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THE HUMAN SIGNIFICANCE AND PITFALLS OF NON-LITERAL NARRATIVE AND FICTIONAL LITERATURE

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Abstract

Following some attention to Plato's famous (or infamous) hostility to poetry and other arts in such dialogues as *Ion* and *Republic*, this paper argues that this may have turned largely upon some failure to appreciate the different human purposes of literal and figurative language and narratives. Rather than seeking to extend the reach of (empirical and other) human knowledge, the concern of non-literal or metaphorical tropes and narratives of poetry and other arts lies more with sharpening and enhancing existing experience and perception to the end of deeper vision and insight into human affairs. From this perspective, the fictional constructs of art have much of significance to contribute to human moral and other development. That said, it need not be doubted that much danger lies in store from a fairly common human failure – by which Plato was also probably much exercised – to interpret non-literal, figurative and fictional idioms and narratives in literal terms. This paper sets out to explore these matters with particular regard to religious and other cultural beliefs.

Keywords

Fiction, Metaphor, Belief, Knowledge, Fundamentalism

> '"Can you not see," I had exclaimed, "that the fact of justice being admirable will not be affected by the absence of her being also a living agent? Can you really think that men will be one whit less hopeful, because they no longer believe that hope is an actual person?" She shook her head and said that without men's belief in the personality all incentive to the reverence of the thing itself, as justice or hope would cease; men from hat hour would never be either just or hopeful again.' (Butler 1985, 153)

> 'It is not a good idea to believe in a god when he is a character in a story! Don't think for a moment that the narrator of *Genesis* or his audience ever believed in or prayed to that kind of god. This is the world that the teller has created for his representation of old Israel, where sometimes iron does float on water, and where sometimes God is awful.' (Thompson 2000, 303)

> 'No fairy story ever claimed to be a description of the external world and no sane child ever believed that it was' (W. H. Auden, cited in Tatar 1987, 56)

Plato's problem about poetry

Given his own evident poetic and dramatic talent and proclivities, it seems something of an irony that Plato was clearly much exercised by the difficulty of making sense of figurative discourse and narratives (see, for example, Liebert 2010; Carr 2023). And while Plato's way with this problem may have been somewhat short, it is also arguable that his worries about the human hazards of non-literal discourse are (as we shall see) far from entirely unwarranted and it is not clear that later philosophical reflection has satisfactorily allayed or resolved them. In a nutshell, Plato's concern is epistemic. On the face of it, it is not clear how the idioms and narratives of poetry and fictional literature can be true, relate to the 'real' world or be (thereby) considered sources of genuine human knowledge. Thus, in the dialogue *Ion* (Plato 1961a), Socrates gives short shrift to the claim of the eponymous performance artist of this dialogue that the recitative or interpretive art of rhapsody represents genuine knowledge from which something of human significance might be learned; and, in his *Republic* (Plato 1961c), he more or less

dismisses the works of the greatest poets and dramatists of his own ancient Greek time as creators and purveyors of potentially deceitful and/or corruptive fiction and is evidently inclined to banish them from any rational civil polity.

To be sure, even to the most sympathetic of Plato's admirers, none of this looks quite satisfactory. Aside from the fact that it is far from clear from the fairly reasonable protests against Socrates that Plato puts into the mouth of Ion the rhapsode that Plato is himself entirely persuaded by them, there is the quite morally compromising argument of the *Republic* that the common run of citizens of the ideal state should be persuaded to accept the authority and dictates of ruling guardians on the basis of a 'noble lie' about divine creation of men (and/or, for Plato, women) of greater and less – gold, silver and bronze – innate quality. To be sure, we might here dismiss some latter-day critiques of Plato (perhaps, most notably, Popper 2000) that he is here advocating explicit control or indoctrination of the masses by presumptive political elites, insofar as Plato is explicit from the outset that his ideal republic is but a non-literal or figurative analogy or metaphor for proper moral and spiritual order in the soul. But if such good order is essentially a matter of the rule of the lower appetites and passions by reason with the help of rational spirit or volition, what place could there be in the economy of the well-ordered self or soul for self-deceiving myths or fictions of no defensible rational or epistemic substance? Indeed if, as Plato's Socrates appears to argue elsewhere, the wisdom of genuine moral virtue consists in clear recognition of knowledge of the truth of things, and lies or falsehoods threaten serious harm to the soul (see, for example, Plato 1961a, 462; and 1961c, 629), how can we make sense of virtuous agents whose conduct is impelled by lies? In sum, if is morally wrong to deceive or lie to others, it can be no less so – even if we could be clear how this might be psychologically possible – to deceive or lie to ourselves. Still, while we shall shortly return to the psychological and moral complexities and implications of human life or conduct guided by epistemically problematic ideals and narratives, we may turn next to brief consideration of a more general issue of whether these are always and inevitably at variance with human benefit.

Towards the significance of figurative discourse and narrative

With all the respect due to a philosopher of Plato's peerless stature, his idea of the 'noble lie' would seem to be not only morally compromised but confused: in fact, it is morally compromised largely because it *is* confused. To be sure, the heart of the confusion is the not unreasonable idea that since truth-based knowledge or belief is necessary (if not also actually sufficient) for the wisdom of virtue, untruths or falsehoods can only be mostly harmful to any would-be virtuous agent: precisely, any communication or promotion of what is false is liable to be morally untoward or vicious – at least in the ancient Greek sense of unconducive to human (moral or other) benefit or welfare. That said, it may also be that Plato here more doubtfully runs together the fault of communicating falsehood with that of actual deceit or lying. At all events, while Plato is far from entirely clear whether some deceiving agents might be morally excused on the grounds that they are themselves ignorant of the falsehood of what they are communicating, it seems fairly clear that he regards poets as liars precisely because they can hardly consider the fanciful tales that they invent for others to be true. But this does put Plato in the awkward position that if intentional poetic communication of known falsehoods is a matter of culpable deceit, how could this not apply equally to the guardians' promotion of the 'noble lie'? To be sure, it may be that Plato takes the 'noble lie' to be an exception to this rule on the grounds that that it is *noble*: that is, directed to the ultimate good or benefit of those to whom it is communicated. But then, why could not poets say exactly the same – with no less warrant – about their own fictional constructs or narratives?

