

Logic, Parables, and Argument

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Abstract: We explore the relationship between argument and narrative with reference to parables. Parables are typically thought to convey a message. In examining a parable, we can ask what that message is, whether the story told provides reasons for the message, and whether those reasons are good reasons. In exploring these questions, we employ as an investigative technique the strategy of reconstructing parables as arguments. We then proceed to consider the cogency of those arguments. One can offer arguments through narratives and, in particular, through parables, but that doing so likely brings more risks than benefits, from an epistemic point of view.

Résumé: Nous explorons la relation entre l'argument et le récit dans les paraboles. Généralement on croit que les paraboles transmettent un message. En examinant une parabole, nous pouvons nous demander ce que ce message est, si l'histoire racontée fournit des raisons pour ce message, et si ces raisons sont bonnes. Pour répondre à ces questions, nous employons une technique d'enquête qui consiste à reconstruire des paraboles en arguments et ensuite à examiner la force probante de ceux-ci. On peut offrir des arguments à travers des récits et des paraboles, mais, d'un point de vue épistémique, ce faisant apporte probablement plus de risques que d'avantages.

Keywords: analogy, argument, conclusion, instantiation, message, narrative, reasons, representation, story, symbolism

Some take the view that narratives and arguments fall into mutually exclusive categories, on the grounds that narratives are stories and arguments are attempts to support claims by offering reasons for them. That sort of dichotomous contrast is exaggerated, though: there is ample evidence of overlaps. A narrative may contain one or more arguments, as in a case where legal speeches or intellectual discussions are contained in a novel. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* provides an obvious example. On the other hand, a work that is primarily argumentative may contain one or more narratives, as in the

story of the Sun and the Cave or the Ring of Gyges, in Plato's *Republic* and the short narratives in some of Jean-Paul Sartre's books. Some narratives play important rhetorical roles in contexts where arguments are offered, adding interest and vividness. From narratives one can extract propositional claims that in other contexts serve as the premises or conclusions of arguments. And despite the bad reputation of "anecdotal arguments," a story about an individual case can show that something exists or is possible, or provide a counter-example.¹

Further questions about narrative and argument have special significance and interest. Here we are concerned to explore the following question. Can a narrative serve to provide an argument for a claim that can reasonably be taken to be its "point" or conclusion? This question concerns the potential relationship between the point of a narrative, as emerging from the story told in that narrative, and the conclusion of an argument, as emerging from reasons or evidence stated in its premises.² In this essay, we explore this question with reference to one type of narrative, the parable.

Parables are of special interest and, due to their relative brevity, provide convenient material for theoretical analysis. Because parables are often used in teaching contexts, it makes sense to explore just how we could find *good reasons* within such them. To regard a parable as having a message and as providing reasons (potentially good reasons) to support that message is, in effect, to regard it as offering an argument. People often change their minds on the basis of stories such as parables, and we can ask whether they do that for good reasons.

To be sure, interpretive, logical, and epistemic difficulties often arise if one seeks to extract an argument from a narrative—even a short one such as a parable or fable.³ The

¹ See Govier and Jansen (2011), p. 75–88.

² It is one thing to extract claims from narratives, or even to extract arguments from narratives. It is another thing to extract from a narrative an argument that putatively expresses the point or message of that narrative, as supported by the events recounted in the narrative. Thanks to Gilbert Plumer for relevant correspondence on this matter. We take it to be quite obvious that one can extract claims in the first sense here, but far less obvious that one can derive an argument from a narrative, in the second sense. Broader questions about the relation between narrative and argument are of great interest but cannot be considered here. These include whether there is such a thing as a distinctive narrative type of argument (as distinct type in the way, say, that abductive arguments are a distinct type), and whether there is such a thing as narrative rationality, which is distinctive from the rationality characteristic of arguments.

³ Ayers (2010). See also Faigley and Selzer (2009), Fisher (1984) and Reissman (2008), and Spigelman (2001).

interpretive issues that arise when one tries to construct an *argument* so as to capture the point of a *story* are many and complex. It may be alleged that argument and narrative are quite distinct *genres* and a story will be “killed” if cast into argumentative form. Compared to logically stated arguments, stories tend to be vivid, memorable, and emotionally appealing. From the point of view of logical cogency, there is a trap here: we risk persuasion on the basis of vividness and appeal, as distinct from relevant reasons. When a solution works in some narrative (often a fictive one) we may infer that it would be realistic outside that narrative, an inference that would be logically mistaken.

Seeking to derive from a narrative an argument with explicit premises and conclusion is an approach employed here as a method of inquiry. We do not adopt this approach due to any theoretical commitment to the claim that *all* narratives *ought* to be recast as arguments. Rather, we adopt it as a kind of investigative tool. If we can plausibly derive an argument from a narrative such as a parable, we can assess the merits of that argument, and scrutinize it to consider whether the narrative offers good reasons to support its message. If we cannot plausibly derive an argument, or can derive only a very weak argument from the narrative in question, that outcome undermines the view that the parable or story supplies a message supported by *good reasons*. Parables are a convenient and appropriate form of narrative in this exploration because they are short and are characteristically understood as conveying a serious message.

1. Definitions: Narrative, Argument, and Parable

We take these definitions to be broadly in accordance with ordinary usage and, if not definitive from a scholarly point of view, adequate for our purposes here.

Narrative

In a narrative, a sequence of events is described from a point of view that is often but not necessarily that of a person who has experienced it and serves as its narrator. The *narrative has a kind of form*; sense is made of the events, which are shaped into a story with a beginning, middle, and end.⁴ Typically there is a

⁴ We cannot pause to analyze further this commonly made statement which, despite its triteness, seems open to the objection that anything has in some sense or other a beginning, middle, and end.

sort of plot in which a problem arises; as the story goes on there is some kind of outcome as the problem is resolved or ends in some way. In many narratives, events are sequenced in a realistic temporal order; however there may be deviations, as in the case of a story about time travel or novel with frequent flashback scenes. (Ayers 2010) Often, but not necessarily, events are causally linked in a narrative account. A narrative may be an autobiographical account; there is a narrator who is recounting a *story* of something that happened to him or her and may in some contexts be said to be “telling his or her story.” This notion is presumed in Spigelman (2001) and in Faigley and Spelzer (2009). Narrative accounts are typically particular, about what happened in one case. However, one could have a general narrative account of a sequence of events, as in an evolutionary explanation or historical account of economic problems leading up to a revolution. Liszka (2003) claims that general narratives about processes in nature may, in effect, justify claims about conservation ethics. Narratives may be fictional or non-fictional. Many stories are vivid and absorbing, but a narrative account need not have these features. One might, for example, offer an account of a board meeting which, though boring, would still amount to a narrative in the basic sense that it described events leading to some outcome.

