

Parables: Discourse At the Intersection of Epistemologies

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I. Introduction: The Academy at a Crossroads

Religious ethics, and especially *comparative* religious ethics, inhabits a unique location in the contemporary academy. On one hand, events on our contemporary geopolitical scene demonstrate the urgency of finding common understandings of life in our world (or, at least, a consensus on basic human rights and goods). One need only observe how our central political conflicts, while remaining no less political, are imbued with religious self-understandings to sense the demand for better conversation between traditions. On the other hand, though, elite discourse between traditions in religious ethics seems to be characterized by a confused exchange of “beliefs”, and the benefits of that discourse translate tenuously, if at all, to a wider audience.

This, in our view, is the result of a wider set of academic phenomena that is felt most acutely in religious ethics. We believe that academic culture in the humanities – with its various accoutrements in academic journals, books, conferences, classes, and more – is characterized by what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a “practice”: a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”¹ That is, the various disciplines which comprise the humanities, though each has its distinctive methods, subject matter, and idiosyncrasies, participate to a high degree in a wider-scale practice of the humanities as such. This phenomenon can, in part, be explained by the influences of interdisciplinary dialogue and the shared responsibilities (such as university-wide rank and tenure review boards) and common role (the scholar, or academic, or intellectual per se) possessed across disciplines. However, that underscores the presence of a wider-scale practice in academic culture, as it suggests

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

the common, cooperative function of the humanities alongside the more specific disciplinary apparatuses. To whatever degree such a broad account of academic practice can be observed, it must exhibit and develop the virtue(s) which enable it; in MacIntyre's vocabulary, practices need those "acquired human qualit(ies) the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods."² If there is a shared academic practice, then there must be at least one academic virtue which cuts across disciplines.

We believe that there is such a virtue, and we will call it "analytic clarity". Analytic clarity is the intellectual skill associated with reading and understanding texts, and subjecting those texts to critical scrutiny and evaluation. The clearer one's grasp of foundational principles in a discipline, the more rigorous one's application of logic, and – especially – the greater one's ability to work with cognitive propositions, the more strongly will one express analytic clarity. This virtue enables academic conversation to progress through the exchange and refinement of ideas, achieving many of the goods that academic practice seeks to realize: understanding one's discipline, and the intercourse between that discipline and the wider world, for example. This virtue need not be an explicit aim (though it often is) of any particular instance of academic practice; as long as it is implicit in the prevailing conditions of the academy, the conditions for its contribution to academic practice hold. What strategic thinking is to the practice of chess, and courage to the practice of war, analytic clarity is to the practice of the academy, as we have it.

Analytic clarity is, in many ways, the virtue appropriate to central ethical presuppositions of the academy. The contemporary university or college rarely attempts to convince its students to hold a systematic and detailed account of the human good, what Rawls popularly refers to as a

² Ibid., 191.

“comprehensive doctrine.”³ Aside from sentiments about service and justice (which, in our experience, universities are slow to define), what the academy does is provide training so that students can attain their chosen ends successfully. If this is true, then analytic clarity is paramount to the mission of the academy: it can enable other practices which attain various chosen ends, within the various (often incompatible) comprehensive doctrines held by members of the community. It is a virtue, but a virtue defined largely by its technical character; analytic clarity grants access to ideas and concepts, irrespective of their content.

Because it is limited to operation upon propositions, analytic clarity is not context-specific. In fact, it could not be otherwise: the rules of the practice, so to speak, are meant to apply across contexts and conceptions of the good. As a result, the individuals involved in pedagogy surrounding the practice do not matter as such: what matters is how well the structure of the practice is reproduced by the teacher and internalized by the student. Whether in the particularly pure form of a class on logic, or in a relatively more complex and material form, such as analysis of history, analytic clarity is a virtue available in principle to those who would do justice or injustice, who would serve others or themselves, who seek to be suburban professionals or countercultural radicals. Since the practice of academics does not include individuals as such, we ought not to be surprised that many college students are unsure what stake they have personally in higher education, and, as a result, view a degree as a means to ends determined by a future career. Since no coherent account of human goods is presented in higher education, it becomes valuable chiefly for the advantages it affords in the marketplace.

Analytic clarity and its materials are, therefore, easily transacted between individuals. That is, the academic training and resources involved in the practice of academics as we have it are easily

³ For example, the University of Chicago embodies in its motto, *crescat scientia, vita excolatur* (let knowledge grow from more to more, and so be human life enriched), the idea that knowledge as such improves quality of life generally, without specifying the type of life to be lived.

alienable from their context, like a commodity, and are therefore subject to the same kinds of market dynamics that characterize other commodities. For one, higher education is seen as a good commensurable with others, so that if one can attain equivalent market status through an online or for-profit university, there is no good reason not to do so. Moreover, since all institutions and instances of higher education are seen to accomplish similar goals, antagonism erupts, in the form of competition for recognition between universities and between students who seek admission there; what matters is not really the “right fit” but receiving the maximum payoff for one’s investment in a commodity for which there are adequate substitutes. Of course, these dynamics do not alone or completely characterize the practice of the academy as we have it, but, insofar as they do, we believe they do so as a result of the limitations of the analytic enterprise.

We wish to be quite clear that analytic clarity is, in fact, a virtue: it is essential to the broadest definition of human flourishing, to the important workings of our contemporary society, and to intellectual rigor and honesty. The academy ought not to abandon the practices that support the development of this virtue, due to the unique possibilities for and responsibilities of advanced research and teaching. However, we think that the academy can draw on some of its resources to accommodate another practice alongside the prevailing one, and, in so doing, rectify some of the problems involved in current academic arrangements.

