Parables and Riddles in Ancient and Modern Teaching

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Achilles, a Hare and Two Tortoises

By

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and Matthew B. Schwartz

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The authors dedicate this book to friends and family
who have kept alive the tradition of parables
to make learning sweet and filling.

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PREFACE

Both parables and riddles represent a welcome change from simple rote presentation of information. Yet the Hebrew Bible distinguishes between a *mashal* or parable, (Ezekiel, 18 f) and a *chida* or riddle (Numbers 12: 6-8). While the former can be edifying, the latter is described as "dark speech."

Certainly not all riddles are sinister. We can probably all remember from childhood riddles designed to arouse our curiosity and delight us. Some are quite harmless.

Question: The harder you try to catch something else, the harder it is to catch me. What am I?
Answer: Your breath.

Here is another one:

Question;
I have no wings; yet I do fly;
I have no eyes, yet I do cry.
Sometimes low and sometimes high.;
If I get too heavy, I will drop by.
What am I?
Answer: A cloud.

However, some riddles are quite dark. Consider the riddle posed to Oedipus by the Sphinx (a winged beast with the head of a woman and the body of a lion) who pounces on and devours all who cannot answer her riddle: "What has one voice, and goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" The answer Oedipus is purported to give is "man, who goes on all fours as a baby, who walks upright in the prime of his life, and who hobbles with a stick in old age." Correctly answering this riddle ends the tyranny of the Sphinx who throws herself over a precipice. But consider the result Oedipus is rewarded with an incestuous marriage to his widowed mother, blurring the demarcation line separating one generation from the next, a separation important and indeed essential to the biblical mind.

In other words, the recipient of a riddle often seems damned if he answers it incorrectly, and maybe more so, if he answers the riddle correctly. The very answer Oedipus gives implicitly accepts a curvilinear view of the life cycle: the aged is like an infant. But with what life message does the listener walk away?

The parable also differs from simple rote presentation of material. Consider the famous parable of The Boy Who Cried Wolf:

> There once was a shepherd boy who was bored as he sat on the hillside watching the village sheep. To amuse himself he took a great breath and sang out, "Wolf! Wolf! The Wolf is chasing the sheep!" The villagers came running up the hill to help the boy drive the wolf away. But when they arrived at the top of the hill, they found no wolf. The boy laughed at the sight of their angry faces. "Don't cry 'wolf', shepherd boy," said the villagers, "when there is no wolf!" But he did it again, with the villagers getting angrier. Later, the shepherd boy saw a REAL wolf prowling about his flock. Alarmed, he leaped to his feet and sang out as loudly as he could, "Wolf! Wolf!" But the villagers thought the shepherd boy was lying yet again and did not come.

But here there is a compelling life lesson. A habitual liar will not be believed even when he/she is telling the truth.

This book will compare riddles and parables and their presence in ancient Greece and in biblical and post-biblical Israel and the use to what they were put. Many concrete examples will be provided. We will draw implications for modern education, which seems to have become in many ways stagnant. How can we bring life to the learning process? And what are the roles of parables versus riddles in emotional as well as cognitive education, as well as in promoting positive action?

FOREWORD

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Once upon a time, courses bearing titles like "The History of Western Civilization" were not uncommon in secular high schools and colleges in North America. These courses generally began with Ancient Greece and segued into Ancient Rome before reaching the Dark or Middle Ages. Sometimes there was a nod to monotheism, the Decalogue, or the Sermon on the Mount, but on the whole little attention was paid to the shaping influence of Judaism and Christianity on early Western Civilization. I am speaking, of course, of secular schools, for Jewish or Christian schools readily acknowledged Ancient Israelites and Early Christians as contributors to Western Civilization.

One wonders why those two ancient civilizations were so neglected by our secular educators. Was it because they originated in Asia Minor and became worthy of consideration only after taking root in Europe? Were they ruled out in the United States for being religions and therefore threatening to breach the quasi-Constitutional barrier between Church and State? Did the Ancient Israelites, who were the precursors of the early Christians, suffer in the popular American imagination from "an image problem"? That is to say, instead of being seen as founders of civic institutions worthy of study by the younger citizens of a democratic republic, Israelites (some of whom became early Christians) may have been perceived as nomadic wanderers, sometimes at war with neighboring peoples, sometimes overwhelmed by regional superpowers, and sometimes obsessed with ritual sacrifices and spectacular miracles? By contrast, the Athenians of the Fifth Century BCE were seen as participating in a direct democracy (although not if they were slaves or women), living under the enlightened leadership of Pericles, and fighting wars to preserve their freedom. They also had the good sense to consign their gods to mythology and their sacrificial rites to Homeric antiquity, while they learned philosophy from Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and watched tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

Kaplan and Schwartz challenge the exalted status of Ancient Greek culture as the starting point of Western civilization and do so in a most surprising way: by contrasting two vehicles for intellectual discourse—the Greek riddle and the Biblical parable. While the authors provide enough examples of both vehicles for readers to gauge their relative value, the authors' own judgment is clear and unequivocal. Greek riddles are a kind of intellectual game; they require, promote and celebrate mental acuity but rarely impart useful information or insight, and generally imply the helplessness of the human mind in the face of an inscrutable world. By contrast, Biblical parables address complex ethical problems with insight and tact, and often convey practical human wisdom clothed in engaging narratives. For example, whereas the Greek Seer Tereisias responds to Oedipus's plight with tormenting riddles that do nothing to help him deal with the crisis at hand, the Israelite prophet Nathan presents King David with an incriminating parable but then directs him to an ethical pathway out of his situation.