Parable

A parable is a short simple story typically told of specific events and characters likely to be familiar and readily understood by the intended audience. It might, for instance, be about a man disturbing his neighbour in the middle of the night, a person helping a wounded stranger, a wandering son returning to his father, a stranded traveler constructing for himself a raft to cross a river, or some other specific and concrete thing (see Munson (1976), Cartwright (1999), Parker (2011)). Many parables are religious in nature; Jesus of Nazareth is especially renowned as one who sought to teach by parable. However, there are parables within other religious traditions as well as non-religious moral parables-and even philosophical parables, as we shall see. The parable is one type of narrative and considerations pertaining to it do not necessarily apply to narratives of other types.⁵ A parable has a *message*, often referred to as its *lesson*. (Good novels and short stories are less didactic.) Often the message of a parable goes unstated and is implicit. The story of something specific and particular is told so as to convey or suggest a more

⁵ Munson (1976). See also Parker (2011) and Cartwright (1999).

general claim.⁶ In religious parables the message is broadly spiritual in nature, often concerning the relationship between God and human beings or moral relationships between people.

Some New Testament passages commonly described as parables would not count as parables in our sense of that term. A well-known example is the so-called parable of the mustard seed as expressed in Mark 13: 31–32. Here Jesus is asked to what we shall liken the kingdom of heaven, or to what we should compare it. His answer is:

*It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth; but when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all the herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it.*⁷

In this version of The Mustard Seed there is no story, so it is not a parable in the sense defined here. What we have instead is a figure of speech—a statement that the kingdom of heaven is *like* a growing mustard seed.

Argument

The point of an argument is not to tell a story that goes in some direction to a resolution but rather to *provide reasons* to support a claim that is in question. Arguments are often made in efforts to rationally persuade some audience that a claim or claims are rationally acceptable. They may also be put forward in contexts of deliberation or inquiry, when arguers explore reasons to consider the extent to which claims can be given rational support.⁸ In an argument one or more claims are made *to offer evidence or reasons* for a further claim or claims. The claims offered as support are premises of the argument and the claim to be supported is its conclusion. The term “argument” is not a success term. It is quite possible to have a poor argument, in which premise claims are put forward as supporting some conclusion for which they offer only weak support or no support

⁶ Our preliminary survey suggests that the *implicit* message is more characteristic of Christian parables in the western tradition than of secular parables and parables within Hinduism and Buddhism.

⁷ See also Luke 13: 18–19, where the “parable” is stated in more narrative terms, and we have an analogy between the kingdom of heaven on the one hand and the very small, but growing, seed on the other.

⁸ See Govier (1999) and Govier (2010) for defence and elaboration of this account of argument. Compare also Johnson (1996), especially Chapter Six.

at all. It is one thing to say that a discourse expresses an argument and another to say that it expresses a good argument.

Important for our account here will be the fact that many arguments may be reasonably deemed to have implicit conclusions or premises. If one understands an argument to have implicit material, one should be able to give interpretive reasons for adding that material, from the context or wording of the stated material. For present purposes, we presume that at least one premise or conclusion claim must be explicitly expressed in order to have an argument. Any claim that we take to be an implicit conclusion or premise is marked in our presentation of an argument by *. We do not allow here for the possibility that *all* of an argument could be expressed visually or through some other non-verbal means. A picture of a gleaming new car is not itself an argument, on our view, though such a picture might be said to provide the premise of an argument to the effect that “you should buy this car,” provided there are appropriate verbal indicators.

The logical core of an argument is constituted by its premises (explicit and implicit), indicators of its line of reasoning, and its conclusion or conclusions. To display the logical core of an argument, we standardize, stating the argument’s premise(s) and conclusion(s), employing indicator words to show which statement(s) are used to support which others, and marking implicit claims with *.⁹

2. An investigation, and some logical issues

With reference to parables, the question of arguments can be posed in this way: if we learn from these stories (as is commonly presumed) do we simply learn a lesson as *illustrated* or *suggested* in the parable? Or do we, rather, learn that lesson in some way that incorporates *reasons* that are offered in its narrative and can be plausibly and fairly articulated in an argument?¹⁰ In such an argument, the lesson would appear as

⁹ To speak of the logical core of an argument is not to ignore the fact that there may be other important elements present when arguments are articulated in discourse. These include emotive indicators; counter-considerations introduced by such terms as ‘even though,’ ‘while,’ and ‘despite the fact that’; introductory material; asides such as jokes or illustrative anecdotes or elucidatory remarks; and attempts to rebut actual and potential objections to the premises, conclusion, or line of reasoning.

¹⁰ We have selected cases with reference to our primary interest in the relation of narrative and argument.

the conclusion and the reasons given by the story of the parable would appear as the premises.

As plausibly as we can, we will proceed here to derive arguments from a number of parables. We will then examine logical and interpretive problems, reflecting on the implications of our results for the broader issue of learning from stories, and the relationship between narrative and argument.

From a logical point of view, basic questions arise concerning the notion that rationally compelling arguments can be derived from narratives.¹¹

First, *the scope of the conclusion*. As mentioned already, typically a narrative is particular, being an account of events in a singular actual or fictional case. If one seeks to derive from such a narrative a general or universal conclusion, is the result simply an anecdotal argument? Is there a fallacy of hasty generalization? If a narrative is used simply to show that one instance exists, these issues do not arise.¹² But if the case within the narrative is to *represent* further cases, we need to ask what those further cases are, and how (if at all) the narrative can acquire the needed representative quality. Questions of this type arise whether we interpret the representation as analogical (how good is the analogy?), by instance (do we have a hasty generalization?), or symbolical.

Second, there is the matter of *fictive assertion*. In an argument, premises are asserted and when the argument is evaluated, one checks whether those premises are true or rationally acceptable. If the narrative is about a fictional case, that epistemic approach seems inappropriate. One might try to dodge the issue of truth by thinking in terms of the rational acceptability of the premises.¹³ However it is not clear that the problem of fictive assertion is thereby fully resolved, given that the larger question of what it is to rationally accept claims made in fiction remains unanswered. An alternative approach, and the one used here, is to state the premises in conditional form so as to minimize ontological commitments.