II. Parables: An Alternative form of Academic Discourse

The desire within the academy for easily transacted, universally accessible discourse is not a modern phenomenon. Nor, for that matter, is the tension between those who believe such discourse ought to reign supreme in a community of scholars, and others who find such a way of speaking needlessly exclusionary and founded on false principles.

Beginning with Plato, grandfather of the western academy, philosophers have always wondered about the place of certain types of discourse within a properly ordered community of people who study truth. Plato himself is conflicted: in Book II of the Republic we see arguments against the formation of Greek society according to the values of Homeric poetry, and in Book III Socrates argues against poetry and myth-makers in general, suggesting we expel poets from his ideal community of virtuous truth-seekers. Yet *The Republic* contains one of the most famous philosophical narratives in history, the parable/allegory of the Cave. It certainly partakes of *mimesis*, hallmark of the much-vilified poets. Here, however, Plato appears to employ it with the end of benefitting the reader and helping her in the process of seeking knowledge. What are we to make of this position?

In his article on “Plato and Poetry,” G.R.F. Ferrari writes the following: “Just as an image is, or rather should be (in Plato's view), for the sake of its original, the art of image-making is destined to be the helpmate of the art that seeks truth. Poetry cannot, so to speak, be trusted on its own, but as the ward of a philosophic guardian[,] can put its talent to good use (Ferrari, 108).”⁴ The question becomes, then, how a philosophic guardian might put the talents of *poesis* to good use. Or, in more familiar terms: how can the modern teacher of comparative ethics integrate the virtues of poetic discourse into the academy, without either corrupting the values of our community or turning the poetry into a proxy for what we already do, and how we already talk.

Our focus on parables narrows the discussion still further. The choice is natural, at least for the discipline of comparative religious ethics. Like Plato, the luminaries of virtually every ethico-religious tradition – rabbis, Jesus, Mohammed, Confucius, Buddha, Lao-Zi, to name a few – have all employed parabolic discourse in some form or another to communicate their ethic. Clearly they

⁴ *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, ed. George Alexander Kennedy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

perceived some merit in this unique means of conveying ethical truths, and it will be our argument that the modern academy can partake of it profitably.

In order to understand what that merit is, and whether it belongs in the academy, we must first define the genre of the ‘parable’. The dominant understanding is indebted to Aristotle, and it is one we eventually wish to contest:

“There are two species of paradigms: for to speak of things that have happened before is one species of paradigm and to make up [an illustration] is another. Of the latter, comparison [*parabole*] is one kind, fables [*logoi*] another, for example the Aesopic and Lybian... Socratic sayings are an instance of comparison (*Rhetoric*, 20.2).”

Parables and fables, like metaphors and similes, are for Aristotle modes of comparison, narrative forms useful for illustrating philosophical points, but in themselves not a specific type of knowledge. To understand a parable is to grasp the discursive content that lies behind the narrative, itself merely a dispensable rhetorical mode. In other words, while the persuasive power of parables differs from that of logical discourse, the knowledge conveyed is the same. Telling a story about how someone acted kindly may be more persuasive than showing logically how someone ought to treat others kindly, but the ethical knowledge evinced by the former is always susceptible to analysis by the latter. Reducing a parable to its “philosophical meaning” only subtracts a persuasive dimension, not an epistemological one.

Kant, another titan of the western tradition, further destabilized the role of poetic discourse for philosophical inquiry. His Enlightenment project was, in part, an effort to show how all ethical truths can be illustrated through *a priori* principles, without need for supplement by the narrative discourse of any religious tradition. Ethical truths can be (indeed, they *ought* to be) discussed and deduced without any reference to narrative traditions. Consequently ethics in the academy becomes a practice where we sort out truths responsibly, in a rhetorical mode accessible to all who share in the common language of *a priori* truths and logic. Of course, many moderns do not accept the

premise that ethics can be conducted entirely *a priori*. We are fond of using historical examples and empirical evidence to supplement ethical arguments. But these types of evidence fit the first species of Aristotle's paradigms – that of speaking of things that have happened before. The latter species concerns us here, and it is that one that is still impermissible.

Parables, consequently, become subservient in this mode of speaking. A parable does not count as a conclusion in an academic argument. Rather, we ask of a parable what it “actually means,” and then analyze the answer according to the criteria of logic and empirical evidence that currently dominate the academic epistemological mode. Such analysis, in its ideal form, partakes of the virtue of analytic clarity, is easily transactable, and does not depend for its validity on the identity of the individuals who participate.

Implicit in this discursive paradigm is the idea that truths, at least academic ethical truths, can only be stated using certain types of statements. Journals, books, classroom discussion, exam formats and job descriptions – all favor a certain type of discourse. And beginning during the Enlightenment, there were rebels and dissidents, those who demanded that truths be expressed in a different type of discourse. One of the earliest and most interesting such rebels was Johann Georg Hamann, a remarkable and mysterious German who was a contemporary, and friend, of Immanuel Kant's. Hamann critiqued Kant, but in an unusual way. As Kenneth Haynes writes: “it is not that particular philosophical arguments need to be refuted but that the motivation behind them (a desire for mathematical certainty, Hamann alleges in Kant's case) stands in need of scrutiny and exposure.”⁵

More specifically, Hamann rejects the idea that truths are reducible to philosophical arguments. The primacy of Kant's mathematically precise, “reasonable, abstract, and transparent” discourse is what needs to be rebutted. And Hamann does not use the discourse of the academy to

⁵ See Johann Georg Hamann, *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xi.

make his rebuttal. Never does he explicitly state an epistemological theory of parables. Instead, he writes: “Poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race, as the garden is older than the ploughed field; painting, than writing, song, than declamation; parables, than logical deduction; barter, than commerce.”⁶ His style is like that of the parables he defends: philosophically elusive, strange, and obscure.