Kaplan and Schwartz see the differences between riddles and parables as symptomatic of deeper cultural differences between a narrow Greek rationalism and a more broadly based Israelite culture. (They also argue that these differences are embedded in profoundly different pedagogical styles in our own day.) If Greek riddles and Biblical parables are, indeed, as representative of the values of their respective cultures as Kaplan and Schwartz claim, then a reevaluation of the influence of Ancient Greek civilization as compared to that of biblical and post-biblical Israel on the development of our own culture seems long overdue.

CHAPTER ONE

ACHILLES, A HARE AND TWO TORTOISES

> Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner, shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. There, she dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the doors and was readily welcomed into the villagers' houses. They invited her to eat at their tables and warm herself by their fires.
>
> Ever since that time, Truth and Parable have gone hand in hand and they are made welcome wherever they go. "And do you see," concluded the Preacher of Dubno, "I do not change the truth, nor try to hide it within my stories. I merely dress it up in beautiful clothing so that people will welcome it into their hearts" (Baltuck, 1995, p. 71).

This book is about the difference between parables and riddles, really between different views of wisdom, different definitions of it, and different attitudes towards its desirability. Both parables and riddles go beyond a tedious rote presentation of facts. Yet there is a major difference. Parables transmit an underlying insightful message in a way that will not be rejected. Riddles, in contrast, are largely unintelligible. They leave one helpless, without any life-lesson that can be derived.

Consider the famous riddle of Rumpelstiltskin which is not Greek at all, but illustrates our point. We follow the Grimm Brothers' version.

A poor miller had a beautiful daughter. Once he had occasion to speak to the king and, to give himself an air of importance, boasted that his daughter could spin straw into gold. The king ordered the miller to bring the girl to the palace. If she succeeded, he would make her his queen; if not, she would be put to death. The next day the girl came and was placed in a room full of straw and ordered to spin the straw into gold. The poor girl, of course, had no idea what to do. Suddenly the door opened, and a little man stepped into the room. Learning of the girl's dilemma, the little man asked, "What will you give me if I spin this straw into gold?" The girl volunteered her necklace, and the little man spun all the straw into gold. The king was thrilled but also greedy. On the next day, he again placed the girl in a room

full of straw with same demand. Once again the little man appeared and offered to spin the straw into gold in exchange this time for the girl's ring. The greedy king repeated his demand on the third day. Again the little man came, but this time the girl had no more baubles to give him. "Well then," said the little man, "will you promise to give me your first-born child if you become queen?" Desperately frightened, the girl agreed. When the king returned the next day, the room was once more filled with gold, and he married the miller's daughter.

A year later, a beautiful child was born. The queen had quite forgotten the little man, but he came and demanded the child as promised. Terrified, the queen offered him all sorts of wealth but could not dissuade him from demanding the child. She wept so bitterly that the little man finally felt sorry for her. He agreed to give her three days. If she could discover his name, she could keep the child.

For two days, the queen guessed a long list of names but could not discover the true name. On the third day, one of her agents came in and reported that he had passed a little house far away in a forest on a mountain, where he saw a little man dancing around a fire and singing a song that ended with the words, "And little knows the royal dame that Rumpelstiltskin is my name."

When the little man returned on the third day and heard the queen's correct answer, he grew so enraged that he stamped his foot into the ground up to his waist, and then seizing his left leg tore himself apart.

The central riddle in the story is the little man's name, but the story contains other characteristic features as well - the magical entry of the little man and his inhuman appearance, the remarkable greed and cruelty of the king, the importance of gold and the lack of decency. There is little to learn from the story unless it is that the world is a frightening and irrationally insecure place. The very people who help you turn out to be your persecutors. A riddle such as this leaves the listener feeling powerless; that there is nothing one can do to escape a terrible situation. Perhaps this is the underlying intent of the riddle.

Contrast this with the famous parable of the Emperor's New Clothes by Hans Christian Andersen.

Many years ago, there was an Emperor so exceedingly fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on being well dressed. He cared nothing about reviewing his soldiers, going to the theatre, or going for a ride in his carriage, except to show off his new clothes. He had a coat for every hour of the day, and instead of saying, as one might, about any other ruler, "The King's in council," here they always said, "The Emperor's in his dressing room."