¹¹ These will be illustrated by our efforts regarding examples here, and we will return to these general logical points at the end of our paper.

¹² These issues have been explored in Govier and Jansen (2011). Michael Stigl interestingly suggests that the message of a parable should be interpreted according to the context in which the parable is offered and, in particular, the specific question to which it is an answer. That approach would be fitting when a parable emerges from an oral tradition. We do not adopt it here because the parables we discuss are teaching parables that appear to be offered to a general audience.

¹³ This is the view taken in Govier (2010) though not for reasons connected with fictive assertion.

Third, there are questions of *representation*. Just how does the story of a parable represent something else? Our consideration of parables so far suggests three distinct relationships for representation. These are:

(1) *Analogy*. The parable is about some concrete phenomenon X; the intended message or lesson is about some more abstract phenomenon Y, where Y is said or presumed to be *relevantly similar* to X, which is to say similar in aspects relevant to the credibility of the conclusion or message. X is the analogue and Y is the primary subject. The presumption underlying the argument is that the claim made about X can also correctly be made about Y. If there is an argument in such a parable, it is an argument by analogy.

(2) *Symbolism*. The items and events in the parable are symbolic of something else. For example “a master” in a story may symbolize God and “a feast” may symbolically represent the riches of heaven. It’s important here to note that symbolic representation is not that of analogy, although there can be overlaps. Symbolism need not be based on relevant similarity. An item S may symbolize a characteristic W without in any way resembling W, as when a pen symbolizes an author and a sword symbolizes a war. How to assess symbolism from a logical perspective is, to say the least, unclear.

(3) *Instantiation*. The items and events in the parable are instances, or cases of something. A figure in a teaching role is an instance of “the teacher” and a figure in a learning role is an instance of “the student”, for example.¹⁴

3. Discussions of parables

We begin our exploration of these questions by examining three accounts of parables and the claims emerging from them. In considering these accounts, we present examples relevant to the understanding and assessment of the claims made.

3.1 A.H. Parker

¹⁴ We note that an *instance* may come to serve as a *symbol*, if it is widely accepted as a stand-in for a class. The royal couple, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are an instance of young European royalty; their publicized tour across Canada in July, 2011 may also serve to make them a symbol of young European royalty.

In *Light Denied*, a recent work on the parables of Jesus, A.H. Parker interprets parables in a broadly argumentative way. On his account, a parable “puts forward an illustrative package that consists of an argumentation along the lines that *if such and such a situation pertains then commonsense dictates that so and so will follow.*” We note here that these conditional claims do not in themselves amount to arguments; they may be said to be “argumentative” in the sense that they seem like the sorts of claims one might incorporate into an argument. The problem of fictive assertion is avoided when one adopts this approach, since the premise is understood as conditional.¹⁵ Parker states that parables function as two-dimensional speech-forms in that they describe “a particular scenario but only so as to make reference in some way to something quite other.”¹⁶ That comment alludes to the representativeness problem, which (disappointingly) is avoided by Parker. He only handles the particular scenario, omitting the “something quite other”, which he is unwilling to address.¹⁷ A parable’s illustrative package (for Parker it is “if... then” “logic”) is very literal and specific. For example Parker identifies the “logic” of *The Insistent Neighbour* (which we discuss later under the title *The Bothersome Neighbour*) to be that “[i]f the neighbour was successful in getting what he needed, *then commonsense suggests that it was not due to friendship but to his shameless persistence.*”¹⁸

On Parker’s account, a further step, *interpretation*, is required to understand what Jesus meant, spiritually and morally, by that story and by other stories such as those of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son.¹⁹ (We have called this the problem of representation: just *what* does the parable represent, and how does it do that?) For our purposes, it is this further step of interpretation that is of special interest, as it is directly related to the question of whether there is a central message or “point” which can be regarded as a conclusion supported by reasons.

Contrary to Parker, in some parables, what happens is contrary to what one would expect from a commonsense perspective. An example is the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20: 1–16), in which people who work very different numbers of hours are all paid the same amount by their employer. This parable seems to work as an analogy; the analogue is that of a land-owner who chooses to pay late-arriving workers the same amount as those who have been

¹⁵ We have benefitted from this suggestion.

¹⁶ Parker (2011).

¹⁷ Parker (2011), p. 10.

¹⁸ Parker (2011), p. 60.

¹⁹ Parker (2011) makes it clear that this step has many problems. See Ch. 9 for further discussion.

working all day. The analogy is not stated in fully explicit form in the text; however there is a clear textual justification for it earlier in verse 1, which says “For the kingdom of heaven is *like unto* a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard.” The parable is developed over sixteen verses, the last of which says, “So the last shall be first, and the first last...” The message of this parable is that people who repent and begin to serve the Lord late in life deserve the same reward as those who began to serve him early in life. Contrary to Parker, the way in which the landowner is paying his workers seems strikingly unlike common sense, and the memorability and interest of the parable are mostly due to that fact.

While we find Parker’s account helpful with regard to the issue of fictive assertion, his failure to address the representativeness problem is disappointing. In addition, his view that the literal message of a parable is accord with common sense fails to fit some significant cases.

3.2 *Ronald Munson*

In an older textbook on informal logic, Ronald Munson included a chapter discussing analogy, parables, fables, and illustrative examples. He begins with analogy, noting that an analogy may be purely illustrative or may serve as the basis for an argument. In any analogy, there are two things said to be similar; these are the primary subject and the analogue to which that primary subject is compared. It is the primary subject that is the main topic of interest and the analogue is brought in for expository purposes. In an illustrative analogy, Munson says, the analogue is described as a way of making the primary subject more intelligible and interesting. In a good illustrative analogy, the analogue is “fitting” to the primary subject (in other words, is relevantly similar to it), vivid and more familiar than the primary subject, and not misleading. Insofar as it is purely illustrative and not argumentative, an analogy has no role in providing logical support for a conclusion. The illustrative analogy, says Munson, is an expository device as distinct from a logical device.