There have been other philosophers after him, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for example, whose very style was integral to their arguments against certain types of discourse. But it is telling that, like Hamann, they were decidedly outside of the academy. Their form of discourse as legitimate philosophy has never been vindicated in the academy, except perhaps in retrospect, and even then subsumed under current norms of discourse.⁷

This is not to say that the arguments do not continue, or modern academics are unaware of the situation. In political philosophy, the academic divide can be seen between political liberals and communitarians. And powerful ethical thinkers such as Richard Rorty, Stanley Hauerwas, and Alasdair MacIntyre have made compelling arguments that narrative forms provide foundational principles for certain ethical perspectives. Hauerwas puts the point well:

“Contemporary ethics has paid little attention to character, vision, stories, and metaphors as part of our moral experience. I want to argue that the particularity of the Christian moral life cannot be accounted for apart from these notions.... Contrary to the assumption of many philosophers, moral principles do not serve as the “essence” of stories, as if they might be abstracted from the story and still convey the same meaning. Rather, our principles are but shorthand reminders necessary for moral education and explanation; their moral significance is in the stories.”⁸

Sallie McFague goes even further. First, she makes an epistemological argument: “What is at issue, of course, is not just metaphor as a useful (or even a necessary) means of communicating something we already know... Rather metaphor is a way of *knowing*, not just a way of

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ The use of the thought experiment in philosophy is an interesting exception – nevertheless, we currently use it as a means to make an argument, like Aristotle’s parable. The experiment is always a means to understanding an argument, not the conclusion of the argument itself.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, (Duke University Press, 2005) 166.

communicating.”⁹ Having developed this claim, she then suggests that “we take the genre of parable seriously as a central *model* of theological reflection.” Parables “hold in solution the ordinary and the extraordinary.” The parabolic world “is neither secular *nor* religious but both at once.”¹⁰

In order to show that parables could be a central model of theological reflection, McFague needs to show a correspondence between the structure and function of parables and the ability of a theologian to articulate truthful statements about God. The concern of a university, however, or a modern professor of ethics, goes far beyond the articulation of theological truths. If the parable is to serve as a model for ethical discourse in the academy, then the task must be to show how certain truths and virtues of the academy are approached best in parabolic form. That is the task we will undertake in the following section.

It is important to note one way this approach signals a break from previous thinkers. Like McFague, most modern academics who argue for the importance of narratives do so from within a certain type of discourse (non-parabolic), on behalf of a community that is outside the academy, or in McFague’s case, for the minority within who do theology. Here, on the other hand, we want to pursue the argument that parabolic discourse could be integrated fully alongside traditional ways of speaking, in a manner that would complement the goals of the academy and improve ethical discourse. It would also serve to counteract the potential marginalization of those narrative traditions that feel as though academic discourse increasingly excludes and alienates them.

Parable, unlike theology, does not depend upon a particular metaphysical scheme. Like empirical evidence and logic, parables may be understood by atheists or the devout, from any

⁹ Sallie McFague, “Parable, Metaphor and Theology.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42 Dec 1974, p. 632.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

tradition. Hans Christian Andersen's words about fables may be understood to apply equally well to parables:

“Wise men of ancient times ingeniously discovered how to tell people the truth without being blunt to their faces. You see, they held a magic mirror before the people, in which all sorts of animals and various wondrous things appeared, producing amusing as well as instructive pictures. They called these fables, and whatever wise or foolish deeds the animals performed, the people were to imagine themselves in their places and thereby think, ‘This fable is intended for you!’ In this way no one's feelings were hurt.”¹¹

Parables, in distinction to straightforward ethical arguments, participate in indirect discourse. They invite the reader to use her imagination, to think about herself as a part of a narrative, to interpret and question her own story. When a parable ceases to stimulate the imagination it becomes a dead parable, just as metaphors die when they cease to illuminate. Multiple readings might indicate the failure of a traditional philosophical paper, but are necessity for parables. Since each listener sees him or herself in the mirror of the parable, the meaning differs with each encounter.

In the following section we will use parables from two different traditions to illustrate the virtue they teach, as well as the means necessary for teaching it. The virtue, that of *attentive humility*, is one that we believe belongs in the academy alongside analytic clarity. Attentive humility is the ability to question one's own narrative and foundational principles. Parables, paradoxically, both teach and require it. As we shall see, parables can force reluctant listeners into such questioning, while simultaneously rewarding the attentively humble with valuable ethical knowledge that would be otherwise inaccessible.

Attention to the form of the parable will help us supplement this claim, and one particular attribute will be the focus of our discussion: *significance of context*. By significance of context we mean the importance of personal identity, historical location, and other contextual factors in producing a valid interpretation of a parable. Parables are, in essence, permanently

¹¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *Andersen's Fairy Tales* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1942), p. 255.

irreducible. That is to say, while a parable may yield a contingently valid interpretation, it cannot be permanently reduced to that interpretation without losing its identity as a parable.

With these ideas in mind we can now turn to the parables themselves.

III. Jesus and Chuang-Tzu: Parables and Pedagogy

While analytic clarity plays a role in the interpretation of parables, we think that role is secondary to the role played by the virtue of attentive humility. Since parables cannot be reduced without remainder to their “propositional” content, consecutive logic alone cannot account for what the parable *is* or what it *does*. The skill entailed in the interpretation of parables – what we are calling attentive humility – operates on different relational dynamics in the situation of pedagogy. It is, first of all, a form of attention: a direction of one’s intentions and receptivity toward the parable (perhaps it is noteworthy that religious traditions highlight the importance of *wakefulness* and *watching* in the face of the temptation to sloth or inattention). While recording and analyzing propositional knowledge does not primarily require attention to personal aspects of the student’s individual relationship to the material and its context, the interpretation of parables depends heavily upon it. Parabolic content frequently serves to resituate and reorient the listener, especially in relation to her context. That cannot be done without self-conscious attention to oneself and to the alternative world of the parable.