In the great city where he lived, life was always joyous. Every day many strangers came to town, and among them one day came two swindlers. They let it be known they were weavers, and they said they could weave the most magnificent fabrics imaginable. Not only were their colors and patterns uncommonly fine, but clothes made of this cloth had a wonderful way of becoming invisible to anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid.

"Those would be just the clothes for me," thought the Emperor. "If I wore them I would be able to discover which men in my empire are unfit for their posts. And I could tell the wise men from the fools. Yes, I certainly must get some of the stuff woven for me right away." He paid the two swindlers a large sum of money to start work at once.

They set up two looms and pretended to weave, though there was nothing on the looms. All the finest silk and the purest old thread which they demanded went into their traveling bags, while they worked the empty looms far into the night. "I'd like to know how those weavers are getting on with the cloth," the Emperor thought, but he felt slightly uncomfortable when he remembered that those who were unfit for their position would not be able to see the fabric. It couldn't have been that he doubted himself, yet he thought he'd rather send someone else to see how things were going. The whole town knew about the cloth's peculiar power, and all were impatient to find out how stupid their neighbors were.

"I'll send my honest old minister to the weavers," the Emperor decided. "He'll be the best one to tell me how the material looks, for he's a sensible man and no one does his duty better." So the honest old minister went to the room where the two swindlers sat working away at their empty looms. "Heaven help me," he thought as his eyes flew wide open, "I can't see anything at all." But he did not say so.

Both the swindlers begged him to be so kind as to come near to approve the excellent pattern, the beautiful colors. They pointed to the empty looms, and the poor old minister stared as hard as he dared. He couldn't see anything, because there was nothing to see. "Heaven have mercy," he thought. "Can it be that I'm a fool? I'd have never guessed it, and not a soul must know. Am I unfit to be the minister? It would never do to let on that I can't see the cloth."

"Don't hesitate to tell us what you think of it," said one of the weavers.

"Oh, it's beautiful-it's enchanting." The old minister peered through his spectacles. "Such a pattern, what colors!" I'll be sure to tell the Emperor how delighted I am with it."

"We're pleased to hear that," the swindlers said. They proceeded to name all the colors and to explain the intricate pattern. The old minister

paid the closest attention, so that he could tell it all to the Emperor. And so he did.

The swindlers at once asked for more money, more silk and gold thread, to get on with the weaving. But it all went into their pockets. Not a thread went into the looms, though they worked at their weaving as hard as ever.

The Emperor presently sent another trustworthy official to see how the work progressed and how soon it would be ready. The same thing happened to him that had happened to the minister. He looked and he looked, but as there was nothing to see in the looms he couldn't see anything. "Isn't it a beautiful piece of goods?" the swindlers asked him, as they displayed and described their imaginary pattern.

"I know I'm not stupid," the man thought, "so it must be that I'm unworthy of my good office. That's strange. I mustn't let anyone find it out, though." So he praised the material he did not see. He declared he was delighted with the beautiful colors and the exquisite pattern. To the Emperor he said, "It held me spellbound."

All the town was talking of this splendid cloth, and the Emperor wanted to see it for himself while it was still in the looms. Attended by a band of chosen men, among whom were his two old trusted officials-the ones who had been to the weavers-he set out to see the two swindlers. He found them weaving with might and main, but without a thread in their looms.

"Magnificent," said the two officials already duped. "Just look, Your Majesty, what colors! What a design!" They pointed to the empty looms, each supposing that the others could see the stuff.

"What's this?" thought the Emperor. "I can't see anything. This is terrible!

Am I a fool? Am I unfit to be the Emperor? What a thing to happen to me of all people! - Oh! It's very pretty," he said. "It has my highest approval." And he nodded approbation at the empty loom. Nothing could make him say that he couldn't see anything.

His whole retinue stared and stared. One saw no more than another, but they all joined the Emperor in exclaiming, "Oh! It's very pretty," and they advised him to wear clothes made of this wonderful cloth especially for the great procession he was soon to lead. "Magnificent! Excellent! Unsurpassed!" were bandied from mouth to mouth, and everyone did his best to seem well pleased. The Emperor gave each of the swindlers a cross to wear in his buttonhole, and the title of Sir Weaver. Before the procession the swindlers sat up all night and burned more than six candles, to show how busy they were finishing the Emperor's new clothes. They pretended to take the cloth off the loom. They made cuts in the air with huge scissors. And at last they said, "Now the Emperor's new clothes are ready for him."

Then the Emperor himself came with his noblest noblemen, and the swindlers each raised an arm as if they were holding something. They said, "These are the trousers, here's the coat, and this is the mantle," naming each garment. "All of them are as light as a spider web. One would almost think he had nothing on, but that's what makes them so fine."

"Exactly," all the noblemen agreed, though they could see nothing, for there was nothing to see. "If Your Imperial Majesty will condescend to take your clothes off," said the swindlers, "we will help you on with your new ones here in front of the long mirror."