Having discussed illustrative analogies, Munson moves on to consider parables and fables. He defines parables as simple stories told to illustrate or explain certain principles or attitudes, saying parables are analogies presented in dramatic or fictional form. Munson claims that the analogy underlying a parable is often not made explicit; the parable has to be interpreted by the reader “in a way that straightforward and explicit analogies

don't have to be.”²⁰ On Munson's account, parables have a message, which is their “point”. That message, about a primary subject, is presented in an analogy. However the analogy does not provide the basis for an argument: for Munson parables do not express arguments. They do not seek to provide reasons for the message conveyed. Rather, they are expository devices that serve well when they are vivid, memorable, offer short dramatic narratives, and are not misleading. Since a parable will be a story, it is likely to be more entertaining and remarkable than purely descriptive or logical exposition. It may have a use in writing that aims at demonstrating norms of behaviour or attitude. On this account, parables could be supplements to argumentative discourse but would not by themselves provide arguments.

Here is Munson's own example of a parable.

The Parable of the Stonemasons

A knight was traveling to London, and as he passed through the town of Ely he came upon three stonemasons busy at their work. “What is it that you are doing?” the knight asked. “Why, Sir,” the first answered, “I am smoothing a stone.” “I am fashioning the keystone for an arch,” the second said. “And you?” asked the knight, turning to the third mason. “I am building a cathedral,” he replied.²¹

Note: this is a secular parable. The message here would seem to be that the third mason is right, and (by analogy, on Munson's account), one should describe one's work in the broadest and most inspirational terms.²² Though some parables amount to analogies, on reflection “analogy” does not quite fit the stonemason story. The message of this parable is about work and the masons are working: what they are performing are *instances* of work, not *analogues* of it.

Contrary to Munson, however, some parables can be cast, with relative ease, as arguments. Consider, for instance, the well-known Hindu parable of the blind men and the elephant.

The Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant

Four blind men went out to see an elephant. One touched the leg of the elephant and said, “The elephant is like a pillar.”

²⁰ Munson (1976), p. 326.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

²² What we have here is probably better understood as a symbolic instance than as an analogy. The masons are doing work; what they are doing is, then, an *instance* rather than an *analogue* if we think the point is about the understanding of work, generally.

The second touched the trunk and said, "The elephant is like a thick club." The third touched the belly and said, "The elephant is like a big jar." The fourth touched the ears and said, "The elephant is like a big winnowing basket." Thus they began to dispute hotly amongst themselves as to the shape of the elephant. A passer-by, seeing them thus quarrelling, said, "What is it you are disputing about?" They told him everything and asked him to arbitrate. The man said: "None of you has seen the elephant. The elephant is not like a pillar, its legs are like pillars. It is not like a winnowing basket, its ears are like winnowing baskets. It is not like a stout club, its trunk is like a club. The elephant is the combination of all these—legs, ears, belly, trunk and so on."

In the same manner, those who quarrel (about the nature of God) have each seen only some one aspect of the Deity."²³

There seems here to be an *analogy* between the elephant and God, and between the blind men seeking to know the elephant and limited human beings seeking to know God. The point, or message, is that when disputes arise in each of these contexts, their sources lies in the limitations of those seeking to know.

If we set out to standardize an argument here, we could generate the following result:

- (1) If four blind men investigated an elephant and touched different parts, they would begin to dispute about the shape of that elephant.
- (2) If these four blind men began to dispute about the shape of the elephant, their dispute would be due to their having experienced only one aspect of it.
- (3) People who dispute about the nature of God are like these four blind men.²⁴

Therefore,

- (4) People who dispute about the nature of God have experienced only limited aspects of God.

Munson would say that there is no argument in this parable: on his account the message is asserted and the analogy is illustrative only. He would say that one should not look for reasons for a message.²⁵ To be sure, we could assess the aptness

²³ Page 355 of a PDF book called *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* accessed on July 20, 2011 at

<http://www.archive.org/details/TalesAndParablesOfSriRamakrishna>

²⁴ This premise is not marked as implicit because it is explicit, in the final statement.

²⁵ One may believe that there is an argument by analogy, on the grounds that these blind men are LIKE limited human beings (with respect precisely to their limitation) and the analogy provides the basis for an

of the analogy as an expository device and that alone. One point supportive of Munson's view is that the conclusion, (4), may seem more plausible in its own right than it is with "support" from the analogy of the blind men and the elephant. But a point against Munson's non-argumentative line of interpretation is that this story about the elephant and the blind men does seem to provide some account of the nature of disagreement about matters of religion. The blind men are instances of persons lacking the capacity needed to make a discovery they seek.

In some parables the narrative serves to illustrate a point, or remind us of something we already know, rather than to provide *reasons for* a claim, as one would do when offering an argument in its support. But it would be premature to stop our investigation of parables with the idea that they are all illustrative analogies. Contrary to Munson, some parables represent by symbolism or instantiation, and some appear to provide support for a message. While appreciating the fact that Munson included the topic of parables in his informal logic textbook, we find his account unduly restricted due to its failure to consider the argumentative significance of some parables and its concentration solely on analogy, as distinct from instantiation and symbolism.

3.3 Nancy Cartwright, in the tradition of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

Nancy Cartwright has recently explored the notions of fable and parable, using them to understand how models work in science.²⁶ Her account is developed from eighteenth century discussions by Lessing. Both Lessing and Cartwright say that a parable differs from a fable insofar as its lesson is not written in, but must be inferred. A fable comes with "the moral of the story" stated right there, whereas with a parable, the audience must supply the message. Interestingly, while this notion that a parable must have an *implicit* message fits parables in the western tradition, it does not seem to fit many Hindu and Buddhist parables, in which the message is often explicitly stated and may even be given in the title of the parable. The parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant provides one example. Another is the Parable of the Raft.

The Parable of the Raft

argument. One could also maintain that the blind men are actually an INSTANCE of limited persons seeking knowledge, and that there is an inference from this putatively representative instance to the quests by beings who are limited in other ways,

²⁶ Cartwright (1999).