The skill, however, demands also a form of humility: the willingness to be disoriented, to have one’s basic convictions challenged, and, especially, to inhabit the narrative world of the parable-teller (even, in its possible application to religious exchanges, a very broadly different narrative world). While it might, perhaps, require humility to inhabit one’s own narrative fully and meaningfully, listening to parables is an immediate occasion for the development of this kind of humility. The willingness to listen, and entertain the parable seriously, requires both a willing (if

temporary) submission to the parable-teller and an imaginative power capable of seeing things otherwise than they are taken to be, both of which require making space for the possibilities brought to the conversation by the parable-teller. Parables are usually meant to resist assimilation into established patterns of thought; their success depends, as a result, on a certain recognition of and posture toward the situation between parable and hearer. Attentive humility is the habitual form of this recognition.

A paradigmatic case of a New Testament parable that exhibits the demand for and trains its hearers in attentive humility is the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23).¹² This is, however, a paradoxical instance, as it is one of the few parables that includes what might be seen as an “authoritative explanation” from the parable-teller: Jesus gives an allegorical interpretation of his own words in verses 18-23. We would be mistaken, though, to take it that this “explanation” does anything to resolve the difficulties of the parable into easily digestible propositions. We can say initially that up to and even through the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, neither Jesus’ general audiences nor his disciples showed a comfortable comprehension of his message of the Kingdom of God, and that the parables (which the disciples continually questioned as a strategy of pedagogy) were never adequately translated into such propositions. Indeed, the explanation of the Parable of the Sower itself is a response to this question, “Why do you speak to [the crowds] in parables?” (v. 10). Thus, the Parable and its elaboration are meditations in their own right on the demand for and operation of parabolic communication.

In the parable, a Sower disperses seeds, which land in several places: some on a path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and others on good soil. Circumstances or outside agency (in the form of a bird) prevent the seeds from bearing fruit in all but the last case. Jesus finishes the parable, and declares, “Let anyone with ears listen!” (v. 9). A hasty reading might take this as a

¹² This parable is told in all three of the synoptic gospels (Mark 4:1-9 and Luke 8:4-8). We will refer primarily to the Matthean account because it devotes relatively more space to the parable and its explanation than the others.

fairly simple allegory, especially because, if the reader continues straight through the chapter (in any of the three versions), she gets an explanation from Jesus himself: the seed (according to Mark and Luke) is the Word of God, and the various circumstances represent various forms of receptivity toward the gospel, be they misunderstanding, superficial and transient pleasure, worldly contentedness, or, finally, understanding and flourishing. Yet, this is a trick of the text itself, for it leaves open possibilities for the identity of the Sower (God? Christ? The Evangelist?), what it means to understand the Word, and, most crucially for our purposes, who exactly *does* understand the Kingdom. Even if we take it, on the basis of Jesus' explanation of the parabolic method in v. 10-17, that the disciples clearly understood and the crowds did not (and there may be good reason not to do so)¹³, as later interpreters at a remove from the disciples' position, we cannot assume ourselves to be in one group or the other from the outset. We are left with a complex situation: a word dispersed by a seemingly reckless Sower into various circumstances, which depends on the integrity of its hearers to flourish.

This complexity amplifies the question posed by the disciples – why Jesus bothered with this method when it would clearly deny access to many among the crowds he drew. While certain interpretations of his reasoning – that it has been given to some to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom and not to others – are possible, our interpretation coincides with the demand for attentive humility. Belonging to the Kingdom requires disorientation and displacement of the self, which comes from the jarring of one's presuppositions about God's Kingdom in order to inhabit another narrative world. If it is true that this Kingdom is an “other” narrative world, such that our common expectations and understandings of how worlds can operate do not apply to it, then the call to

¹³ A set of good reasons to doubt that the disciples simply “got it” can be found in Robert Farrar Capon's *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 2002), 59-61. The central point of his argument is that the elaboration given by Jesus of the parable comes to conclusions about the Kingdom that flagrantly violate the prevalent expectations of 1st century Judaism, and that they would be more confused as a result of the explanation as a result.

inhabit that Kingdom must disturb the very categories that would assimilate it to those common expectations and understandings. Those who cannot “hear” the parable lack the ability to understand “the mysteries of the Kingdom”; without the virtue that opens one to vulnerability in regard to one’s basic convictions, one can only hear what is already known.

In this way, Jesus’ quotation from Isaiah proves appropriate:

“You will indeed listen, but never understand, / and you will indeed look, but never perceive. / For this people’s heart has grown dull, / and their ears are hard of hearing, / and they have shut their eyes; / so that they might not look with their eyes, / and listen with their ears, / and understand with their heart and turn - / and I would heal them.”¹⁴

This pericope suggests that the kind of sensation and observation (what we can see and hear) that might serve as the ground for propositions about what lies outside of us depend precisely on the kind of ears and eyes we have; attaining to the proper understandings of the Kingdom first demands certain personal capacities. If we may be permitted to change gospel accounts suddenly, we find that Jesus, when confronted about his teaching authority, makes an interesting claim about his own teaching and its hearing: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him” (John 7:16-18).

Attentive humility is conspicuous in two forms here. First, the humble resolution to do the will of God – importantly, without having recourse to evaluation and rejection before allegiance – is a precondition for understanding the teaching. What *cannot* be accomplished is teaching without commitment on behalf of the hearer, the communication of propositions that would be subject to a later evaluation and decision of the hearer. Second, Jesus allows himself to be displaced in favor of God: he precisely does *not* seek to impose his own understanding but rather claims to be inhabiting the narrative set forth by God. He directs his own attention toward God through a willingness to

¹⁴ The quotation is found verses 14-15 of the text, and refers to Isaiah 6:10.

listen and become reoriented toward the transcendent Kingdom. If the comparison between these two passages is valid, this opens the Parable of the Sower to a better understanding: the message of the Kingdom cannot be contained in the usual categories. As Jesus says elsewhere, we cannot hope to put new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:37); we must have the capacity to become new selves before anything like knowledge about mystery can be communicated to us.

While this is how parabolic discourse works using a Christian set of symbols, the virtue of attentive humility cross-cuts such symbolic systems, and can be seen in the parabolic discourse of radically different traditions. The *Chuang-Tzu* is a founding work of philosophical Daoism, second only to the *Dao-de-jing* in fame, and certainly more accessible in content.¹⁵ The unusual parables and philosophical word-games that fill its pages have fascinated thinkers as diverse as Oscar Wilde, Thomas Merton, and Martin Buber (the latter two offer their own translations), as well as modern physicists and philosophers of language. While the history and authorship of the text is fraught with controversy, that controversy need not occupy us here. Instead, we can focus on one of the many parables about learning the Way, and how one might or might not go about such learning. In the sixth book of the *Chuang-Tzu*, entitled “The Great and Venerable Teacher,” we encounter a man who wishes to learn about the Way. The story begins as follows:

“Nan-po Tzu-k’uei said to the Woman Crookback, ‘You are old in years and yet your complexion is that of a child. Why is this?’

‘I have heard the Way!’

‘Can the Way be learned?’ asked Nan-po.

‘Goodness, how could that be? Anyway, you aren’t the man to do it. Now there’s Pu-Liang Yi—he has the talent of a sage but not the Way of a sage, whereas I have the Way of a sage but not the talent of a sage. I thought I would try to teach him and see if I could really get anywhere near to making him a sage. It’s easier to explain the Way of a sage to someone who has the talent of a sage, you know...’¹⁶

Woman Crookback proceeds to explain how she taught the Way to Pu-Liang Yi, and in so doing she also explains it to us. For our purposes, however, it is the framing of her explanation that

¹⁵ For the sake of simplicity we will be using Burton Watson’s translation of the *Chuang-Tzu*, *The Complete Works of Chuang-Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). Newer translations use a more modern form of phonetic Chinese, and spell the name Zhuang-zi. The convenience is purely orthographic – here we use Watson’s for the sake of consistency.

¹⁶ *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 82-83.

brings out the importance of attentive humility. First, we should note that the explanation is given, strangely, to someone who is purportedly unequipped to understand it. According to Woman Crookback, teaching the Way requires a student who has “the talent of a sage.” If the reader, like Nan-po, is lacking in that talent, then he too will be incapable of understanding her teaching. Thus the whole parable calls into question the hearer’s own readiness to understand the meaning of any teaching about the Way, and forces him to be humble about his own interpretative or hermeneutic abilities. If one does not possess the talent of the sage, then enlightening explanations, however clear they may seem, will fail to disclose their true meaning.

Yet close attention to Woman Crookback gives us hope that we might yet understand something of her explanation. She herself admits to lacking the talent of a sage, but nevertheless she somehow acquired the Way of the sage. Is she being intentionally deceptive about what it takes to learn the Way, or simply saying that having the talent of a sage makes a very difficult lesson much easier? Alternatively, it seems possible that while Nan-po might not have what it takes, the reader might discover (or develop) within herself that talent necessary for understanding what another, less perceptive listener might not. At the very least, we are primed to listen attentively and humbly, keeping in mind that we may well not be able to understand the meaning of a given story, while hoping that somehow we will. This uncertainty about one’s own hermeneutic abilities, combined with the increased attentiveness that results from the hope of understanding, is an important aspect of attentive humility. It parallels our uncertainty when reading the parable of the Sower concerning whether or not we are among those who have ears to hear.

The virtue of attentive humility is further reinforced by the conclusion of the parable. After informing her questioner that he would not be able to learn the Way, Woman Crookback proceeds to offer a rather long, cryptic story of how she taught the Way to Pu-Liang Yi, and his resulting

enlightenment. When she is finished, her hapless would-be student Nan-po asks her, “Where did you happen to hear this?” Woman Crookback answers:

“I heard it from the son of Aided-by-Ink, and Aided-by-Ink heard it from the grandson of Repeated-Recitation, and the grandson of Repeated-Recitation heard it from Seeing-Brightly, and Seeing-Brightly heard it from Whispered-Agreement, and Whispered-Agreement heard it from Waiting-for-Use, and Waiting-for-Use heard it from There-in-the-Singing, and There-in-the-Singing heard it from Dark-Obscurity, and Dark-Obscurity heard it from Participation-in-Mystery, and Participation-in-Mystery heard it from Copy-the-Source!”

Here we have a list of different types of people who (perhaps) understood the Way, themselves representing a variety of different methods of acquiring knowledge. Each has his own particular identity, and each requires assistance from someone else. One whose father is aided by ink must learn from someone whose grandfather repeatedly recites, who in turn must learn from one who sees brightly, and so on until the end of the line, to one who copies the source. Every hearer, from Nan-po to twentieth century Westerners, shares in one of these ways of being and learning, or even a few, but all of us are in need of a teacher whose own way of being is foreign to our own. It is our job as attentively humble listeners to respect these other ways of being and acquiring knowledge, and realize that the meaning of the Way may come from a variety of sources, a Crookbacked Woman or someone who simply whispers agreement. The combination of possible sources of meaning with the humility of realizing that any source might be the right one should result in attentive humility, not just for the meaning of this particular parable, but for all parables. Any story, from any source, if properly attended to, might turn out to be meaningful, and the virtue of attentive humility opens us to the possibility of meanings from teachers we did not expect to hear, and stories that may or may not appear clear initially. To put this insight in terms of the academy, it is not only Aided-by-Ink and Analytic-Clarity who can provide ultimate knowledge.

Parables help break us out of that mold, and open up a variety of valuable ways of being and learning that might otherwise be marginalized by the current epistemological bent of our community. They give us a new set of ears with which to hear.

Attentive humility, at a basic level, is essential for respecting the way in which a parable means. It honors a distinguishing feature of parabolic discourse, one that is absent from that of propositional analysis: the intractable significance of context to valid interpretation. The narrative world that parables create depends on elements of the relationship between parable and hearer: in some contexts, they can serve as a reimagining or a retelling of actual circumstances in order to render visible important differences between the world of the story and the familiar world of the hearer. In other contexts, they function as veiled criticisms of the taken-for-granted beliefs and practices of the hearer(s). Whatever the situation, though, parabolic meanings always depend on their context. What it means to be telling *this* parable to *this* person in *this* place varies; the way in which a parable means is indexed to these factors. This dynamic is internal to the workings of parables and, therefore crucially figures in their telling and hearing.

We can attend to the significance of context for the Chinese parable by looking at a variety of interpretations it has produced. It is obvious how in the current context of our argument about the modern academy, this parable generates a possible interpretation by demonstrating through its form the necessity of attentive humility, and bringing about that virtue in the reader or listener. However, to understand this reading as the correct one, or the only one, is misunderstand how the parable has functioned. The parable stands alone, as a narrative that inspires meaning-making; each moment of meaning is unique to its context, and cannot be pronounced right or wrong according to traditional understandings of those terms. Rather, the parable succeeds or fails in being illuminating, in helping us understand parts of ourselves or the world that weren't previously clear.

It might also illuminate by undermining, showing us that certain aspects of our worldview are questionable.

Take, for instance, two other readings of the list that concludes Woman Crookback's story. In our own interpretation we have taken them to represent different ways of learning, and the meaning of the list is simply to realize that one's lesson might be learned from a variety of sources, and that every form of knowledge depends for its enlightenment on another different form. This conclusion fits nicely with the context of our investigation, namely how the epistemology of parables can bridge gaps and open up relationships between the current views of the academy and those communities that prefer to know by means of narrative, or tradition.

If we look at the commentary of Wang Fuzhi, a 17th century Chinese literary theorist and Confucian, the meaning of the passage changes considerably. He writes the following gloss:

“Since the Great Course is formless and cannot be seen, all that is learned, whether from bamboo and silk, bindings and manuscripts, ink and seals, recitations, direct hearing and seeing, or words and phrases, is just insubstantial echoes. What it all begins from is drift, murkiness, darkness, obscurity—one suspects something is there, but there never has been. The guesses and suspicions about beginnings and no beginnings were transmitted by means of these “transforming sounds.” Thus these transforming sounds, though blowing forth like pipings from bamboo, never find that from which they sprout, and yet the Radiance of Drift and Doubt has never cease to be lodged in their self-transformations. So you may go ahead and lodge True Knowing in any symbolic language at all! It's just another case of reaching completion only through tumult.”¹⁷

Wang Fuzhi comes to the conclusion that all learning is just “insubstantial echoes.” Rather than asserting the potential viability of any given way of knowing, he argues that this passage signifies one's ultimate lack of ability to learn anything. In fact, it appears that True Knowing is just the awareness that all symbolic systems are based on drift, murkiness, and darkness, and a reconciliation with this truth is in fact the foundation of True Knowing.

Given Wang Fuzhi's context – he was objecting to Neo-Confucian doctrine that dominated at the time of his writing, codified in the rigid civil service exams of his time – it makes sense that

¹⁷ Zhuangzi: *The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Hackett Publishing Corporation, 2009), p. 200.

he would read the passage in this way.¹⁸ And after reading his interpretation, it does indeed call our own reading into question. Is the list a list of potentially valid symbolic systems, or is it a summary of all the ultimately inadequate sources of True Knowing, which itself is mere recognition of tumult and doubt? If the latter is in fact the case, what do we do with Woman Crookback's story? Suddenly the whole narration seems like a joke – for she has expressed everything in a symbolic system, which, according to Wang Fuzhi's reading of the story, can only express insubstantial echoes of the truth. A plausible reading, entirely different from our own, and one that again reinforces attentive humility.

A third reading of this list yields another interpretation of the parable, influenced by yet another interpreter's context. Burton Watson, whose translation we have used here, includes a footnote to the passage: "These names are open to a variety of interpretations. The whole list, of course, is a parody of the filiations of the other schools of philosophy."¹⁹

Drawing on his knowledge of the Chuang-tzu's authorial context, Watson reads the final list as a different type of joke – an undermining of the other schools of thought with which the author of the entire passage had certain disagreements. His reading seems completely opposed to both our own and Wang Fuzhi's. The names are not viable sources of Enlightenment, nor are they a statement of the fact that all symbolic systems are equally inadequate for expressing True Knowing. Instead, they represent an explicit denunciation of the philosophical schools that rely on certain ways of learning – being aided by ink, or engaging in repeated recitation, and so forth. Given the rest of the tenor of the Chuang-tzu, this interpretation is highly plausible; other passages and parables explicitly mock Confucians and logicians of the time.

But just like Wang Fuzhi's reading, and like our own, Watson's raises as many questions as it answers. If the list is a parody of the different schools of philosophy, it is nevertheless the source

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁹ Watson, p. 83.

of Woman Crookback's information. Should we then take the whole story, including her instruction of Pu-liang Yi, as a parody? That seems to be the logical conclusion, given that the source of her knowledge is precisely the schools of thought that are being parodied. Or should we accept her story, and read the last paragraph as a satirical aside, telling us to ignore these other modes of learning and stick only to the teaching that precedes them? If the latter approach is preferable, then two more conundrums present themselves. The first has already been stated in our own reading: what if we don't have the talent of a sage, and therefore cannot understand the only true teaching of the Way? The other problem is that the parable itself is presented in ink. We, the readers who are hearing it in an alternative context, that is, written rather than spoken, do not have the luxury of stepping outside the parodied method of learning. In order to do so, we would have to ignore the entire parable, an impossibility given our present position as readers and interpreters.

While various circumstances and identities can help generate a multiplicity of valid interpretations, we must also remember that one's situation and basic convictions can close off a parable's ability to speak, especially when the hearer does not possess the virtue of attentive humility that allows her to step outside of her basic convictions, and inhabit an alternative world. The Parable of Sower works as a cautionary tale to this effect.

In its original context, the Parable of the Sower works parasitically on the expectations about the Kingdom and the nature of the Messiah that already existed in the minds of Jesus' audience. As has been well-documented, most expectations surrounding this set of symbols involved a kind of political rebellion that would re-establish the Davidic Kingdom; the notion of a Messiah who dies and a Kingdom that is already among God's people was nonsensical to Jesus' audience because it transgressed their basic understandings of the world, understandings they were loath to relinquish. Consequently, they continually failed to understand what otherwise could have been illuminating teachings.

The Parable of the Sower, because it does not make clear who understands and who does not, opens the possibility that, in any context, there are factors that contribute to *mis*understanding. In the original context, it was hearers' common sense view of the kingdom that rendered the parable meaningless. However, we have no assurance that our own common sense does not cut us off from understanding. That is, the parable of the Sower calls for the hearer not just to attempt to interpret the parable itself but also to question her own circumstances, including her relationship to the implied world-view of the parable, in light of the fragility of understanding itself. The thorns, the bird, the rocky ground, and the good soil are, with respect to the cultural location of their hearing, variables for which different values can be substituted. Thus, the ability to learn the lesson of the parable well depends on the ability to make an ever-new judgment about both the spirit of the parable and the actual condition of a particular situation. A multiplicity of interpretations, based on the always shifting circumstances of the parable's telling, creates a situation where no prescribed answer can be found. Therefore, attentive humility – sensitivity to the relationship of our common sense world to the world of the parable – and not the mere possession of knowledge, is what enables us to interpret parables well.

IV: Parables in Practice

The question becomes, then, how best to integrate the features of parables into academic practice, without doing violence to our current goal of analytic clarity and or sponsoring comprehensive doctrines. How can we expand or emphasize certain ways of teaching so that the practices of the academy (at least in those disciplines where it is deemed appropriate) will exercise the virtue of attentive humility alongside analytic clarity, and in doing so make the enterprise of learning richer and more rewarding?

Burton Watson's footnote about the meaning of the list that concludes the Daoist parable provides an excellent place to begin. His comment exhibits precisely the division between two types of learning that currently dominate – that of parabolic discourse, which depends on one's own perspective, and that of analytic clarity, that transcends perspectives and takes the form of propositional knowledge. Watson writes, "These names are open to a variety of interpretations. The whole list, of course, is a parody of the filiations of the other schools of philosophy." The first sentence exemplifies parabolic discourse; the meaning of the list is left open to judgement and interpretive skills of the hearer. Yet the second sentence cuts off that possibility, by forcing a particular interpretation onto the passage. Watson undoes his own claim; any student or reader who comes across this footnote would surely take his pronouncement on the list of names to be authoritative.

It is precisely this type of specification that we want to avoid, or at least supplement by use of creative pedagogical techniques. One possibility would be to present a wide range of Chuang-tzu translations, of which only Watson's suggests that the list is a parody of philosophical schools. Another possibility would be to present Watson's interpretation, and then ask students what the consequences would be for the parable if Watson were incorrect. Certainly Watson's insight about the potential reference to rival philosophical schools can open new possibilities for understanding; it must, however, be treated as one among other possibilities, at least on our reading of how parabolic teaching functions. The concern here is not to discredit Watson, or any responsible academic interpreter, but rather open up a new dimension of experience and interpretation, one that emphasizes imaginative attention to different possibilities rather than a structured search for a single propositional truth. One option would be, as Brook Ziporyn does, to include the scholarly apparatus as an appendix, rather than using the traditional practice of sprinkling commentary in at the beginning of chapters or as footnotes (A.C. Graham, the pre-eminent 20th Western scholar of

Chinese philosophy, provides a gloss of the “meaning” of each Chuang-Tzu chapter at the beginning of his translation, for instance.)

In the same way, one might begin a presentation of the parable of the Sower by only allowing students to read the first portion, absent Jesus’ explanation. After asking students to write down their own interpretations of what the parable meant, the following portion could be revealed. Not only would this experience replicate the actual experience of Jesus’ disciples, who themselves had to wait before receiving an explanation, but it would also emphasize the importance of one’s own experience and interpretation of the text. Revealing Jesus’ gloss after students have come up with their own readings would entail a rethinking of their own original position, a questioning that might not occur were everything presented together. This questioning, as we have suggested, might be *internal* to the logic of the parable itself, and so complement the unusual way in which it means.

Stanley Fish provides an excellent example of this experiential approach to learning in his essay “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One.”²⁰ During one of his classes on literary theory, he placed a list of literary critics’ names on the board:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman(?)

That class that followed was on English religious poetry. Before it began, Fish drew a frame around the names and wrote p. 43 at the top. When the students arrived, he told them that what they saw on the blackboard was a religious poem and asked them to interpret it. The members of the class produced a variety of highly nuanced readings, all of which assumed the truth of Fish’s information.

²⁰ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 322 ff.

One can assume that if they were appraised of the truth, those readings would have appeared ridiculous.

Fish then uses this anecdote as evidence in a propositional argument: he claims that texts are constructed by the mode of interpretation we bring to them. He makes the radical argument that communities of interpretation, not the texts themselves, determine both the nature and quality of the work. It is essential to realize, however, that this story about a “fake” poem, and the experience for his students, *cannot* be merely reduced to Fish’s analysis of it. Certainly some could take from this that all texts are determined by the interpretative practices of a given community, as Fish would have us believe. But others might have felt deceived: perhaps the lesson they took was that teachers ought to be honest when presenting information. Others might have been delighted by Fish’s trick, but taken it as a reason to question their own blind faith in the information provided by teachers, and a cautionary tale about thinking hard before assuming something is really what it seems. The lesson could have been exactly the opposite: narratives and communities can be misleading, and objective clarity about the history of a text is the only way to avoid making mistakes. The point here is that Fish’s lesson, like a parable, depends for its meaning on what the students take away from it at that particular time. The point here is that like a parable, Fish’s lesson includes and transcends both how the students present approached their interpretations, and how he himself interprets his own experience. To read about it in a book and reduce it to a single interpretation is to miss the real meaning of the experience (or at least to miss other possible valid meanings).

The job of the pedagogue here parallels that of the parable, rather than the encyclopedia or text-book. Teachers no longer merely provide or clarify information, nor is their role to equip students with the tools to do that for themselves. Rather, they act like like Hans Christian Andersen’s mirror, providing a context within which students can question themselves and develop their own readings. To encourage this approach, teachers could also ask for different genres of

response to their lessons. The analytic essay in which students process previous theory and offer their own argumentative analysis is certainly useful, but it by no means provides the only way to approach a text. Lee Yearley, who recently suggested that current academic practices stifle the study of “poetry, ethics, and religion,”²¹ welcomes the use of unusual creative projects as a means of understanding texts. Alternative forms of media such as music, computer programs, and personal reflection are all accepted by him as ways of understanding the texts he teaches in his classes.

Understandably such forms are not currently the norm in the academy, and for a variety of reasons. Most controversially, perhaps, there is no universal standard for evaluating them. Grading a student’s musical piece written about Dante, for example, would be very difficult, and the criteria for success or failure given by analytic clarity are entirely irrelevant. The knowledge or learning gained is highly idiosyncratic, not easily translated into propositions. That fact, however, need not stop us from adopting these alternative approaches, especially if doing so will actually contribute to broader understanding and a richer academic practice overall. An increasing realization that “objective” methods of information dissemination and evaluation (standardized tests and textbooks) should provide fodder for the need to supplement the current approach. If tests and texts can discriminate against race, sex, gender, and class, perhaps they can also discriminate against narrative. Howard Zinn’s remarkable *People’s History* of the United States shows one way in which the stale standardized approach to American history can be supplemented (not replaced) by providing a perspectival narrative that according to Zinn himself does *not* take analytic clarity as a primary goal. Such supplementation need not be restricted to high school level learning.

Nor should we assume that pursuing an alternative experiential or narrative approach must preclude the exercise of analytic clarity. Books like Zinn’s help supplement analytic clarity by providing us with perspectives that might otherwise never have been considered. One might, for

²¹ See Yearley’s keynote Harvard lecture: “The Ethics of Bewilderment”, at www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/resources/lectures/yearley.html

example, approach learning about the parable of the Sower by asking students to write narratives from the perspectives of the different characters involved. Some might be assigned to write from the point of view of the Pharisees, others from that of the disciples, and others from that of Jesus himself. Such an exercise could easily reinforce current practices of the academy – students would have to consult secondary sources to learn more about their assigned perspective. Yet the exercise itself would entail the exercise of attentive humility, imaginative identification with a narrative world entirely different from one’s own, and thus facilitate a learning experience that cannot be reduced to the text produced by the student. Rather, the lesson learned would consist precisely in their experience of producing the text. Indeed, the likely charge that parabolic-inspired pedagogy would not lead to fair evaluations or would likely lead to erratic classroom experiences suggests, in fact, that such pedagogy, whatever flaws it might have, would serve as a corrective to the many limitations of current academic practice. We believe it to be worthwhile to imagine and refine methods that would train in both analytic clarity and attentive humility.

These ideas are certainly not new, and many of us have probably encountered such an approach in the classroom (as students), or even used it ourselves as pedagogues. The fact remains, however, that it is far from the norm. The desire for discourse that transcends personal narratives, along with an emphasis on easily transacted knowledge and a specific idea of the scholar’s job has marginalized creative approaches to learning, especially at a university level. Yet it should be clear from the arguments offered here that parabolic discourse need not violate the hard-earned and highly valuable virtues of the current academy. Narrative approaches to learning do not exclude certain comprehensive doctrines, nor do they preclude the development of analytic clarity. Rather, they complement current strengths of the academy by opening us to more imaginative ways of learning about others, ways that we believe will be of great use in our quest to understand others, and ourselves. Hamann and Kant can coexist without doing violence to each other. There will be

disputes between both sides, a back and forth between those who, like Plato, regard narrative forms of teaching with suspicion, and those who believe such teaching to be essential, whatever the difficulties it may entail. If the goal of the university is an unbiased, non-exclusionary approach to learning, however, the parabolic mode of discourse must be adopted in order to do justice to the complete range of perspectives on what learning, and ethics, truly consist in. A.C. Graham writes the following of Daoist thought, though one might apply it just as easily to any mystical or parabolic thinking: “The Daoist... cannot be a ‘philosopher’ in the Western sense, establishing his case by rational argument; he can only guide us in the direction of the Way by aphorisms, poetry, and parable.”²² Graham might be wrong, but the only way to investigate his claim fairly is to allow it full expression in the academy. This paper provides the beginning of a theory and justification of why we should do so.

²² A.C. Graham, *The Book of Lieh-Tzu* (London: John Murray, 1960), p. 10.