The Emperor undressed, and the swindlers pretended to put his new clothes on him, one garment after another. They took him around the waist and seemed to be fastening something - that was his train-as the Emperor turned round and round before the looking glass. "How well Your Majesty's new clothes look. Aren't they becoming!" He heard on all sides, "That pattern, so perfect! Those colors, so suitable! It is a magnificent outfit."

Then the minister of public processions announced: "Your Majesty's canopy is waiting outside." "Well, I'm supposed to be ready," the Emperor said, and turned again for one last look in the mirror. "It is a remarkable fit, isn't it?" He seemed to regard his costume with the greatest interest. The noblemen who were to carry his train stooped low and reached for the floor as if they were picking up his mantle. Then they pretended to lift and hold it high. They didn't dare admit they had nothing to hold.

So off went the Emperor in procession under his splendid canopy. Everyone in the streets and the windows said, "Oh, how fine are the Emperor's new clothes! Don't they fit him to perfection? And see his long train!" Nobody would confess that he couldn't see anything, for that would prove him either unfit for his position, or a fool. No costume the Emperor had worn before was ever such a complete success.

"But he hasn't got anything on," a little child said. "Did you ever hear such innocent prattle?" said its father. And one person whispered to another what the child had said, "He hasn't anything on. A child says he hasn't anything on." "But he hasn't got anything on!" the whole town cried out at last.

The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, "This procession has got to go on." So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn't there at all.

This parable has a strong moral. Do not be governed by social pressures which violate reality. Many things which are untrue are paraded as reality by people who do not want to seem out of touch with the prevailing world view, no matter how erroneous it is. This parable teaches the reader to value the truth above what in this case is erroneous social conformity

Let us compare the riddle of Rumpelstiltskin and the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes. The saving knowledge of the dwarf's name comes only by chance. The knowledge of the nudity of the Emperor comes from a little boy who makes up his own mind and is not overwhelmed by social pressure.

The wide use of riddles and of riddling language in ancient Greek stories and writings, especially by oracles and prophets, is puzzling. Why don't they speak clearly? Perhaps this practice reflects a world they saw as filled with riddles and uncertainties. The gods themselves were unreliable, unpredictable and even criminally vicious, certainly not a force for harmony and stability. The world itself, as Hesiod described it, began in *Chaos.* Neither clear expression, nor wisdom nor morality were necessarily good or beneficial to people.

Parables allow one to extract meaning from events. Riddles attack the very idea of meaning and knowledge altogether. Biblical history does not block interpretation but gives it meaning and structure. History without a God and a divine purpose can be interpreted as having no structure, a riddle whose meaning we do not know. Biblical people do not feel unwanted as Oedipus did. The person who sees him/herself as created in the image of God is not a tragic figure. In the Biblical story, it is God Who has breathed life into human beings and has sustained them. God controls breath, in contrast to Zeno, the Stoic philosopher who, according to writer Diogenes Laertius, held his breath until he died

In a study of the ancient Oracle of Delphi, H. W. Parke and D. Wormell (1956) discuss several of the oracle's pronouncements regarding wisdom, wealth, piety and happiness. These authors were probably not aware of a passage in the Mishna that more or less parallels their discussion but that points up some subtle but sharp differences between Talmudic and Greek approaches in these matters. Though both Greek and Jewish literatures sought and respected wisdom, their approaches were very different.

In his probing discussion of the non-informative aspect of Apollo's speech, Bruce Heiden (2005) suggests that perhaps Apollo's noncommunicative oracles served another purpose. He cites Sophocles fragment 771 in this regard.

> And I thoroughly understand that the god is this way:
> To the wise, always a poser of riddles in divine speech,
> but to the foolish a teacher of lessons, trivial and concise.

Heiden goes on to argue that "the different addressees for whom Apollo's speeches are either lessons or riddles do not exercise different linguistic competencies, but different degrees of wisdom, and the

acquisition of the positive meaning of the teaching surprisingly accords with stupidity, while the riddle, whose characteristic is denial of meaning, accords with positive wisdom." (pp. 236-7).

For the classicist E. R. Dodds (1973), "Oedipus is a kind of symbol of the human intelligence which cannot rest until it has solved all the riddles – even the last riddle, to which the answer is that human happiness is built on an illusion." To the Greek thinker, life itself was a riddle, but not a pleasant one. He could not have real knowledge nor was there any stability nor security. In a sense, the world remains the Chaos which Hesiod says it was at its beginning. No matter what one accomplished, or gained in life, he could never let himself be happy, because tomorrow it might all be gone. This contrasts notably with the Bible's description of Abraham at the end of his life as being "satisfied with days."

These are extraordinary observations, with chilling implications for education. We can agree that rote teaching and learning can indeed be tiresome. Yet the Greek curative can be even worse, destructive and entrapping riddling, actually obfuscation, which can hide and deny meaning. But the ancient Greeks seem to see this as the mark of positive wisdom. In contrast, they see presentation of positive meaning which can be useful in one's life as simple-minded.

This view seems totally at odds and indeed repugnant to the biblical understanding that wisdom contains positive meaning and is useful and informational. But does it have to be rote teaching and learning, or can it be more creative? Can it take the form of a parable to both evoke interest and evade a person's cognitive and emotional defenses? As a backdrop to this discussion, it is imperative to distinguish parables and riddles. This distinction is not as easy as it may first appear. Let us begin by examining two similar stories, each involving a race between two figures, a slower and a quicker one. However, the ways in which these stories are treated can begin to illustrate the difference between a parable and a riddle. Zeno of Elea tells of a tortoise and the renowned Greek warrior Achilles, while Aesop tells of a tortoise and a hare. In each case, the tortoise is the slower figure. However, it wins each race, though for very different reasons.

The Tortoise and Achilles

The Tortoise challenged Achilles to a race, claiming that he would win as long as Achilles gave him a small head start. Achilles laughed at this, for of course he was a mighty warrior and swift of foot, whereas the Tortoise was heavy and slow.

"How big a head start do you need?" he asked the Tortoise with a smile.

"Ten meters," the latter replied.

Achilles laughed louder than ever. "You will surely lose, my friend, in that case," he told the Tortoise, "but let us race, if you wish it."

"On the contrary," said the Tortoise, "I will win, and I can prove it to you by a simple argument."

"Go on then," Achilles replied, with less confidence than he felt before. He knew he was the superior athlete, but he also knew the Tortoise had the sharper wits, and he had lost many a bewildering argument with him before this.

"Suppose," began the Tortoise, "that you give me a 10-meter head start. Would you say that you could cover that 10 meters between us very quickly?"

"Very quickly," Achilles affirmed.

"And in that time, how far should I have gone, do you think?"

"Perhaps a meter—no more," said Achilles after a moment's thought.

"Very well," replied the Tortoise, "so now there is a meter between us. And you would catch up that distance very quickly?"

"Very quickly indeed!"

"And yet, in that time I shall have gone a little way farther, so that now you must catch that distance up, yes?"

"Ye-es," said Achilles slowly.

"And while you are doing so, I shall have gone a little way farther, so that you must then catch up the new distance," the Tortoise continued smoothly.

Achilles said nothing.

"And so you see, in each moment you must be catching up the distance between us, and yet I—at the same time—will be adding a new distance, however small, for you to catch up again."

"Indeed, it must be so," said Achilles wearily.

"And so you can never catch up," the Tortoise concluded sympathetically.

"You are right, as always," said Achilles sadly—and conceded the race. (Smith, 2014)

What is wrong with this paradox is that it creates an artificial world that distorts reality. It is not based on evidence. In actuality, Achilles will catch the tortoise. Yet Zeno's paradox represents a world where motion is impossible; before I can cover half the distance I must cover half of half the distance, and before I can do that I must cover half of half of half of the distance, and so on. This means that in reality I can never move any distance

at all, because doing so involves moving an infinite number of small intermediate distances first.[1]

The Tortoise and the Hare

Consider now Aesop's fable of The Tortoise and the Hare. What is known about Aesop is that he seems to have lived in Asia Minor around the 7th century B.C.E, and may have been a slave. It is possible he had some connection to King Croesus of Lydia and some interaction with Delphi. His fable is dramatically different from the paradox of Zeno.

One day a hare was bragging about how fast he could run. He bragged and bragged and even laughed at the tortoise, who was so slow. The tortoise stretched out his long neck and challenged the hare to a race, which, of course, made the hare laugh.

"My, my, what a joke!" thought the hare. "A race, indeed, a race. Oh! what fun! My, my! a race, of course, Mr. Tortoise, we shall race!" said the hare.

The forest animals met and mapped out the course. The race began, and the hare, being such a swift runner, soon left the tortoise far behind. About halfway through the course, it occurred to the hare that he had plenty of time to beat the slow trodden tortoise.

"Oh, my!" thought the hare, "I have plenty of time to play in the meadow here." And so he did.

After the hare finished playing, he decided that he had time to take a little nap. "I have plenty of time to beat that tortoise," he thought. And he cuddled up against a tree and dozed.

The tortoise, in the meantime, continued to plod on, albeit, ever so slowly. He never stopped, but took one good step after another.

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[1] The paradox leads to the following mathematical joke. A mathematician, a physicist and an engineer were asked to answer the following question. A group of boys are lined up on one wall of a dance hall, and an equal number of girls are lined up on the opposite wall. Both groups are then instructed to advance toward each other by one quarter the distance separating them every ten seconds (i.e., if they are distance d apart at time 0, they are $d/2$ at $t = 10$, $d/4$ at $t = 20$, $d/8$ at $t = 30$, and so on.) When do they meet at the center of the dance hall? The mathematician said they would never actually meet because the series is infinite. The physicist said they would meet when time equals infinity. The engineer said that within one minute they would be close enough for all practical purposes. There is some dispute as to whether calculus solves this mathematical problem, which of course violates a person's actual experience.

The hare finally woke from his nap. "Time to get going," he thought. And off he went faster than he had ever run before! He dashed as quickly as anyone ever could up to the finish line, where he met the tortoise, who was patiently awaiting his arrival. (Aesop, 2014)

The moral of this story is clear. Do not underestimate an opponent. Do not rest on your laurels. Continue diligently on your task. These interpretations contract into the same basic life lesson. Do not cease your efforts, or you will be overtaken and surpassed. The expression of this as a fable allows its usage as a learning device which may overcome a person's defenses. For the present purposes, let us designate this as a parable which is designed to transmit a life lesson.

A Comparison

The two stories illustrate diametrically different attitudes toward knowledge and wisdom. Aesop's fable presents a life message, though perhaps in a rather negative way. The lesson is clear. To paraphrase the iconic baseball pitcher Satchel Paige, "Don't look back, someone may be gaining on you" Be alert, don't stop, take nothing for granted, do not rest on your laurels, lest you lose what you have. This is a practical lesson one can use in life. It represents applied wisdom.

Zeno's paradox is completely different. It creates an artificial theoretical conundrum with no obvious practical benefits. It represents a puzzle, in fact a riddle, an interesting one, which removes a person from practical life pursuits and redirects him into totally impractical theoretical ruminations. It is not based on evidence but on an axiomatic view of the world that may be completely inaccurate, impervious to evidence.

One is reminded of Anatole France's biting critique in *Penguin Island* of the Dreyfus trial. "It's a good idea to have evidence, but perhaps better not to…As evidence, false documents generally are worth more than real ones, first of all, because they have been created on purpose for the needs of the case. They are preferable also because they lead the mind into an ideal world and distract it from reality. Nevertheless, I believe I should have preferred not to have any evidence at all." (France, 1909).

Zeno's paradox does not lead to wisdom but rather to a false sophistication which denies reality, has no application and actually hampers a person's ability to deal with the realities of day to day life. In actuality, Achilles will catch the tortoise in Zeno's paradox just as surely as the tortoise will catch the sleeping hare in Aesop's fable.

How strongly the parable-riddle distinction characterizes the difference in Greek and biblical thought! The implications for contemporary education

are significant. Consider the different conceptions of time presented in Biblical and Greek writings in regard to two objective time events: 1) people age, and 2) there is day and night. These facts can be expressed in a boring rote manner, or they can be expressed poetically.

The two alternate versions of the Sphinx's question to Oedipus express these realities in riddle form. The first question, aging, goes as follows: "Which creature has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" Oedipus is reported to have answered: "Man, who crawls on all four as an infant, walks on two legs as an adult, and with the help of a cane as an elder." This "correct" answer to the riddle represents a cyclical curvilinear view of life. Oedipus subdues the Sphinx through answering its riddle, but is "rewarded" for this by being wedded unknowingly to his mother Jocasta, this incestuous coupling, violating and indeed obliterating the line of demarcation between one generation and the next.

This view is dramatically different from that expressed in the Hebrew Bible, where the passage of time is not feared. The passing of the matriarch Sarah illustrates that each phase of life is appreciated on its own terms and is also expressed poetically and more in parable form. "And the life of Sarah was a hundred and seven and twenty years; these were the years of the life of Sarah" (Genesis 23: 1). Rather than simply stating that Sarah died at the age of 127, Genesis says that Sarah lived 100 years and 20 years and 7 years. Rashi states that she was as free from sin at 100 as she was at 20 (there is no liability for divine punishment until 20) and she was as beautiful at age 20 as at age 7.

Consider now the second objective reality. Both day and night occur and they alternate. This second version of the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus clearly expresses this view. "There are two sisters. One gives birth to the other, and she in turn gives birth to the first. Who are the two sisters?" Here Oedipus is reported to have answered: "Day and night, day giving birth to night, and then night giving birth to day." (Kannicht, Snell and Radt, 1971-2004; Theodectes, Fragment 4). Days and nights are sisters, each replacing the other in an endless repetitive cycle. Although more poetic and creative, the message is that no growth or development occurs. It is the same story, day after day, night after night. It is the same old "same old".

Compare this to the description of the separation of evening and morning in Genesis 1. And God saw the light that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness, he called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning, one day. (1: 4-5)

Let us raise three questions. (1) What is the relationship of evening and morning? (2) Why not speak of night and day instead of evening and

morning? (3) Why does the Biblical day begin and end with evening? The sentence, "And there was evening, and there was morning," appears at the end of each of the first six days of creation, and is as poetic as the Greek riddle above. However, it provides a very different message. Life is not a cycle; day and night are not sisters. Rather each day begins unformed and in darkness and emerges into light. Evening can be seen as the parent of morning, which then grows into evening. That evening then becomes parent to a new morning, not a recycling back to the first morning. This is not simply a rote recitation of a boring fact, but instead represents a parable of growth, and is radically different than the cyclical riddle that the Sphinx poses to Oedipus. The Book of Genesis begins with an account of God's creation of the world in six days. The first day ends with "And it was evening and it was morning, one day."

Although the biblical account portrays the sun and moon as created only on the fourth day, God established an order of time and calendar from the very first day. The world He was creating would be harmonious and orderly, not chaotic. Day and night are not enemies but are both parts of God's creation. Some commentaries suggest that the day going from darkness to light symbolizes the pattern that the good person may face great challenges in this world but can look forward to the light and beauty of the next world. (See Moshe Alshich, *Torat Moshe*, Israel; Shilo, 1970, p.4b-5a).

Both the parable and riddle are attempts to circumvent rote forms of transmitting knowledge, though they use quite different forms. Chapter 2 will examine riddles as a dominant form of discourse and thought in Greek writings. Chapter 3 will examine the great number of biblical and post-biblical parables. Chapter 4 will draw on these presentations to compare Biblical and Greek views of wisdom. Finally, Chapter 5 will draw implications from this analysis for contemporary education.

CHAPTER TWO

RIDDLES

Riddles, like parables, avoid boredom. However, while parables are designed to illuminate a situation, riddles often aim to befuddle the listener. They do not lead anywhere. They may amuse, but they evade the basic issue, typically do not contain any useful information or insight, indeed often confuse what people's common sense tells them is true, and only distract and confuse the situation. They are likely to entrap an individual in a never-ending labyrinth.

Greek Riddles

According to the Oxford Classical Dictionary, the Greeks seemed to like riddles while the Romans, a more practical people, did not (p. 924). The Dictionary defines a riddle as a "dark saying" designed to baffle or challenge the intelligence of the hearer. Life is indeed a puzzling riddle for most characters of Greek literature. They do not live according to moral commandments as in the biblical parables presented in the next chapter, but instead face the constant need to use all their tricks to protect themselves against a tricky world ruled by tricky, immoral gods and inhabited by many tricky, immoral people. Greek plays often end with the chorus musing that terrible things happen far beyond anything that mortals can anticipate or handle. They can conclude only that tragedy is the doing of fate or the gods.

Much of modern philosophy, logic, mathematics, and literature is heavily based on ideas that were conceptualized in Ancient Greece. Some riddles can be seen as promoting thinking. However, others can be used simply to distract, to entertain, to control and to entrap people. Riddling oracles are typical. The oracle typically expresses herself in maddening and often destructive enigmatic forms. Early examples of riddles in Greek literature are Hesiod fr. 160 Rz (contest of Calchas and Mopsus) and Theognis 1229f. The later *Certamen Homer et Hesiod* preserves the ancient story of Homer and the Fisherman.

Clearchus of Soli composed a work which was used by Athanaeus who himself recounts many riddles from comedies and other sources For

Clearchus, a riddle is primarily a sportive problem based on play of language, whether a letter, syllable or a whole noun, an intellectual exercise for the sake of intellect itself.[2]

Riddle of Cleobulus: An early collection of riddles is ascribed to Cleobulus of Lindos and his daughter Cleobuline (Gaisford, *Suidae Lexicon,* 1834). Consider the following riddle of Cleobulus preserved in the collection of Pamphila and presented by Diogenes Laertius (I, l.91).

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[2] Clearchus says there are seven kinds of riddles, "Depending on a letter, as when we are to tell, for example, the name of a fish or a plant beginning with *a* ; similarly, when the propounder requires a word which contains or does not contain a certain letter, like the riddles called the s-less; whence even Pindar composed an ode against the letter s, putting forth, as it were, a kind of riddle in lyric poetry (*P. L. G.*4 frag. 79, *cf.* Athen. 455C, 467B). Then there are riddles depending on a syllable, where, for example, we are to name something measured that begins with *ba* like basileus (king), or that ends in *-nax*, like Callianax, or that has the lion for its leader, like Leonides, or at the end, like Thrasyleon. Or riddles involving a whole noun, where, for example, we must give either simple or compound nouns of two syllables, wherein the form has a pompous or, conversely, a low implication; or names which are godless like Cleonymus, or have a god in them, like Dionysius. In this case the noun may be made up from the name of either one or several gods, like Hermaphroditus; or a noun beginning with Zeus, like Diocles, or with Hermes, like Hermodorus; or one ending, perhaps, in -nicus. Those who failed to answer as required had to drink the cup, This is the answer that Clearchus gives but leaves the name of the cup unspecified.

Now let examine some specific riddles of ancient Greece. We quote four: 'Depending on a letter, as when we are to tell, for example, the name of a fish or a plant beginning with *a;* similarly, when the propounder requires a word which contains or does not contain a certain letter, like the riddles called the s-less; whence even Pindar composed an ode against the letter *s,* putting forth, as it were, a kind of riddle in lyric poetry. (*P. L. G.*4 frag. 79, *cf.* Athen. 455C, 467B)

Then there are riddles depending on a syllable, where, for example, we are to name something measured that begins with *ba*, like basileus (king), or that ends in -nax, like Callianax, or that has the lion for its leader (*i.e.* begins with the lion, Eng. Lionel, Leonard) like Leonides, or contrariwise at the end, like Thrasyleon. (Bold-Lion) or riddles involving a whole noun, where, for example, we must give either simple or compound nouns of two syllables, wherein the form has a pompous or, conversely, a low implication; or names which are godless (lacking the stem of *theos,*"god") like Cleonymus, or have a god in them, like Dionysius;[1] in this case the noun may be made up from the name of either one or several. gods, like Hermaphroditus; or a noun beginning with Zeus, like Diocles, or with Hermes, like Hermodorus; or one ending, perhaps, in *-nicus.* Those who failed to answer as required had to drink the cup.

> One sire there is, he has twelve sons, and each of these has twice thirty daughters different in feature; some of the daughters are white, the others again are black; they are immortal, and yet they all die. Answer: The year.

This is a clever riddle which stimulates the intellect, but it is difficult to discern any lesson. It is simply a poetic statement that the year has twelve months, and thirty days within these months each consisting of a day and night. It really at heart is a cyclical message of endless repetition and does not touch the question of aging and spiritual and emotional meaning of the passage of time in human development.

Riddle of Alexis: Alexis, in *Sleep*, propounds the following riddle "A. It is not mortal nor yet immortal; rather, it has a nature so mixed that its life is neither in man's estate nor in a god's, but its substance ever grows fresh and then dies again; it may not be seen by the eye, yet it is known of all. B. You always delight, woman, in puzzling me with riddles. A. Yes, but what I say is simple and plain to understand. B. What child, then, can have such a nature as that? A. Sleep, my daughter, the bringer of release from mortal woes." (II, l.385). While this riddle is clever, one must ask what do people gain from it?

Riddles of Eubulus: Eubulus in *Sphinx-Cario* presents the following interchange between persons A and B, in fact solving the riddle himself—"A. It has no tongue, yet it talks, Its name is the same for male or female, steward of its own winds, hairy, or sometimes hairless; saying things unintelligible to them that understand, drawing out one melody after another; one thing it is, yet many, and if one wound it, it is unwounded. Tell me, what is it? Why are you puzzled? B. It's Callistratus! A. No, it's the rump. B. You keep talking drivel. A. No, really; this it is, one and the same, that tongueless speaks; it has one name though belonging to many; wounded it is unwounded; it is hairy and hairless. What would you? Guardian of many gales . . .. 'Locust-eyed, no front-snout,–double-headed, a warrior that destroys the seed of young unborn.' This is the Egyptian weasel; for it takes the eggs of crocodiles, before the seed is formed into the likeness of the animal, breaks them up and then destroys them. And since it is double-mouthed, it can sting from behind and bite with its lips...— 'I know one that is heavy when he is young, and when he becomes old, though wingless, he lightly flies and leaves the land invisible.' This is down from a thistle. For it 'stands firmly in the seed when it is young, but when it has cast that off it is light and takes to flight, being blown about, you see, by little boys.' — 'There is an image which stands on top, its lower parts gaping, bored sharply clear through from head to foot; it gives birth to men at the tail, each one in his turn, and some of them obtain the right to live, while others must wander

forth, each bearing his own fate in his own person, but calling out. Beware!'"

What does one make of such riddles? They seem to describe a frightening world of hidden and insurmountable dangers, where one's very attempt to improve one's situation and find safety, come to naught. Indeed. This is a world where one's very attempts to extricate himself from his situation, plunge him, like Uncle Remus's Brer Rabbit, even more deeply into the trap of the Tar Baby. The more one tries to escape, the more enmeshed he becomes.

Riddles of Antiphanes; In *The Riddle*, Antiphanes describes an interchange between two men: A and B. "A. A man who expected to wrap his net round many fish pulled in a single perch at great expense; disappointed in her, the grey mullet brought him another like her. For a perch willingly follows a black-tail. B. Grey mullet, man, black-tail! I don't know what you mean. You are really talking nonsense. A. Well, I'll tell you plainly. Many a man who gives his goods knows not that he has given them, to whom he has given them, nor even that he now has what he did not want at all. B. What? Someone gave what he did not give, and has what he does not have, I can't make head or tail of that. A. Well, that's what the riddle said. All that you know, you don't know at this moment, nor all that you have given, nor all that you have in place of it. It meant something like that.

B. Well then, I should like in my turn to put a riddle to you. A. Go ahead. B. A Pinna and a mullet, two fishes with voices, were talking a lot, but concerning what and to whom they thought they were saying something, they talked not at all. For the one addressed couldn't understand a word, so that, while their talk was addressed to him, they were talking a lot to themselves, and may Demeter destroy them both!"

In *Sappho*, