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## **Can Parables Work?**

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### **Abstract**

While theories about interpreting biblical and other parables have long realised the importance of readers' responses to the topic, recent results in social psychology concerning systematic self-deception raise unforeseen problems. In this paper I first set out some of the problems these results pose for the authority of fictional thought-experiments in moral philosophy. I then consider the suggestion that biblical parables face the same problems and as a result cannot work as devices for moral or religious instruction in the way that they are usually understood to work. I examine a number of influential theories about interpretation of the parables which might appear to deflect the problems, and argue that none of them are ultimately successful in doing so.

### **Introduction**

The parable was a device that Jesus favoured for getting his message across. What appears to be a similar choice is made by many moral philosophers nowadays: they argue for their views by appeal to fictional thought-experiments, using what is often called the "method of cases". This method is not without its problems, however. I will highlight some important difficulties that stem from results in social psychology. These results call into question any reliance on our intuitive responses in general, and our responses to fictional cases in particular.

I will set out the central steps in the use of fictional cases in ethics and the thinking behind the method of cases. I will then set out (in Sections 3 and 4) how this method is affected by the evidence of systematic self-deception. After that, I take up the suggestion that parables face the same difficulties and investigate whether there is any respite to be had from developments in the theory of parable interpretation. While I acknowledge the ingenuity of some of these developments, I argue in the end that the problems remain and that parables cannot work in the ways that they are usually understood to work.

### **The method of imaginary cases in ethics**

Moral philosophy has a long history of using fictional cases and our responses to them in support of or against particular moral views. Two prominent examples are Bernard Williams's story of Jim and the Indians (Williams 1973, 98-99) and Judith Jarvis Thomson's 'famous violinist' case (Thomson 1979, 132). There are many more – involving trolleys on railway lines rolling towards various disasters and large people stuck in the mouths of caves – but these two will serve as illustrations. Williams tells the story of Jim who has to choose between shooting an Indian villager in order to save the lives of nineteen others or not shooting the villager and having the nineteen killed by their captor. The story gives Jim no way around these choices. Williams wishes to use the case against utilitarian theories. That may at first seem puzzling, since you may agree that the right thing for Jim to do is to shoot the one Indian and thereby save nineteen lives in line with utilitarian thinking. Williams's argument is more subtle, however. He argues that, according to the utilitarian it is obvious that Jim should do this; but our response is more graded – it may be the right thing to do, but it is not *obviously* so. And that means utilitarians are wrong.

Thomson's case has a different form, but uses the same method of appealing to our intuitive responses. In the context of the debate around the morality of abortion, she presents a counter-example to the purported moral principle that the right to life always outweighs a person's rights concerning what happens in and to their body.

Let me ask you to imagine this. You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music Lovers has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "... To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you". ... I imagine you would regard this as outrageous.

(Thomson 1979, 132)

Thomson takes that intuitive response as indicating that you think your rights concerning what happens to your body are not always outweighed by someone's right to life. The idea is then that, as a result of this analogy, that particular principle does not count as trumps in the abortion debate.

### **Initial questions about the authority of intuitive responses**

There is, at least on the face of things, a plausible model supporting the kind of authority that arguments like these grant to our intuitive responses (Kagan 2001). Such responses take the place in moral knowledge that observation takes in scientific

or commonsense knowledge. In science, if what we observe runs counter to what a theory claims to be the case, then we reject that theory or at least require that it be revised to fit what we have observed. Although we do not grant observation to be infallible – there can be many reasons for rejecting particular observations – we do grant it epistemological primacy over theory: theories must answer to observation.

In a similar way, we can understand the relationship between moral theory or principles and our intuitive responses to cases. Should the implications of a particular moral theory for a case run counter to our intuitive responses to that case, then we reject that theory or call for it to be appropriately revised. Some moral philosophers make the link to observation quite explicit, in talk of our “seeing” the rightness or wrongness of some action or feature of a situation (Harman 1977, 5; Thomson 1986, 257; Sober 2001, 413). And, as with observation, there can be reasons for rejecting particular intuitive responses - perhaps as not occurring under ideal conditions.