In any case, the more serious difficulty here is evidently that while Plato *does* clearly regard his myth of the metal men as a lie – which, true to his own philosophical position, can only be regarded as morally objectionable – there is surely no reason why the fictions of poets should be regarded as *lies* in any serious or significant sense. So, when Homer or Euripides spin the tale of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia to the sea-god Poseidon; or when Shakespeare writes a play about a Scottish nobleman's rise to power on the basis of regicide and other murder and mayhem; or when the English novelist George Orwell invents a fable of tyrannical pigs who ruthlessly enslave other farm animals following the farmers' demise, no-one of much wit or wisdom is likely to accuse such authors of telling whoppers in the generally accepted sense of trying to persuade others of what is not true. On the contrary, it is usually understood by all but the very young or mentally impaired that, far from relating inaccurate or misleading history or news coverage, such authors are telling *stories* which they do not at all intend to be taken as true. Thus, while we cannot rule out the possibility that even relatively mature and intelligent adults may persist in taking what are evidently fictions to be literally true – and we should not entirely dismiss the Platonic concern that some evidently deceitful narratives (of, say, racial superiority) have been promoted as true by those of evil intent – it is likely that many past or present fictions have seldom been devised with much real purpose to persuade others of literal falsehood. Indeed, even in perhaps the clearest cases of non-literal communication – the telling of fairy tales to young children – this is probably best construed as early education about the precise difference between truth and fiction. 'Where does Cinderella live daddy?': 'She does not really live anywhere darling: she is just a character in a story!'

However, this does now raise the key question – which Plato's conspiracy account of poetry seems hardly equipped to answer – of why or to what purpose poets or other storytellers invent or relate narratives that are untrue or fail to correspond to any past or present human reality. Why have human agents always been – and continue to be – drawn to such imaginative fictions which evidently comprise a large part, not just of past oral tradition and literary culture, but of modern cinema, television and more recent communication technology? Indeed, if one is disposed to seek for some principled distinction between human experience and agency and the rest of non-human animate nature, one might well locate it in the characteristic attraction of humans – indeed, in the very possibility of such attraction, since there can surely be no scope for this in the lives of creatures lacking the language-dependent cognitive powers of humans – to such fictional constructs. Thus, while dogs, cats and bats are stuck with the brute reality to which their natural faculties of sense experience confine them, the rational powers of make-believe of human agents enable their escape to imaginatively constructed worlds that lie well beyond such limited experience. That said, since we may also suppose that even human cognitive powers might have been confined to registering the bare experience that is the lot of other creatures, it can still be asked why rational agents should seek or be drawn to images or representations of what is not real or demonstrably false. Still, whether or not it is reasonable to expect any single final or all-embracing philosophical, psychological or other explanation of such attraction, some fairly obvious reasons are fairly near to hand. For present purposes, we may consider four or five roughly distinguishable reasons of this sort.

The first fairly obvious reason for such attraction is that imaginative fictions are simply distracting or entertaining. Like other animate creatures, humans are playful animals; but unlike their non-human relatives – for whom such pleasures, as we have already noted, are inevitably denied by their limited cognitive powers – human play is at least as much mental as physical. Indeed, it is common to regard those agents whose pleasures or entertainments are largely confined to the bodily or physical or who appear limited in their capacities for significant engagement with literary or other realms of imagination or fantasy as falling somewhat short of full human powers and potential. Indeed, such unfavourable judgement on defective imagination seems much reinforced by a second significant reason for attraction to the non-literal or figurative: namely, that fictional narratives enable humans to envisage virtually limitless possibilities of experience and agency of indispensable value for mature and responsible conduct. To be sure, the human capacity for hypothetical or counterfactual reasoning – reflection about what could or might happen if things were other than they are – is clearly of great importance for significant rational development. Here, moreover, while the value of such counterfactual reasoning for rational scientific enquiry is fairly apparent, it is evidently of more general significance for everyday human life and association and it is difficult to see how anything much resembling genuine human agency might be possible in its absence. Once again, such agency would seem to be quite ruled out in the case of non-human animals clearly lacking such cognitive and imaginative power. While this dog may be faced with the challenge of responding to simultaneously attractive but conflicting stimuli – between whether to chase the duck or the rabbit – its conduct to this rather than that end is ultimately conditioned by the greater power of this over that sensual stimuli, rather than by any rational weighing of probabilities.

However, a third practical reason for human attraction to non-literal or fictional narratives follows fairly well from this point about the significance of hypothetical or counterfactual reasoning. For while academic or professional specialists – such as physicists or psychologists – may employ such reasoning for insights into the workings of nature or the human mind, it is evidently of wider practical currency and utility for negotiation of issues and problems of everyday human interaction and association. In short, imaginative visualisation of alternative possibilities of choice and action seems necessary for effective *moral* agency – which reveals yet more clearly why those who appear deficient in this capacity may be thought to fall somewhat short of full humanity. In this light, moreover, it is evident that much past and present-day non-literal, figurative and fictional folk tale and literature – from Greek antiquity to modern novel and drama – has been much concerned to explore and illuminate essentially moral aspects of human association. Indeed, some distinguished philosophers have been inclined to consider widespread concern of non-literal or fictional narrative with moral issues and problems to be the defining feature of literary art. For one such example, the widely known twentieth century philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (who, while much devoted and indebted to Plato, nevertheless rejects his unfavourable view of art) drew a highly influential distinction between the *fantasies* of popular human entertainment and the *imagination* of genuine art which she was inclined to define in terms of essentially moral concerns (Murdoch 1970, 1997). While the present author has elsewhere argued that Murdoch's fairly strong moralism about art is far from unproblematic (Carr 2022), her main point that much great literary art is indeed morally concerned seems generally sound enough.

Still, a fourth – though no doubt also related – reason for the human appeal of non-literal or fictional narrative is that it is often taken to have significant formative influence on human cultural identity. In fact, there could hardly be or have been anything much worth regarding as a human culture in the absence of some epistemically stronger or weaker subscription to legends or myths of often evidently non-literal or fictional character. Thus, primitive to advanced cultures have often been founded upon myths of the creation of the world or human agents by non-human supernatural forces or entities of one kind or another and have also told tales of heroes, heroines or strong men supposed to have set standards of good or noble conduct for those who come after

them and who may also be claimed as ancestors. Still, when the also largely fictional Henry V of Shakespeare addresses the troops of his French invasion with the words ‘Cry, “God for Harry, England and Saint George”’, we might well ask who on earth is or was this ‘Saint George’? To be sure, he is the patron saint of England, as Saint Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. But while there may not be much doubt about the historicity of the Irish Patrick, and there may be some remote historical basis for a legendary Cappadocian martyred Roman Christian George, the Saint George of popular patriotic imagination is almost certainly the mythical hero who slew an equally mythical Libyan dragon in a realm quite outside any real space and time. In this light, we might also reasonably wonder whether David slew Goliath, Alfred burned the cakes, Arthur pulled the sword from the stone, Bruce spied a spider or William Tell shot an apple off his son’s head. But now, even closer to present concerns, we may observe a fifth more culturally specific reason for human attraction to non-literal narratives with regard to the widespread religious and spiritual life and devotions of a great many people – to which we need to give closer attention in the next two sections.

Fictional meaning in religious narratives

Of the various grounds of human attraction to non-literal or fictional narratives lately considered, several are clearly – epistemically or otherwise – quite unproblematic. Thus, beginning with the entertainment value of such stories, small harm to readers (apart from any possible waste of time) may be caused by consumption of romances by Ian Fleming or Barbara Cartland – as long as, of course, readers do not take such fantastic or sentimental excursions to have much serious consequence for real life. By and large, readers of such fiction occupy their leisure hours with such works before moving on to more serious business. Again, while either scientific researchers or writers of science fiction may speculate about what might follow from aspects of the natural world being otherwise than they are, such conjectures may do little harm – if not some good – just so long as they are not confused with how things *really* are or might be. Indeed, with regard to the hypothetical and counterfactual reflections of scientists – if not, for that matter, of some writers of science fiction – it may be that such flights of fancy serve to give sharper focus to our appreciation of how things are in the real world: one might come to a clearer picture of how things actually are, by contrast with suppositions as to circumstances in which they are otherwise. Moreover, one might even come to appreciate how things as they are might be significantly changed or improved in the light of imagined other possibilities.

This would seem to be especially so with regard to the potential of such fictional and non-literal narratives for moral insight and illumination into what is wrong or wanting with the present actual world. In fact, this would seem to have been the main aim of much make-believe – from fairy tale to serious drama and novel – from the very dawn of human storytelling. In this light, however, it is evident that citizens of western and wider contemporary cultures have also turned to religious narratives – such as those of the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible – as sources of moral inspiration. That said, it seems that for many religious, the moral other lessons of such narratives have also been taken to depend on their *literal* truth. Still, apart from the apparently legendary or mythological (not to say sometimes morally dubious) character of much biblical narrative, it is no less clear that many memorable Christian moral lessons are of non-literal form. One such Old Testament example is the story that the Prophet Nathan is said to have told to King David of a poor man’s lamb which was stolen by a rich owner of many sheep – an evident fiction that prods the king to bad conscience regarding his adulterous theft of Bathsheba from her husband Uriah whom he has also sent to his death in battle. While it may well be questioned whether either the king or the prophet of this narrative had any actual historical existence, it need not be doubted that the story itself is a fiction devised to press a significant moral point regarding the wickedness of the conduct ascribed to King David as well as about the nature of justice and fairness as such. To be sure, whether there actually was any historical Nathan or David, the parable is clearly an invented fiction from which any of us may stand to learn.

But, of course, yet better examples are afforded by the New Testament, most notably in the shape of Jesus’s parables. For whatever moral lessons may be discerned in other alleged conduct of Jesus (and, with regard to miracles of exorcism and healing, such lessons are not always entirely clear), it seems that the most memorable of these are to be found in such evident fictions as the good Samaritan and the prodigal son. Indeed, since Jesus narrates these parables as *stories*, even the most hardened of fundamentalists would be hard put to insist they must be reports of actual kind Samaritans or wayward sons. To be sure, it may be that the parable of the prodigal son never been more vividly depicted than in its cinematic presentation by the film director Franco Zeffirelli in his 1977 movie *Jesus of Nazareth*. In this dramatic re-visioning, Jesus has been invited to dine at the house of Matthew the Tax-collector (soon to be disciple) who wishes to make fun of the teacher and his stories in company with his frivolous and riotous friends. Jesus’s chief disciple Peter, who refuses to have anything to do with the sinner Matthew, is also shown as eavesdropping on the scene from the doorway of the publican’s house. As Jesus proceeds to the story’s climax – describing the repentant return of the younger son and his resentful reception by his older brother – it dawns upon both Peter and Matthew that the story is about the two of *them*: Matthew is the (about to be) repentant sinner and Peter is his pharisaical and unforgiving sibling. But this evidently further non-literal cinematic depiction of the parable – effectively a fiction within a fiction – makes the universal moral lesson

of the tale if anything clearer than the Gospel original. Neither the original parable nor its cinematic depiction is merely some entertaining tale about a wastrel and his family. Indeed, it is not even – as the movie suggests – about only Matthew and Peter. Rather, it is more generally about flawed human agents who stray from the right moral path and/or who are quick to judge others before themselves – which is effectively *each and every* human soul. But the same clearly goes for much storytelling and fictional literature from ancient to present times. Moreover, contrary to any Platonic or other conspiracy theory, such stories have often if not usually been devised more to assist greater moral clarity and insight than with any darker purpose to mislead or corrupt.

Still, what these reflections on parables clearly show is that stories about what did not in fact take place – though they are evidently plausible enough to have actually done so – can be bearers of humanly significant meaning. However, this may now raise the no less interesting issue of why people are strongly drawn to insist on the truth and meaning of stories that are considerably less persuasive as fact rather than fiction or fantasy. In this regard, the Christian bible evidently contains many narratives that stretch credibility (as the content of Jesus's parables that we may assume to be fictional in fact do not) quite beyond the limit. Thus, while the Old Testament tells of a boat on a flood that contains specimens of all animals in the world, of a god speaking to Moses in a burning bush and of a sea parting to allow the crossing of Israelites, the New Testament has a virgin birth, the exorcism of demons and not infrequent raising of the dead. In this light, we may ask: first, whether any possible historical or other evidence might or could support such beliefs; second, how such belief might be sustained in the apparent absence of much or any compelling evidence.

Literal belief in fictional religious narratives

The Christian Bible and the works of Shakespeare have sometimes been said to be the twin pillars of Anglophone if not wider western literary culture. However, while it is unlikely that those who claim to have learned much (of moral or other value) from Shakespeare's plays would regard them as factually true, the case is clearly otherwise with the contents of the Christian bible which many of past and present times have been prepared to defend as literally true to the very last syllable. Indeed, the mere suggestion that this is not or cannot be so is to invite hostile, even violent, reaction in some quarters (even though, if the Christian narrative is accurately read, it plainly condemns hostility and violence). Of course, so far as the most extreme forms of such fundamentalist dogma are concerned, appeals to reason and evidence are also unlikely to be of much avail. However, even from a more thoughtful perspective, contemporary debate about biblical veracity seems largely polarised between progressive academic scholarship from a variety of disciplines pertaining to the textual and historical sources of these ancient scriptures and largely rear-guard theological resistance from those for whom received religious doctrines are placed largely beyond question or negotiation. All the same, as careful modern scholarship and research – from various historical, archaeological and other critical perspectives – has shown, it is evident that what traditional Christian doctrine has claimed to be literally true regarding the worlds of both Old and New Testaments hardly bears rational critical scrutiny. In short, leaving aside biblical books or passages of law or poetry, the more familiar narratives of both these ancient texts – like those of other ancient literature to which they often appear related – seem almost entirely fictional rather than literal.

To begin with the Old Testament, it is fairly clear that most of the narrative content of *Genesis* is not only mythical but actually draws quite significantly upon the creation and other narratives of ancient (Egyptian, Sumerian and Hellenic) neighbouring cultures (See, for example, Greenberg 2000). At all events, the (different and often conflicting) accounts of God's creation of the world, of first human disobedience in the Garden of Eden or of the flood and Noah's Ark (a common ancient eastern mythical theme) are hardly credible as historical events. In short, as Thompson observes in the quote which heads this essay, we can or should hardly give historical credence to a god who appears as a character in a story, who interacts with other (human or divine) characters, argues with them or begets children by congress with human women. But can we not have more faith in the tales of such great biblical patriarchs and heroes as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David or Solomon? Again, however, aside from the fact that such narratives are also far from free of mythical ornament – with gods appearing in burning bushes or heavenly bodies ceasing motion – all serious research and evidence seems against their historicity. Thus, apart from the fact that historical and archaeological evidence discloses nothing of any Israelite captivity or exodus from Egypt, it seems that the ancient occupants of Israel, Judea and Canaan existed only as client states to a succession of larger Egyptian, Hittite, Phoenician, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and (eventually) Roman imperial powers during all the times when these biblical events might be supposed to have taken place. Indeed, for much of this ancient time, Palestine actually benefited from the patronage and protection of its infinitely more powerful southern Egyptian neighbour and no ancient Palestinian group could have established and wielded the imperial power attributed to the likes of King Solomon. Thus, while it might be that Moses, Joshua, Saul, David and Solomon are dim folk memories of legendary local tribal chieftains or strong men, it is actually more likely – given the 'cue names' (see Greenberg 2000) of some of these figures – that they are but figurative or allegorical personifications of more abstract theological or ethical themes and concerns. So, on the face it, there are no more

grounds for crediting Moses, Joshua and David with real existence than there is for Homer's Agamemnon, Achilles or Odysseus.

On the other hand, we might seem to be on firmer ground with regard to the New Testament, since events from the Christian era onwards are within available historical record. Thus, we have independent evidence (from the likes of such ancient historians as Josephus) that such New Testament figures as Pontius Pilate, John the Baptist and various Herods actually existed and the four canonical Gospels have been traditionally supposed to be detailed accounts of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. First, however, even making some allowance for the miracles of healing and exorcism with which Jesus of the Gospels is credited, there is much evident figurative adornment in all these works that defies credible historical reading. For example, while the first composed Gospel of Mark has nothing to say of Jesus's life prior to his alleged encounter with John the Baptist, such details of conception and nativity – such as virgin birth, worship by foreign kings and escape from assassination by evil powers – were not only plainly added by Matthew and Luke, but clearly drawn from themes and narratives of diverse contemporary (Dionysian, Mithraic and other) ancient religious cults. (For example, attempts on the infant saviour's life are common to other religious myths and there is no historical record of Herod's massacre of innocents). Second, more seriously, notwithstanding apparent continuous narrative of the life, sayings and actions of a single agent, close textual scrutiny shows that the Gospels are mostly if not entirely patchworks of wisdom teachings and sayings from Old Testament texts, Greek philosophy (Matthew's Sermon on the Mount seems largely drawn from the teachings of ancient Greek Cynics) as well as, as already noted, the myths of contemporary neighbouring mystery and other cults. (For some of the extensive literature on the non-literal or mythical content of both biblical Testaments see, for example: Freke and Gandy 1999, 2002; Greenberg 2000; Harpur 2004; Carpenter 2004; Robertson 2004; Thompson 2005; Price 2003, 2007, 2017; Brodie 2012; Carrier 2014; Humphreys 2014.)

Thirdly, however, it is yet more revealing that the Pauline epistles – evidently composed before the Gospels and only shortly after the supposed crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – admit to no clear knowledge of any historical figure of that name or of any events in his life (which is also, needless to say, conspicuously absent from reliable historical records). To this may be added, not only the evident inconsistency of the Gospel narratives (not only with regard to narrative detail but also theological and doctrinal coherence), but Mark's evident ignorance of local Palestinian geography – not least regarding the non- existence of any actual town of Nazareth of the time attributed to the Jesus narrative. In this light, it seems likely that the Christ of St Paul is an entirely mythical saviour of something like Roman era Palestinian mystery religion (one of many of eastern Mediterranean provenance) which only received later literary form at the hands of various (anonymous) authors (see Greenberg 2011). It should also be noted that the four 'canonical' gospels were only some of many conflicting accounts of Jesus's sayings and actions hand-picked for attention (for doctrinal reasons) by the later official Christian church. Other gospels (some only recently discovered in modern times), offering quite theologically conflicting accounts of Jesus life and sayings, were clearly either lost or suppressed by later church authorities. Indeed, it is largely in this light that many past and present-day Christian apologists (notably Rudolf Bultmann 1953) have sought a 'demythologised' Jesus in the form of a more shadowy but credible reality behind the Gospel myth. The trouble here, however, is that insofar as the Gospels are evidently highly syncretic, inconsistent and conflicting patchworks of material drawn from other sources, it is difficult to see how they might meaningfully refer to any credible historical figure, much as Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* (itself a patchwork of diverse medieval romances) seems hardly traceable to any legendary Arthur of British Dark Ages. Still, despite the largely non-literal or fictional character of such biblical and other narratives, they would seem to have been widely entertained as literally true by large numbers of people. In this light, it may now be asked how such widespread belief in such evident fictions could have come about.

Belief in the evidently fictional

First, while we can only speculate about human motives for the imaginative construction of such evident fictions and their communication to others, one may reasonably guess that they had ancient origins as fireside entertainment, cautionary tales and/or celebration of instances of heroism or virtuous character on the part of legendary, merely imagined or perhaps more local and real-life exemplars, rather than, as deliberate attempts to record actual past events. As such, they may be significantly related to, if not indeed regarded as more literarily sophisticated forms of, fairy tales. To be sure, this is not at all to deny or downplay the significant psychological, moral and spiritual contribution of such non-literal constructions to human thought and conduct (see, for classic modern defence of fairy tales, Bettelheim 1989; also Tatar 1987) – for as lately seen, the no less fictional parables of Jesus have clearly had much morally beneficial impact on their hearers for over two millennia – we still need not suppose that the authors of such fictions, any more than present-day parents telling fairy-tales to their children would intend them to be taken as literally true: 'Look darling, the prince and princess are just made-up characters in the story: but let's see what the story seems to be saying!' In this light, we need not take the authors of the ancient narratives of the Christian bible – any more than the near contemporary authors of the *Iliad* or the *Epic of Gilgamesh* – to have been trying to deceive us with malicious lies in the conspiratorial spirit that Plato seems to

have attributed to poets. So why is it that past and present human agents have been widely drawn to something approaching genuine belief in the the fabulous tales of their local religious or other culture?

On first thought, the human psychological inclination to such evident suspension of rational belief is perhaps not too hard to appreciate or comprehend. Certainly, from past to present, human agents have inhabited an often precarious and dangerous world, so that all mortal flesh is naturally susceptible to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. This is especially true of the very young towards whom the imaginative fantasies and pantomimes of fairy tale have ever been aimed. Thus, the stories of Cinderella, Snow White and Red Riding Hood offer reassurance that however bad things might look or get, they will inevitably – especially with some fairy-godmother, handsome prince or guardian woodcutter on hand – turn out well in the end. Wisely, however, such fairy tales will also have been told as fictions to be taken with a pinch of salt: 'Isn't it good that the wicked witch was killed daddy?' 'Well darling, it is always good when those who try to hurt others are prevented and punished: but remember that the witch and the princess are just characters in this story and there are really no such things as either witches or magic'. Still, the gods and heroes of larger cultural myth and legend have clearly played similar roles as protecting parents or (usually more specifically) *father* figures. In this vein, like other messianic saviours, the ancient British King Arthur is not actually dead but only sleeping until he is again needed to defend Britain (or sometimes more confusedly England – despite that the Arthur of dark ages is supposed to have opposed invasion *by* the ancestral English). Moreover, in addition to these psychological impulses to literal belief in the fictional, there is the peculiar human tendency – well observed in the introductory quote to this essay from Butler's *Erewhon* – to think that an idea or principle cannot have much force or validity unless it is somehow actually personified. At all events, it cannot be doubted – not least in a world in which some people also believe in stories of alien visitation, Loch Ness Monster or the survival of Elvis – that superstitious belief in the impossible, fantastic or downright preposterous has nevertheless deep roots in the perfectly understandable physical and psychological uncertainty and insecurity of all mortal agents.

From a more general epistemic perspective, moreover, the trouble is also that such belief – indeed, belief as such – is not constrained by reason and evidence in the manner of knowledge and is readily swayed by subjective feeling and desire under which influence humans are inclined to believe what they want, rather than what may be more reasonable, to believe. That said, it might still be asked whether such belief in evident or demonstrable fictions is always or inevitably bad or harmful. Indeed, while Plato's Socrates evidently required the goodness of virtue to be compatible only with knowledge and truth, and the deceit of oneself – either by others or oneself – to be harmful to the soul, at least one influential modern moral philosopher has insisted that some moral virtues may well depend upon agents believing what is untrue. Thus, Julia Driver (1989, 2001) has suggested that what she calls 'virtues of ignorance' – such as modesty or humility – must depend upon some false estimate of one's own worth or significance. Moreover, while this argument seems less than compelling and to stray too uncomfortably far from basic Socratic or other faith in the basic harmony of virtue and truth, it might yet be conceded – in light of the widespread psychological liability of human belief to irrational desire – that not all false beliefs are of equal or inherent moral hazard. Thus, there may be no serious harm in persisting to believe in the Loch Ness monster, alien visitation or the survival of Elvis. That said, one is clearly on much more morally dubious ground in believing – in thrall to the influence of some western and eastern cultures – in demon possession and witchcraft, or that other human races are of less worth than others Thus, considering the theological influence of Hindu mythology on the Indian caste system or the way in which the Third Reich deployed ancient Nordic myths to reinforce anti-Semitism, Plato's fear of the potentially malign influence of poetic or other non-literal tropes or narratives may seem far from unwarranted.

What in particular, then, should be said of past and present religious faith in fairly evident fictions? To be sure, the case is clearly different from that of belief or disbelief in particular myths or legends of local culture. First, if some (native) British person thinks that the legends of King Arthur or of Merlin the magician are literally true, he or she no doubt believes what is false: but while this is quite epistemically untoward, it need not (any more than belief in flying saucers or the Loch Ness monster) do much moral or other harm. However, if the same person did doubt the literal truth of such legends, we should not thereby question his or her cultural status or identity as a British citizen. But this is plainly quite otherwise with regard to the relationship of certain suspect beliefs and religious faith or membership of (at least some) faith communities. Indeed, it is evidently the case that any questioning of the literal truth of certain articles of faith – notably those explicitly stated in the Nicene Creed concerning the divine origins of Jesus, his conception and birth of a virgin mother and his resurrection from the dead following Roman crucifixion – would clearly raise doubts about the status of that individual as a genuine member of the Christian communion. Hence, it seems that genuine belief in the literal truth of certain scriptural and/or theological claims or assertions – which, in the light of previous considerations seem quite beyond credence as literal rather than non-literal or figurative constructs – is an indispensable condition or requirement of Christian religious community and identity.

It also hardly needs much present emphasis that the required commitment of Christian religious believers to literal biblical truth leaves them at serious odds with the common drift of secular rational thought which is more drawn to ground belief in empirical or other plausible evidence. Indeed, such serious divergence of view may be

most conspicuous in the contemporary opposition of fundamentalist Christians to Darwinist or other scientific accounts of human evolution in favour of strict allegiance to the *Genesis* narrative of God's instantaneous creation of the first parents of humankind whom he named Adam and Eve. (It should also not be forgotten here that such opposition to Darwinism has often taken the form of fundamentalist efforts to prohibit the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools.) Furthermore, it would seem that both sides to this dispute (such as it is) take the issue to turn on whichever of these two perspectives is faithful to something like actual 'historical' facts about the origins of the world and human species. Of course, scientific advocates of evolution, no doubt under the influence of modern philosophy of science (notably of Popper 2000), may concede that we cannot be sure of the truth of this or any other theory or hypothesis and that the key scientific issue is rather that of whether it can avoid refutation in the light of contrary evidence. Even so, the key concern for scientific critics of religious or other creationist accounts would still be that of whether such evidence favours the *truth* of evolutionary theory – in the sense of better correspondence of our claims about the world to how things actually are or were – over the more speculative, if not actually dogmatic, claims of creationism. But, in any case, both religious supporters of something like the *Genesis* narrative and their scientific critics would appear largely agreed about the basic – fundamentally *epistemic* – terms of the contested issue. The key question for both seems to be which of two propositions is ultimately true: on the one hand, that human agents were created in something like their present physical and psychological form by God following his initial creation of the world at a given (perhaps fairly recent) historical moment; on the other, that human agents developed from more primitive forms of life to their present condition over the course of a protracted process of natural selection spanning billions of years.

In this light, however, it is likely that both parties to this contest are at serious cross purposes via mistaken assumption that their alternative narratives have a common epistemic or grammatical point or purpose. Indeed, it should now be apparent that those inclined to resist evolutionary or other scientific accounts of the origin of the world and its human inhabitants in the name of a god who (recalling the quote from Thompson at the start of this essay) features in a *story* from an ancient book are not in any rival *epistemic* line of business whatsoever. To be sure, this point is worth some present emphasis, insofar as one might be inclined to construe the non-literal or fictional narrative of texts such as *Genesis* as just an alternative species of figurative, allegorical or poetic *truth* (Liebert 2010; Carr 2023). On this view, someone might hold that while evolutionary theory aims for literal truth, *Genesis* seeks to testify to some more analogical or metaphorical truth. However, while this or that term of ordinary usage may well be liable to figurative grammatical deployment in fictional narratives, this is very far from saying that it *refers* to some other dimension of reality or alternative realm of fact. Thus, when the poet writes of the boughs of the cherry tree in winter as 'hung with snow' (Housman 1977, 9) or a dramatic character exclaims that 'all the world's a stage' (Shakespeare's *As You like it*, Act II, Scene 7), he or she is not referring to some alternative reality in which a cherry blossom *is* actually snow or the world *is* actually a stage. Nor is it here, at the semantic level, that the terms 'snow' and 'stage' in such poetic occurrences assume different meanings from those of literal usage. The key point is that these terms in such poetic roles do not *refer* – even to their usual referents – at all. Rather, they serve to identify, signify or draw attention to striking or illuminating resemblances or analogies between objects, events or actions that may be otherwise quite dissimilar. (It might here be noted that the academic literature for and against the idea that literary fiction can have epistemic purpose for the communication of knowledge and/or belief is quite extensive: but see for a presentative recent collection Sullivan-Bissett *et al* 2017: reviewed by Carr 2018. In a nutshell, however, it is the view of the present paper that since figurative idioms or fictional narratives have no reference to anything 'real', they cannot embody knowledge or belief – though, of course, they can enhance the meaning or significance of what is otherwise known or believed.)

The key grammatical function of terms deployed to this non-referential but illustrative end – quite without departure from their usual senses – is essentially that of analogy or *metaphor*. When the poet writes that the cherry branch is hung with snow, he does not mean to say that the blossom *is* snow, only that it may have much the same visual impact (of pristine purity and beauty) as snow. In short, the metaphor seeks attention to a perhaps previously unnoticed or unappreciated (often aesthetic) feature of common experience – namely the beauty of cherry blossom – in an attention-grabbing way. (While the modern literature on metaphor is extensive see, for example, Black 1954, 1962; Cohen 1979; Davidson 1984, 2005; Gibb 1994; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Searle 1979; Hagberg 2005; Underhill 2011.) However, while metaphor is evidently the cornerstone of non-literal or figurative discourse, it clearly functions on much greater and more ambitious scales than that of the simple example so far considered. Indeed, metaphors come in all shapes and sizes from the simple analogy lately considered to protracted works of literary fiction and metaphors of more ambitious scale are comprehended under such more particular rubrics as fable, parable, allegory, myth and legend. Thus, in the biblical contexts lately considered, such parabolic metaphors as the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son clearly do not refer to actual Samaritans or sons but to characters in stories from which we may learn (in this case moral) lessons about our lives in just the way that Matthew and Peter appear to learn in Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*. However, many of the voluminous classics of world literature, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* – not to mention many (if by no means all) books of the Bible and plays of Shakespeare – are

clearly but more extended or complex webs of metaphor or allegory with often much the same morally transformative function as the parables of Jesus.

To be sure, the non-literal or figurative idioms of metaphor are by no means confined to works of literary imagination or fiction but are also stitched into the more familiar web of ordinary and not necessarily fictional usage and communication. This is such an all-pervading feature of common usage as to go largely unnoticed by ordinary language users and where such deployment of non-literal idioms has become customary, routine or 'stale', such commonplaces are termed *cliche*s. Thus, when someone refers to Tom as 'sharp as a razor' (praising his keen intelligence) or to Dick as 'thick as a plank' (deploring his lack of wit), few would be impressed or startled by the freshness or ingenuity of such idioms – even if they may have had some such impact on first coinage. Indeed, it is evident that many chestnuts that we might now regard as cliches have clear origins in works of past literary genius, precisely regarded as such for their original imaginative fabrication. It is a now something of a stale joke that the trouble with the plays of Shakespeare is that they are far too full of quotations, so that if someone now reads in these dramas of 'music as the food of love' or of 'life being but a dream', such lines may seem no more than the tired commonplaces of ordinary use. However, the precise point of the joke (if any explanation is necessary) is that when the poet first composed these lines, he was creating images of striking and unforgettable power and insight. It is only with tedious repetition that – again to cite this poet's own words – 'custom stales the infinite variety' (Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act 2, Scene 2) of such idioms.

But now, having lately noticed that non-literal or fictional idioms and narratives enter into the economy of human communication for different purposes and at various more and less significant levels, we are also in a position to appreciate that the non-literal metaphorical or allegorical core of such usage is better served by some of these purposes than others. Indeed, if the creative function of the fresh and original metaphor and analogy of serious art and literature is to rouse us from the habitual and unreflective 'world that is too much with us' (in the apt image of Wordsworth: Nichol-Smith 1921, 146) to fresher and deeper insights into nature and human affairs, it would also seem that while some modes of engagement with non-literal usage are well fitted to this purpose, others can have a contrary and more deadening, effect. First, while it need not be doubted that the fictional works of romance and adventure that most read for entertainment will often contain much live as well as dead metaphor, these are seldom liable to give readers much pause for deep meditation upon their perception of the world or insight into their lives or personal relationships. Secondly, while human cultures have often drawn upon local foundational legends and myths of clearly figurative, metaphorical or allegorical import, these have not infrequently served more socially conservative and stifling ends of distinguishing one social group from another – indeed, often, to the exclusion of others – via a repertoire of ideological dogmas or prejudices that conspire to discourage wider vision or insight. Indeed, a good example of this seems to be the highly dubious myth of the Confederate 'Lost Cause' that has served to define Southern US identity for more than a century (see Churchwell 2023). At all events, moral philosophers given to more socio-culturally based ethical perspectives – such as latter day 'communitarians' (for example, Sandel 1998) – are inclined to place much emphasis on conservative allegiance to established, if not sometimes reactionary, value traditions. But thirdly, by the same token, it is hard to deny that past and present-day institutionalised religion has been no less inclined (as Dostoevsky made unforgettably clear in his allegory of the grand inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*) to authoritarian promotion of creeds and dogmas that also discourage much individual imaginative dissent. Indeed, in the particular (though by no means singular) case of the Christian religion, this is surely nowhere clearer than in the widespread quite literal construal of the evidently non-literal tropes and narratives of ancient scripture, leading – in the extreme case of fundamentalist evangelicals – to quite far-fetched conviction that every word of biblical literature is factually true.

However, religious fundamentalists are also inclined to compound this error with the correlative one of supposing that if the biblical narratives are not literally true then they can only be dismissed as redundantly *false*. In this dim light, if it should turn out that (scientific) evolutionary theory is true and that human beings and apes have a common ancestry, then any belief that God (whoever or whatever may be meant by this term) created man in his own image within the first week of so of world creation would have to be mistaken or *meaningless* – indeed, meaningless, precisely because mistaken. But if the god of *Genesis* is simply a character in a story, then it makes no more sense to regard this narrative as *false* than as true. In short, neither of these terms usefully applies to the propositional content of a narrative of this nature. But if this so, it may still make sense to ask of the *Genesis* narrative – as we may ask of other human stories including other contemporary middle eastern creation myths to which *Genesis* is literarily related – whether this fiction is insightful or sheds light on significant aspects of human association or condition. In this light, it seems that *Genesis* is or was evidently intended as an allegory of the origins of human error or sin – in thrall to lower influences or desires – construed as disobedience to the wiser counsel signified here by divine command. In this light, one may also concede that much human folly and wickedness may be explained along these lines. But if the point of an essentially non-literal parable is to provide some insightful or illuminating perspective on a significant human problem, it may be no less wise to recognise that this need also not be the last word on this issue or to rule out further interpretations of this very same narrative. And it is clear that such alternative ancient perspectives were on offer. Thus, in *The Apocryphon of St John* – one of the non-canonical (or 'gnostic gospels' discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 – we find, in a dialogue on *Genesis*

between the saviour Jesus and the apostle John, the former insisting that it was *he* (and not the serpent) who induced Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge (Meyer 1998, 175). The point of this *Genesis* interpretation is evidently that while knowledge may sometimes be a dangerous thing, there can also be no human progress – or the freedom for further spiritual or moral growth – in its absence (or in circumstances in which knowledge is denied).

Moreover, what is true here of the imaginative role of this and other clearly fictional Old Testament narratives is no less so of those of the New testament. As our knowledge of alternative gospel literature from the Nag Hammadi and other discoveries – as well as a long tradition of New Testament scholarship – clearly shows, there were ancient competing imaginative accounts (many suppressed by the early Christian church) of the spiritual and moral significance, ministry and teaching of the saviour of Christian faith – and, indeed, even the four canonical gospels of the New Testament fail to provide a unified or consistent picture of this. But, again, while this would or should be considered a serious defect of narratives that aspire to historical accuracy, it need not be so considered – indeed, might well be considered a virtue – of truly great imaginative or fictional compositions. It is surely a virtue of the Judeo-Christian narrative – as of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – that it has been a perennial source of further imaginative and thought-provoking western fictional literature – by, for example, the likes of Dante and Milton. Indeed, one could hardly find a better instance of a provocative reworking of the Christian biblical narrative than Milton's masterfully ambivalent and challenging elaboration or recreation of the *Genesis* narrative. (The enduring influence of Milton's poetic fiction, of course, may be one of the reasons why Christian fundamentalists invariably interpret the biblical figure of Satan quite wrongly – since, far from being a Manichean opponent of the Judeo-Christian deity, he is evidently, throughout the bible. his loyal and obedient steward and servant: see, for example, Kelly 2006). But Milton's Satan is just as clearly a Christian literary reworking of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus in which we may be hard put to decide whose side we are on – that of the significantly heroic central character or that of his authoritarian opponent. However, the greatness of Milton's epic lies precisely in this imaginative re-figuring of the perennial moral and political tension between liberty and authority. And, of course, similar instances of fresh and insightful literary reworkings of the characters and themes of ancient myths may be endlessly multiplied. To cite but one other example, the time-honoured Homeric myth of Odysseus, was notably the inspiration for one the greatest of twentieth century novels – James Joyce's *Ulysses* – as well as for a more modern comic but nevertheless thought-provoking Coen Brothers movie *O Brother*, *where art thou* of the year 2000.

Afterword: Plato wrong and right

At all events, one evidently compelling way of countering Plato's apparent suspicion of and hostility towards poetry and the arts as sources of dangerous lies and deception is to point out that the primary concern and purpose of poetic idioms and narratives lies not with literal description of actions and events of historical occurrence but with imaginative, metaphorical and/or allegorical transformation of our perceptions of experience to the end of greater appreciation of and insight into the world, ourselves and the prospects of more positive human association. When the poet refers to the cherry bow as 'hung with snow', he is not uttering a lie but seeking to refresh or enhance our perception of a potentially worthwhile and rewarding aspect of experience that we may hitherto have failed to appreciate as it deserves; and when Jesus narrates the parable of the prodigal son, he is not trying to deceive us into believing something happened that did not, but attempting to teach a lesson about positive human association that we may hitherto have been too morally and spiritually short-sighted to appreciate. All the same, while all this is clearly a timely and much needed corrective to what seems to be a more literalist perspective on poetic language and narrative in Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*, it also falls somewhat short of defusing all Platonic misgivings of this kind. For if fictional literature has indeed the potential or capacity to transform or enhance vision and insight in such ways – and it is also clear that great literature is generally judged to be so on just this score – we should be no less aware that it has often served a contrary and more suspect purpose. Thus, in a powerful and unsettling recent work of history and politics, Sarah Churchwell has explored in depressing detail how one of the most popular and best-selling fictional works of the twentieth century – Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* – has also contributed to a pernicious myth about the (alleged) virtues of pre-civil war slavery, slave owners and the terrorist order of Ku Klux Klan that continues to influence American white supremacist attitudes and conduct to the present day (In this regard, she explicitly links the novel to present-day US political events.) For present purposes, Churchwell demonstrates beyond doubt that fiction may be morally toxic and corrupting no less than enlightening: as she puts it, 'Our society likes to claim that fiction teaches empathy, but what *Gone with the Wind* reveals is that fiction may only show us the bars of our cage' (Churchwell 2023, 282).

On the one hand, then, we may conclude – indeed, on the present view, we *should* conclude – that apparent Platonic suspicion of poetry and imaginative fiction and its dismissal from civil polity and education is based on some failure to comprehend the logical grammar of non-literal usage and narrative and its significant educational potential for better human appreciation of the world, self and others. Indeed, from this perspective, it may be doubted whether there might be education worthy of the name apart from significant acquaintance with serious

forms of such insight and illumination. On the other hand, however, it is no less clear that education to this end requires careful and critical discernment to ensure that all fictional literature is approached with due caution. Thus, while we have observed that one hazardous form of misreading may follow from the taking of fiction for fact – well exemplified by religious fundamentalist reading of biblical myths as literal truths – another no less serious hazard may lie in failing to discern the blatant propaganda behind all-too-innocent-seeming tales that we may also want to hear. In short, while we need not fall prey to complete Platonic paranoia about non-literal, fictional or poetic narrative, we should not forget that people have sometimes been out to get us. In this light, the tall educational order is to tell the figurative and metaphorical 'wheat from the chaff' with all the wit. wisdom and good will at our human disposal.

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