A man is trapped on one side of a fast-flowing river. Where he stands, there is great danger and uncertainty—but on the far side of the river, there is safety. But there is no bridge or ferry for crossing. So the man gathers logs, leaves, twigs, and vines and is able to fashion a raft, sturdy enough to carry him to the other shore. By lying on the raft and using his arms to paddle, he crosses the river to safety. The Buddha then asks the listeners a question: “What would you think if the man, having crossed over the river, then said to himself, “Oh, this raft has served me so well, I should strap it on to my back and carry it over land now?” The monks replied that it would not be very sensible to cling to the raft in such a way. The Buddha continues, “What if he lay the raft down gratefully, thinking that this raft has served him well, but is no longer of use and can thus be laid down upon the shore?” The monks replied that this would be the proper attitude. The Buddha concluded by saying, “So it is with my teachings, which are like a raft, and are for crossing over with—not for seizing hold of.”²⁷

In this parable, the message is explicit in the statement of the Buddha. The parable may be understood as offering an analogical argument; that analogical argument would be that in *just the same way that* it would be silly to carry a raft once it had served its purpose, it would be unnecessary to hang onto the teachings of the Buddha, once they have served their purpose. On the other hand, one might say that, for anything at all, once it is not needed, one should no longer hang on to it. The story of the raft could be taken as a reminder or illustration that if something is no longer needed, one might as well discard it. The Buddha is saying that, and claiming that such a reminder would apply to his own teachings.

When the message of a parable is implicit, extracting it can be tricky. Cartwright notes that a parable is more open to interpretation than a fable. Both fables and parables use the particular and concrete, in narrative form, to approach the general and abstract.²⁸ Like parables, fables are short concrete narratives put forward to convey a general message. That message is typically prudential or moral. Often the characters in fables are animals functioning to represent certain human

²⁷Taken from

<http://heavencantwaitcardsandgifts.blogspot.com/2010/03/Buddhist-parable-of-raft-06.html> Accessed July, 2011.

²⁸ If we reject (on the grounds explained above) the idea that the message of a parable is always implicit, whereas the message of a fable is always explicit, it is not obvious just how we would distinguish parables from fables. Perhaps there is no hard and fast distinction.

traits—as when a fox represents cleverness, a small bird weakness, or a lion, strength.

Discussing fables, Lessing said interestingly that fables succeed by “reducing” the abstract to some particular. It is through something particular and concrete, he said, that we are able to know intuitively something general and abstract. The concrete particular is able to represent the abstract and more general. (This comment seems to apply to many parables as well, and specifically to Lessing’s own parable of the rings, to be considered later. In that parable three rings represent the three distinct religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.) The concrete expression of a general lesson provides a needed particular *that is a case of the abstract truth in question* and enables us to understand it.

Cartwright discusses one of Lessing’s fables in which a marten eats a grouse. The moral of the story is “the weaker are prey to the stronger.” The marten represents the stronger and the grouse, the weaker. The abstract claim that the weaker are prey to the stronger is “fitted out” by the fable, which represents it in a concrete and readily comprehensible form. Cartwright comments that there is not an analogy here; nor is there exactly a case of symbolism. It is not that the grouse symbolizes a weaker creature or is similar to a weaker creature; rather (relative to the marten) the grouse is *an instance* of a weaker creature. The abstract relation of weaker/stronger could be instantiated in other ways in other contexts. If, for instance, we were dealing with labour/management relations, labour would be exploited or oppressed, due to its relative weakness in economic and political power. Obviously the victory of the stronger would not be displayed by management literally *eating* labour as the marten ate the grouse!

In fables and parables, the story told is one in which characters and dilemmas are representative of something else. Unlike Parker, Cartwright does not seek to avoid this question. She notes its central importance. One must ask: what is that something else? What does the parable or fable represent, and how is that representativeness achieved? In a fable, the “moral of the story” is stated, providing readers with reliable clues about what is to be represented. In a parable, there are not always obvious clues. We must infer the represented content from the discourse in context. In the scientific context, Cartwright says, abstract theoretical terms apply only given the applicability of their more concrete models. Many of these models in science, Cartwright maintains, are more like parables than models in their lesser degree of explicitness. We do not always know how to abstract from a given particular. Often representativeness is achieved by instantiation.

Representativeness achieved by instantiation is illustrated in the famous Christian parable of the Good Samaritan. For that reason, it's illuminating to consider this parable in the context of Cartwright's discussion.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked [on him], and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion [on him], And went to [him], and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave [them] to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.²⁹

In this parable the man set upon by thieves serves to represent (by instantiation) people in need of help, and the generous Samaritan represents (again by instantiation) all those who help strangers in need, acting kindly and generously toward those in need. The parable offers an answer to a question put to Jesus by a lawyer who asked how to inherit eternal life. To inherit eternal life, you should love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbour as yourself, the lawyer says. He then asks Jesus who counts as your neighbour. The parable of the Good Samaritan is given in reply to that question. In the parable a man showed mercy and kindness to a needy man who was a stranger. The response: the neighbour was the one who showed mercy on that stranger; Jesus said "go, and do thou likewise."

It is indeed a moving story. We can ask about this story: are there *reasons* given, for treating needy strangers with kindness and generosity? If we seek to construct an argument on the basis of the parable, we can derive the following:

²⁹ Luke 10:31-37. New Testament quotations are taken from the King James Bible. Online version: <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Matthew&chapter=20&verse=1-16>

- (1)* If supposedly holy people (the priest and the Levite) were to ignore an unknown and needy person on a road, they would not treat that person as a neighbour.
- (2) If a person who was of no special status and did not know an unknown and needy person on a road were to treat him with mercy and kindness, that person would treat the needy person as a neighbour.

So,

- (3) What matters about being a neighbour is not one's status or one's prior knowledge of a person.
- (4) What matters about being a neighbour is treating another with mercy and kindness when that person is needy and one encounters him.
- (5)* It is good to treat a needy stranger as a neighbour if one encounters him.

Therefore,

- (6)* One should treat other people, when they are in need and one encounters them, as one's neighbours with mercy and kindness.

This parable has great appeal. As noted, the representation is by instantiation: the man set upon by robbers is an instance of a needy stranger and the Samaritan is an instance of a helping person who has encountered the needy stranger. When set out as an argument, as above, this parable does not obviously provide a poor argument. The hypothetical wording in premises (1) and (2) avoids the problem of fictive assertion. Claims (3) and (4) are distinct conclusions derived from the conjunction of (1) and (2). They then link, along with (5*) to support the main conclusion, (6*). Due to the fame of this parable, the instances have become symbols; charities often employ the word "Samaritan" in their name.

The first stage of this argument appeals to strong moral intuitions about a hypothetical case, to support a normative conclusion. The added premise (5*) articulates the norm embedded in the term 'neighbour,' used here so as to combine descriptive and evaluative judgments. The implicit conclusion (6*) is inferred from (5*). The logical problems that might be alleged here would involve the scope of the conclusion and the interpretations of kindness and generosity and what it means to encounter a needy stranger. These are timeless questions.

4. Some further examples

The dilemma of charm (in a story) versus logical cogency (in a good argument) is illustrated by the following example of a

parable of Sri Ramakrishna. The parable is called “What you are after is within yourself.”

What You are After is Within Yourself

A man wanted a smoke. He went to a neighbour's house to light his charcoal. It was the dead of night and the household was asleep. After he had knocked a great deal, someone came down to open the door. At sight of the man, he asked, "Hello! What's the matter?" The man replied, "Can't you guess? You know how fond I am of smoking. I have come here to light my charcoal." The neighbour said, "Ha! Ha! You are a fine man indeed! You took the trouble to come and do all this knocking at the door! Why, you have a lighted lantern in your hand!"

What a man seeks is very near him. Still, he wanders about from place to place.³⁰

The message of this parable is stated in the title and final sentence, and would seem to be universal; the reference to “a man” would appear to be to any man. Yet the story is about a particular man carrying a lantern at night and seeking a light, to smoke. Representation would be by instantiation. If we were to regard this parable as offering an argument with a general conclusion, that argument would involve hastily generalizing from the highly specific situation of a man wandering about in the dark, with a lighted lantern, to a universal human quest (implied in the expression “what a man seeks”). The charm and wit of the story seem to disappear if we cast it in argumentative form, and the logical argument we would derive from it is weak at best. Thus it may seem interpretively preferable, and more charitable, to leave the parable as a story. If the parable states a lesson, so be it, but no *good reason* is given for that lesson if we take the lesson to be general one.

Here is a narrative in the parable of the Bothersome Neighbour (Luke 11: 5–8), which we attempt to represent as a standardized argument. Premises and conclusions taken to be implicit are marked with *.

The Parable of the Bothersome Neighbour

And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to

³⁰ Page 350 of a PDF book called *Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna* accessed on July 20, 2011 at

<http://www.archive.org/details/TalesAndParablesOfSriRamakrishna>

me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.

The parable seems to be analogical in nature. Here we represent it as having two explicit premises, as well as one implicit premise connecting the relationship between two friends to the relationship of God and humans. The conclusion that God will help a person who persistently asks for his help has also been added. We would justify doing this by the context in which the narrative appears. (Jesus is talking about the relationship between God and human beings who seek things from God.)

- (1) A friend might refuse help to a person if it were inconvenient to offer it.
 - (2) Such a friend would give help to this person, even in inconvenient circumstances, if the person persistently requested it.
 - (3)* God is like this friend.
- So,
- (4)* God will give help to a person if that person persistently requests it.

The narrative of the man bothering his neighbour provides the first two premises. Here (3*) and (4*) are written in. With the addition of (3*) and (4*), we have a pretty clear argument from analogy.³¹ Given problematic nature of (3*), it is not plausible to deem this a good argument; we will not comment further on its cogency at this point.

In the following example of a secular parable, taken from Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise*, representation proceeds by symbolism. In Lessing's play the main character, Nathan, offers the Parable of the Three Rings in response to a question from the Muslim, Saladin, as to which religion is best—Judaism, Islam, or Christianity.

³¹ If we read further in the text, through verses 9 and 10, we find “ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.” This text seems more to represent through symbolism than analogy. It does not really constitute a narrative but an argument based on the general claim that (1) a person who seeks will find, so (therefore) (2) a person who seeks God will find God.

The Parable of the Three Rings

In the Orient in ancient times there lived a man who possessed a ring of inestimable worth. Its stone was an opal that emitted a hundred colors, but its real value lay in its ability to make its wearer beloved of God and man. The ring passed from father to most favored son for many generations, until finally its owner was a father with three sons, all equally deserving. Unable to decide which of the three sons was most worthy, the father commissioned a master artisan to make two exact copies of the ring, then gave each son a ring, and each son believed that he alone had inherited the original and true ring. But instead of harmony, the father's plan brought only discord to his heirs. Shortly after the father died, each of the sons claimed to be the sole ruler of the father's house, each basing his claim to authority on the ring given to him by the father. The discord grew even stronger and more hateful when a close examination of the rings failed to disclose any differences.

"But wait," interrupted Saladin, "surely you do not mean to tell me that there are no differences between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity!" "You are right, Sultan," replied Nathan. "Their teachings and practices differ in ways that can be seen by all. However, in each case, the teachings and practices are based on beliefs and faith, beliefs and faith that at their roots are the same. Which of us can prove that our beliefs and our faith are more reliable than those of others?" "I understand," said Saladin. "Now continue with your tale." "The story is nearly at its end," replied Nathan.

The dispute among the brothers grew until their case was finally brought before a judge. After hearing the history of the original ring and its miraculous powers, the judge pronounced his conclusion: "The authentic ring," he said, "had the power to make its owner beloved of God and man, but each of your rings has brought only hatred and strife. None of you is loved by others; each loves only himself. Therefore I must conclude that none of you has the original ring. Your father must have lost it, then attempted to hide his loss by having three counterfeit rings made, and these are the rings that cause you so much grief." The judge continued: "Or it may be that your father, weary of the tyranny of a single ring, made duplicates, which he gave to you. Let each of you demonstrate his belief in the power of his ring by conducting his life in such a manner that he fully merits—as anciently promised—the love of God and man."³²

³² From Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise*. Excerpt accessed on July 22, 2011 at <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0972.html#lessing>

This parable seems to present an argument in favour of tolerance and charitable living. The messages are stated in symbolic form by the judge. Lessing maintains that quarrelling over who has the true faith is wrong-headed and that, given our inability to discern who is right, we ought to instead live our lives so as to merit the love of God and man. The judge reasons that their quarrelsome behaviour shows that none of the sons has the true ring. The ring represents the true faith, and the sons represent adherents to the three religions of the book: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

We've extracted two arguments from this parable. These arguments represent what the judge said to the three sons. The first captures the reasoning that none of the sons has the true ring. The second captures the argument that, even if one of the sons has the true ring, we cannot know which one does, so each son should live a life that merits the love of God and man. The second argument uses a premise from the first, an aspect that is reflected in our numbering.

Argument 1

- (1) If the owners of the three rings are full of hatred and strife, they do not own the original and true ring.
- (2)* The original and true ring represents the true faith and the sons possessing the rings represent the adherents to the three religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity, Islam).
- (3) The adherents of the three religions of the book are full of hatred and strife.

Therefore,

- (4)* None of the adherents of the three religions of the book has the true faith.

Argument 2

- (5) *Even if* one of the sons has the original ring, then we cannot discern which son that is.
- (6) If we cannot discern which son has the original ring, then each son should demonstrate the power of his ring by conducting his life so as to fully merit the love of God and man.
- (2)* The original and true ring symbolically represents the true faith and the sons possessing the rings symbolically represent the adherents of the three religions of the book.
- (7) We cannot discern which religion has the true faith.

Therefore,

- (8)* The adherents of the three religions of the book should demonstrate their faith by conducting life in a manner so as to fully merit the love of God and man.

Both arguments hinge crucially on (2*), the premise stating the symbolic relationship in which the original ring represents the true faith and the sons represent the adherents of the three religions of the book. The first argument basically takes the valid form of *modus ponens*. The first premise is taken from the story, which is given a summary in a conditional statement, and the third premise is factually true, with the conclusion validly inferred, given (2*). In the second argument, there is a longer story to be told. Premise (6) comes from the story, but even within it can be said to need support. Premise (7) will clearly be plausible to humanists, but may be deemed to need support based on some epistemological account implying that religious knowledge is not possible.

Hesketh Pearson's book *The Life of Oscar Wilde* includes a story by Wilde, who compared metal filings to human beings in regards to whether or not we have free will. In an interview with Denis Dutton for the first issue of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, the Argentinean novelist Jorge Luis Borges mentioned Wilde's parable as a case of a philosophically rigorous short narrative.³³ (Borges qualified his comments by reminding Dutton that despite his interest in philosophy, he, Borges, was not a philosopher.) Here, analogy is used as the basis for a rather clever parable.³⁴ We contend, however, that the parable is less philosophically successful than Borges supposed.

The Parable of Magnets and Filings

Once upon a time there was a magnet, and in its close neighbourhood lived some steel filings. One day two or three little filings felt a sudden desire to go and visit the magnet, and they began to talk of what a pleasant thing it would be to do. Other filings nearby overheard their conversation, and they, too, became infected with the same desire. Still others joined them, till at last all the filings began to discuss the matter, and more and more their vague desire grew into an impulse. "Why not go today?" said some of them; but others were of the opinion that it would be better to wait till tomorrow. Meanwhile, without their having noticed it, they had been involuntarily moving nearer to the magnet, which lay there quite still, apparently taking no heed of them. And so they went on discussing all the time insensibly drawing nearer to their neighbour; and the more they talked, the more they felt the

³³ Dutton and Palencia-Roth (1977).

³⁴ We do not judge the parable to be a philosophical success, as our analysis will indicate.

*impulse growing stronger, till the more impatient ones declared that they would go that day, whatever the rest did. Some were heard to say that it was their duty to visit the magnet, and that they ought to have gone long ago. And, while they talked, they moved always nearer and nearer, without realizing that they had moved. Then, at last, the impatient ones prevailed, and, with one irresistible impulse, the whole body cried out, "There is no use waiting. We will go today. We will go now. We will go at once." And then in one unanimous mass they swept along, and in another moment were clinging fast to the magnet on every side. Then the magnet smiled—for the steel filings had no doubt at all but that they were paying that visit of their own free will.*³⁵

This philosophical parable is intended to show that belief in free will is an illusion. Its argument may be represented as follows:

- (1) If metal filings were personified they would all have the desire to travel towards a magnet.
- (2) If personified metal filings had a desire to travel towards a magnet, they could think that their doing so was due to their choice and free will.

Yet

- (3)* If personified metal filings travelled toward a magnet, they would do so as a result of the physical laws of magnetism.

Therefore,

- (4) If personified metal filings thought that their movement toward a magnet was due to choice and free will, they would be wrong.
- (5)* Humans are like the personified metal filings in that they are physical objects fully subject to physical laws.
- (6)* Objects fully subject to physical laws cannot have choice and free will.

Therefore,

- (7)* If human beings believe they have choice and free will, they are wrong.

Here, the argument hinges on an analogy, which we have made explicit in (5*), and on the claim in (6*). In the context of an argumentative discussion about whether human beings have free will, premise (6*) is contestable. It is true that filings move toward a magnet due solely to the operation of the laws of magnetism, which are physical laws operating regardless of any "choice" on the part of the filings. But whether human

³⁵ Pearson (1978).

reflections are similar with regard to their choices should not be simply assumed in the sixth premise.

In an article on moral education and moral reasoning in traditional African cultures, Polycarp Ikuenabe provides a paraphrased parable about the wrongfulness of deliberately harming other people.³⁶ Ikuenabe argues that in traditional African cultures morality is taught informally through folklore, myths, and parables. On his account, in these cultures, moral thinking is understood as something that should be practical and fruitful. Though conveyed by elders with a concern for community cohesion, moral thinking is not authoritarian. Situations will vary and individuals will have to reason for themselves as to what to do. It is because every situation is different that one must reason about guilt, shame, and affronts to the community. Ikuenabe describes the story of the son and the slave one used to teach a moral lesson against harming someone out of jealousy and greed.

An African Parable: The Son and the Slave

A woman had a son and a slave, both of whom were of the same age. She treated her son better than the slave. The woman would usually prepare meals and dish them differently into the plates of her son and the slave. She usually gave her son a better portion than the slave. As the son and the slave grew up, the slave excelled in everything in the community. The slave had more strength and energy and worked harder on the farm. Whatever the slave touched with his hands turned out well. The same could not be said for her son. The woman became jealous and wanted to kill the slave. On a fateful day, she prepared a meal and dished it into the plate of the slave and her son. She decided to kill the slave by putting some poison in his food. As a coverup, she decided to make the slave's portion more handsome and attractive. When the son came in to get his meal, he secretly opened the slave's plate and found how attractive the slave's food was compared to his. He thought that his mother must have made a mistake; it could not happen that the slave's meal would be better than his. So, he decided to eat the slave's meal that had been poisoned by his mother. Immediately after eating the food, he became sick. His mother became apprehensive and asked him which portion of food he had eaten, and he replied that he had eaten the portion on the slave's plate that was more attractive and handsome. His mother was distraught, and the boy later died from the poisoning.

³⁶ Ikuenabe (1998), p. 37-38.

According to Ikuenabe, the main message here is that one should not seek to harm another person. The story does give a reason by providing an illustration of that possibility.

(1) If a woman sought to poison a slave in her household, she might inadvertently poison her own beloved son.

(2) A woman would not wish to poison her own beloved son.

So,

(3) A woman should not poison a slave in her household.

Therefore,

(4)* A person should not seek to harm another.³⁷

In this standardization, we can see the representation proceeds by *instantiation*. The woman is a case of a person who would harm another; the slave is a case of the person that some other person wishes to harm; the son is a case of a person that that person would not wish to harm. The conclusion seems to be derived by inference from one instance to a generalization. If we generalize only to prospective victims in proximity of the harmful act, the generalization may appear plausible. If (as in the conclusion represented here and as implied by Ikuenabe's account) a general message of non-harm is inferred from that instance, the emerging generalization is rather implausible. If the story were told to show the *possibility* of unintentionally harming one person when intending to harm another, a derived argument to that effect would be cogent. But that modest conclusion is sufficiently banal that we could say it does not need support by argument at all.

Concluding comments

From the examples discussed here, readers may reach their own conclusions about the feasibility and plausibility of deriving arguments from parables. A parable is a short narrative presented to offer a message and we can ask what that message is and whether the narrative provides reasons for it. If we find reasons, they can be expressed as propositions and as the premises of an argument in which the message of the parable is the conclusion. Our work here shows that for many parables it does make sense to extract a message and reasons for it. With

³⁷ Gilbert Plumer in correspondence has suggested that the scope of this conclusion be restricted; the argument would then be considerably improved. We welcome this suggestion but find no hint as to how to restrict the conclusion's scope. The issue points to basic interpretive problems.

some twisting and bending, we can construct an argument in standardized form. When we have an argument in that form, we can evaluate it. From the fact that one can derive some sort of argument from a narrative, it does not follow that that argument is a good one. We can proceed to assess the cogency of the argument we extract.

The questions raised here in the context of parables also apply to myth, legend, and the stories in which traditional knowledge may be cast. As we acknowledged earlier, argumentative representation of a narrative may “kill” the original story. However, if we are reflecting on a narrative in contexts where one is supposed to *learn* from it, analysis in terms of reasoned support is appropriate. Epistemology trumps narrative style and interest when we wish to evaluate the credibility of a message, and it is from that perspective that we have considered logic and parables. In a parable, there is a story about one thing and a message about another. As explained earlier, key questions arise in three areas: the scope of the conclusion, fictive assertion, and representation.

The problem of scope of the conclusion clearly arises in many cases. What we say about the argument offered in a parable will vary depending on the generality of the conclusion we attribute to it. Interpretation is crucial and involves contextual considerations, these being especially apparent for implicit material. If one restricts the scope of the conclusion so that only the possibility of some scenario is claimed, many parables can be said to represent cogent arguments. Given the teaching context in which many parables are stated, restrictions of scope to only a few cases, or to a single case, are not interpretively plausible. A parable carries a message or lesson insofar as it applies to a range of cases and not solely to the events described in its story. What is the intended range? That is a matter of interpretation. The frequent use of parables in moral and religious education makes it reasonable to understand the scope of the conclusion as fairly broad. The issue of intended scope arises for all parables and is especially clear here for the Good Samaritan and the Son and the Slave.

The problem of fictive assertion seems manageable: we have handled it here through conditionalization, taking a hint from the work of A.H. Parker.

Not surprisingly, what is central is the aspect of representation. As we understand in theory, and as is apparent from our examination of examples, representation can be attempted in three different ways: analogy, symbolization, and instantiation. The parables considered here illustrate problems arising for each representative strategy. With *analogy*, the

general issue is that the things compared are likely to differ in respects highly relevant to the conclusion. (The very fact of trying to draw an analogy between something concrete and something abstract makes that likely.) If a wedding feast is an analogue for heaven, or an impatient neighbour an analogue for God, problems about relevant similarity clearly arise. With Wilde's magnetic filings, the analogue and primary subject (personified magnetic filings and deliberating human beings) are presumed to be similar in ways (being fully subject to laws of physical causation) that are question-begging in the context. With *instantiation*, we have the potential for generalization from a highly specific and unique instance that is vivid and memorable but unrepresentative of a broader class. This is the same sort of problem that arises with regard to anecdotal arguments.³⁸

Being hesitant to claim expertise on the matter of *symbolic representation*, we have said relatively little about that matter. If a message and its reasons are given through a symbolic representation so that an argument contains in its premises some such claim as "the landowner symbolically represents God", then in attempting to assess that argument, we will be involved in trying to reach some verdict on that claim, which is not one of analogy or instantiation, but something else entirely: symbolic representation. We begin to ask: How does X symbolically represent Y? How can a claim to the effect that X symbolically represents Y be assessed from a logical point of view? We do not pretend to know the answer to such questions. The nature and "merits" of symbolic representation as it appears here are not a matter of logic, but if such symbolism is crucial to arguments providing reasons for some moral or religious position, then we cannot entirely avoid the topic. Awkwardly, this somewhat imponderable matter is crucial for our considerations. In a number of standardizations, we have included a premise stating the intended symbolic representation of the parable. We have stated that premise while admitting our inability to clarify it further.

Now, our debts are being called in. Being unable to spell out a symbolic premise, we are unwilling to deem such a premise acceptable or unacceptable. Rather, we will deem it "not amenable to logical assessment." Such a verdict on a crucial premise reflects on the epistemic status of the argument as a whole, making us unwilling to deem that argument cogent.

To sum up the results of our investigation, we maintain that some narratives, in particular parables, can be interpreted as providing arguments for a claim that is their "point" or

³⁸ See Govier and Jansen (2011).

conclusion. We find, however, that such arguments are rarely cogent. Such arguments do not seem to have a distinctively narrative form: some are analogies, while others appear to be deductive arguments or generalizing inductive ones. Conveying a message in the form of a story is attractive but logically risky and questionable, insofar as the form and interest of the story will often distract us from attempting any task of logical assessment. We are easily misled into accepting a message claim when there are no good reasons given in the narrative. One can offer arguments through narrative, but doing that has more risks than benefits, from an epistemic point of view.

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