While it is easy to draw parallels in this way, Kagan has pointed out that there are crucial differences between observations and intuitive responses which have serious consequences for the authority of the latter. The apparent isomorphism between observations and intuitions invites us to imbue intuitions with some authority; but there are reasons why observations have epistemic authority which simply do not apply in the case of intuitions. Where observations are concerned, we have a background picture available that explains why they are in a special position: given our sensory apparatus, the observations we experience are (on the whole) reliable indicators of what is going on around us. In current philosophical jargon, our senses ‘track the truth’. It is because of this that theory must answer to observation. In the case of our intuitive responses, we have no such picture available – we have no account which places our responses as reliable trackers of features of moral reality.

Without this, any authority granted to them on the grounds of a parallel with observation lacks any justification.

Kagan's point is well taken, but the problem is far greater than this suggests. For the results from social psychology to which I referred at the start suggest that it is not simply that we lack justification for taking intuitive responses to be reliable, but that we have good reason to see them as completely unreliable and unsuitable for the role in which they have been placed.

### **Further problems – empirical threats**

Over the last ten years, philosophers have become increasingly interested in the consequences of empirical research in psychology for moral philosophy in particular. John Doris and Shaun Nichols, amongst others, have drawn important lessons from 'moral psychology' (Doris 2002, Nichols 2004). I am going to argue, on related but different lines, that there are specific threats that results in social psychology present for the authority of our intuitive responses to cases or fictional thought-experiments in moral philosophy.

The method of cases or thought-experiment operates with a view of the individual mind in which the experiment is to take place that is at odds with the evidence about those individual minds. If we are to introspect and find out how and why we respond to an imagined situation as we do, then we need to have access to the workings of our own minds. But it is precisely this that the evidence shows to be lacking. For instance, we are unaware of our "confirmation bias" – our tendency to unconsciously select which evidence to pay attention to; we are particularly receptive to evidence that supports our current beliefs or puts us in a good light, and we avoid evidence that might be disruptive to our beliefs or reflects negatively on us (Brown

1986; Evans 1990). We may either have no access to the relevant data, or we may mislead ourselves about the data. Our minds may well be healthy, but they are nevertheless prone to systematic self-deception.

Nisbett and Wilson point to more direct evidence as to how the introspected intuitions that we report can be misleading and which seems to show that they are utterly unreliable in their authoritative role in the method of cases (Nisbett and Wilson 1977). The method gets its data by asking us how we respond to a fictional case. The idea is that we know by introspection why we respond as we do to the features of the case, so that we can say what is significant among those features. Nisbett and Wilson present evidence that strongly suggests that we do *not* know why we respond as we do: we tend to misdiagnose and misreport what underlies our responses. For instance, subjects deny the influence on their responses of factors which are indeed playing a significant role.

[In one study] passersby were invited to evaluate articles of clothing - ... four identical pairs of nylon stockings. Subjects were asked to say which article of clothing was the best quality and, when they announced the choice, were asked why they had chosen the article they had. There was a pronounced left-to-right position effect, such that the rightmost object in the array was heavily overchosen. For the stockings, ... the right-most stockings being preferred over the left-most by a factor of almost four to one. When asked about the reasons for their choices, no subject ever mentioned spontaneously the position of the article in the array. And, when asked directly about a possible effect of the position of the article, virtually all subjects denied it. (Nisbett and Wilson 1977: 243-4)

The subjects in the study had no introspective access to the actual feature of the situation responsible for their response, their introspections revealing other features that were patently *not* responsible. And, while this is not a moral case, it remains quite clearly an issue of *value*-judgement and thus pertinent to our focus. The subjects' responses as to which features give rise to their value judgements are systematically unreliable.

An even more pertinent and more striking experiment of Nisbett and Wilson's concerns subjects' reports on which features are responsible for their emotional responses to a piece of fiction. They describe a study in which subjects are given a passage to read from John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*.

The selection described an alcoholic housewife who has just been left by her husband and who is cleaning up her filthy home in preparation for a visit by her mother. While drunkenly washing her infant girl, she accidentally allows the child to drown. The selection is well written and has a substantial emotional impact even when read out of the context of the rest of the novel. There were four conditions of the experiment. In one condition, subjects read the selection as it was written. In a second condition, a passage graphically describing the messiness of the baby's crib was deleted. In a third condition, subjects read the selection minus a passage physically describing the baby girl. In the fourth condition, both passages were deleted.

(Nisbett and Wilson 1977, 245)

The emotional impact of the story turns out to be the same on the subjects, regardless of whether the manipulated passages are present or absent. But the subjects who are exposed to those passages report that those specific passages increase the emotional impact of the selection on them.

Subjects exposed to the passage describing the messiness of the baby's crib are *unanimous* in their opinion that the passage had increased the impact of the selection: 86% said the passage had increased the impact. (Nisbett and Wilson 1977, 245)

What this reveals is that the subjects' reports of why they are responding as they do and of what features they are responding to are completely unreliable. They simply do not have access to what underlies their responses to the fictional scenario – and neither do we. And that presents a major challenge if the method of cases is to lead us to moral truth. Even when we are certain about what we are responding to we can be systematically wrong. It might be objected that the experiment involves emotional rather than moral responses, and thus does not affect the method of cases. But that seems to me to be a red herring – either way, it shows that we do not have access to what underlies our responses to fiction, despite what we think. And you do not have to be an emotivist with regard to ethics to realize that there is a connection between our affective responses and our moral attitudes, such that being out of touch with what underlies the former also has implications for what underlies the latter.

### **Parables**

On the face of things, parables face the same problems as the method of cases or thought-experiment in moral philosophy. Parables – at least to the theologically unsophisticated - are devices for teaching moral lessons. That would mean that the hearers of the parable respond to particular features of the fictional story presented to them as morally significant or particularly relevant. And that is indeed how Jesus's parables have been viewed by most of those who see them as of particular importance.

Even contemporary general authorities characterize them (at least initially) in these terms. In this vein, the 2005 edition of the Thomson-Gale *Encyclopedia of Religion* offers the definition

A parable is a short narrative fiction that expresses a moral or religious lesson.  
(McKenzie 2005, 6976)

This suggests that parables are meant to work in the same way that the analogies of applied ethics – like Thomson’s - are meant to work, and thus that they are prone to the problems that I have identified. The hearers’ responses form the data of the analogies: they reveal the features that are seen as morally relevant or as what is right or wrong in the story and thus reveal the significant features of the hearer’s situation (or of heaven). Since it is this very data that we do not have anything like reliable access to, the method of teaching by parables appears to falter on the same point as the thought-experiments of moral philosophy.

That is how things stand, as I have indicated, on the face of things.

Theological work over the last century suggests that we need to move away from this superficial view – even if it is the view that most believers share – and take a very different stance towards the parables. One common claim, at least since Adolf Jüliche’s work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, is that the parables are not to be seen as allegories. Perhaps the most influential definition of parables comes in CH Dodd’s 1935 *Parables of the Kingdom*. Dodd tells us that a parable is

a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought. (Dodd 1950, 16)

That definition suggests both a profound revision of the traditional view and a reply to the issues I have raised. For, if all that a parable is required to do is to get us thinking, then problems for the reliability of our responses are no longer relevant.

I will argue that the relevance of my issues is not so easily avoided. But before I do that, it will be worth considering why a definition as initially unpromising as Dodd's might have appealed to scholars considering the parables.

I think there are two central reasons for its appeal. One is that (even without considering the extra problems I have raised) a number of Jesus's parables are not at all easy to make sense of, even for insiders. Certain aspects of the story itself or the reading of the parable offered in the text prove difficult to reconcile with other Biblical teachings – we will see two examples in what follows. The other reason stems from what amounts to a theory of parables that is set out in both the gospels of Matthew and Mark; a theory that suggests the parables are not intended to work as straightforward analogies. Both of these reasons will feature in the discussion to follow. Although I think they are worth noting here, I will not use them specifically to shape the discussion. Rather, I will follow various mainstream strategies for interpreting the parables that start with Dodd's definition, arguing that they are not successful in avoiding the difficulties of self-deception.

### **CH Dodd and reader-response theory**

Dodd suggested that the parables demand a greater role for the hearer than seeing them as simple allegories allows. The meaning is not simply given, but has to be actively worked out by the hearer and its application specified by the hearer herself. A prime example is the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1-13). Jesus tells his disciples of a manager who is accused by his employer of wasting his possessions and who is about to be fired. The manager approaches the rich man's debtors and hurriedly arranges deals with them in which they only have to pay back a fraction of what they owe, so that they will look after him once he loses his job. The rich man commends him for this. Anthony Thiselton neatly characterises Dodd's view:

The reader wrestles with the message on two levels. First it appears that at least the dishonest manager may be commended for being a shrewd fellow who knows how to serve his own interests when he is set up against a crisis. Second, it becomes clear at the level of *kerygma* that the crisis provoked by the coming of Jesus also...demands the kind of urgent action which makes all other considerations subordinate ones.

(Thiselton 1985, 97)

Why does the reader need to wrestle when the gospel spells out the message? "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16: 9 NIV). Thiselton suggests that the meaning is still open, until the hearer puts it together for herself, unaided by someone else's interpretation.

Even if Dodd's definition of a parable suggested that problems of self deception are irrelevant, once he spells out the process of interpretation it is not hard to see that they are back. It is up to the hearer to make her own discovery of the

parable's message – and that means the hearer needs access to what it is in the parable that she is responding to. If she is responding to aspects other than those she thinks she is responding to, then she does not know what it is that she is discovering. Dodd's account of interpretation involves a cognitive process that rests on the reliability of the hearer's responses – and that is what we do not have.

Appeals to “reader-response” theories made popular in literary studies have become common in parable scholarship since Dodd, but the same problem remains even when the theories become more sophisticated. They criticize attempts at interpretation that are premised on there being a single meaning to a parable, and insist on the importance of individual or community responses to the narrative. But my worries are not premised on there being a single meaning, rather they are premised on our not having access to why we respond or what we are responding to in a narrative. We may know how we (as individuals or communities) respond, but since we are no good at knowing what we are responding to, the significance of that response is undermined.

### **William Herzog Unmasking the World of Oppression**

William Herzog presents a different approach to interpreting the parables – one that, like Dodd's, can be seen as sidestepping problems from social psychology. What the parables are primarily about, according to Herzog, is not the teaching of some moral or religious lesson but rather about illustrating the power relations in Palestine at the time of their original telling. There may be secondary consequences of this, but “the parables need to be read first as scenes from the larger world of agrarian society and the political control of aristocratic rule” (Herzog 1994, 73). An example will serve

best to explain Herzog's approach: I will use that of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18: 21-35).

Jesus, in response to a question from Peter (as to how often he should forgive someone who "sins against him"), describes the kingdom of heaven as being "like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants" (Matthew 18: 23 NIV). One servant who owed, but is unable to pay, ten thousand talents is brought forward. The king orders that he and his family be sold into slavery to repay the debt. When the servant begs for mercy the king "forgives him the debt". On leaving, the servant meets another servant who owes him one hundred denarii (about one millionth of his own debt). He demands payment, and when the second servant cannot pay he has him sent to prison. The king gets to hear about this, and because the first servant has not shown the mercy that he was shown, sends him off to be tortured until his original debt is repaid. Jesus is reported as ending, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18: 35 NIV).

Herzog holds that understanding the nature of the sort of king involved and how he held power is key to understanding the parable. An aristocratic king of the kind described would hold power by keeping the allegiance of a system of bureaucrats and keeping other aristocrats out. The unmerciful servant is a high-level bureaucrat who collects tax allegiance for the king and who in turn grows rich off the taxes he collects. Only this can explain the huge debt specified (much larger than the annual tributes paid by entire provinces – Galilee's annual tribute was 200 talents according to Josephus). The refusal to pay is a challenge to the king's authority, and thus the debt is forgiven when the servant gives up the challenge and begs for mercy. This begging for mercy weakens his own position in regard to those below him, however, and his subsequent action is his own attempt to reinforce his power. (If this is correct,

then you may ask why the servant is ultimately condemned for doing what the system requires of him. Herzog's answer is in terms of a clash between the values of honour and shame.)

According to Herzog, the parables have the primary purpose of "unmasking the world of oppression" (1994, 79). This one in particular serves as a critique of (then) popular messianic expectations. It highlights the crucial role of retainers in carrying out the policies of the elite and acquiring the vast resources needed to maintain the system of power. The people looked to the elite to save them – either to popular kings or a messianic ruler. The parable "proposes" that neither can solve their problem – the rulers "too were governed by a system that required vengeance when their efforts at generosity were frustrated by the bureaucrats that surrounded them" (1994, 148). Thus the parable unmasks the world of oppression by revealing the tensions in the bureaucratic system.

But although this account is much more sophisticated than either the simple allegory view or Dodd's and reader-response theories, does it not still rely on cognitive responses that are problematic? One way out of the problem is suggested by Herzog's talk of the parable as having the task of revealing tensions. The parable might work as a form of *reductio ad absurdum*: that is, it starts with the assumption that a messianic king can save the people from their oppressive situation, and shows how that assumption leads to a contradiction. The idea would be that it works in the way that a fiction like that in Thomas Reid's response to John Locke's (1975) view on personal identity works:

Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first campaign, and to have

been made a general in advanced life; suppose, also, which must be admitted to be possible, that, when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that, when made a general, he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost consciousness of his flogging.

These things being supposed, it follows from Mr Locke's doctrine, that ... the general is, and at the same time is not, the same person with him who was flogged at school. (Reid 1975, 114)

If you start with the assumption that personal identity is a matter of being able to remember experiences from the inside, then (in response to Reid's story) you are obliged to say that the old general both is and is not the boy who stole the apples. That use of a narrative avoids any appeal to the audience's intuitive responses as data – no matter how they respond, if they start with that assumption, they will end with a contradiction. Is the parable of the unmerciful servant in the same position? It is worth noting that it is a fairly common claim that a number of the parables work in this sort of way – of leading hearers into revising their currently held views (Thiselton 1985, 85ff.)

One thing that suggests it is not intended to work in this way is that that is not how Matthew presents the parable. He (or whoever wrote the gospel) presents it as being about forgiveness and attaches a message, suggesting that the hearer's response to the narrative will coincide (although admittedly the message is not exactly clear – see verse 35). Matthew himself may not have understood the parable, and presumably that is an implicit premise in Herzog's interpretation. Besides this, though, there are other reasons for not seeing this model as a way of avoiding my problems. The story is nothing like as neat as that of Reid's, and Reid's never looked like it worked as an analogy. There are no comparisons to be made as there are in this one between the

structures operating in the story and those in real agrarian societies (or the kingdom of heaven). Even on Herzog's account, the hearer is required to pick out which features she responds to as oppressive, and so on. She must do this – and get it right - if the oppressive features are to be unmasked. And that means there is all the room that is required for my issues to raise themselves. The same argument will apply to the general view of parables as revisionary tools.

There is another, more adventurous, version of how to understand Herzog although it adds some moves that are not strictly to be found in his text (an example of this version can be seen in West and Zwane (forthcoming)). It picks up on the point in the previous paragraph to the effect that it is implicit in Herzog's account that Matthew himself does not understand the parable he relates. It also picks up on Herzog's claim that the point of the parables (or at least many of them) is to unmask the world of oppression and on the subtitle of his book, "Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed".

This version runs along the following lines. The parable speaks only to the oppressed. Matthew, from his bourgeois point of view does not get it, but those who suffer oppression – and only they – will. The problems raised by biases and our other interfering psychological tendencies are solved. The teller speaks to the biases and self-deceptions of his audience (being Jesus will help him to get this right, presumably), and thus they are in a position to grasp the message despite all of that.

Is this absurd as an account of how the parables are meant to work? It does place a special onus on the teller that naturalists might not like. But it has two important factors going for it. One is the one just mentioned – that it can cope with the problems from social psychology whereas the other ways of understanding them

could not. The other is that it fits the Biblical “theory” of parables in a way that hardly any of the other accounts do. To see that, we now need to look at that theory.

### **The Biblical Theory**

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, [quoting Isaiah 6: 9,10] “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”(Mark 4: 10-12 NIV)

The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” He replied, “The knowledge of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables. “Though seeing they do not see; though hearing, they do not understand.” (Matthew 13: 10-13 NIV)

The point of using parables, according to these quotations, is that those who are not among the select will not be able to understand. The select, for Herzog, are the oppressed – and following this version of his account, only they are in a position to understand, just as the Matthew/Mark theory outlines.

Interesting though this is, there are some considerations that militate against selling it as the way for parable scholars. As I have intimated, it says more than Herzog actually says even though it shares much with his account. From the point of

view of the concerns with which this paper began, it is also unclear that it successfully addresses the problems social psychology presents for the use of parables. That is because none of the evidence marshalled suggests that the oppressed are subject to different biases from the rest of us – the evidence is claimed to represent general psychological tendencies, and thus would not favour the poor in the way the current theory requires. It may be that the common experiences of the oppressed result in common responses to narratives, but then the issues of biases and self-deception still stand in the way of those responses having any form of authority.

### **The appeal to Mystery**

All of the problems that I have raised so far turn on the significance of our cognitive responses and difficulties concerning their reliability. But since we are in the territory of religion, it might well be objected that practical issues around our cognition are not all that relevant after all. Perhaps parables do not work on a cognitive level in any such way as my worries require. It does not matter that we have no access to the sources of our responses – the process is a mysterious one in which some arrive at the message and others do not.

This fits with the Biblical theory, and seems immune from my issues. But is it acceptable? It would obviously not appeal to those unhappy with mystery, but to rule out the mysterious would sound especially question-begging when it comes to matters of religious truth. However, even if we allow a place for mystery, further evidence from social psychology suggests that this is not a promising line in rescuing the parables.

The evidence I have in mind is the Darley and Batson “Good Samaritan” experiment (Darley and Batson 1973). This has featured in a range of debates within social psychology (notably those between situationists and dispositionalists) and more recently in related philosophical discussions of moral character (Doris 2002; Harman 2000), but regardless of what they show or fail to show in those contexts, they seem particularly apposite in ours. In the experiment, the subjects were theological students who were told that they were to give a talk in a building a distance away. Half of the subjects were given the Good Samaritan as their topic, the rest were given other topics. They were given different accounts of how much time they had available to get to the talk: one group were told that they had just enough time, another that they were already late and the third that they had plenty of time. The subjects represented a range of theological and moral opinion. On the way to the talk, the subjects passed someone who had apparently been the victim of an attack. The experimenters observed who stopped to help.

Darley and Batson’s results showed that the only variable that significantly affected behaviour was the amount of time the subjects thought that they had available. Most of those who had time stopped (63%), hardly any of those in a hurry stopped (10%). For our purposes, it is noteworthy that the topic set made no difference. Even though some are thinking about the parable of the Good Samaritan, that does not affect whether or not they act like the Samaritan. Although it is highly speculative, it seems reasonable enough to hope that more than 10% of theology students are among the chosen. But that means that the positive evidence for a mysterious mechanism operating behind the parable is extremely poor.

## Concluding

I have not argued that parables and similar fictions like philosophical thought-experiments cannot be informative. One example that featured in the discussion clearly is: Reid's "brave officer" story shows that a particular theory of personal identity must be mistaken. Bernard Williams's story of Jim and the Indians also stands to be informative, but only if we take it to be doing no more than revealing how we use our terms: if Williams is understood as enquiring into how we actually use the term 'right' and arguing that we don't use it in the way utilitarians say we do, then his story stands to succeed. I have argued elsewhere (Beck 2010) that this is an important way in which philosophers argue in both moral theory and metaphysics. But this requires no more authority of our intuitive responses than a form of representative authority: they reveal what we mean. But most of the parables and thought-experiments in applied ethics do not have this humble aim: even if their aim is not as simple as teaching a moral lesson, they attempt to reveal some truth that is independent of what we mean by our words. In that way, they require our responses to have some sort of epistemic authority, and that is what they do not have. None of the theories of parable interpretation examined manage to successfully avoid difficulties concerning our access to why we respond and what we respond to and the consequent problems for fictions as moral or religious devices. The inevitable conclusion seems to be that parables are not in a position to do the work that their proponents think they do.<sup>i</sup>

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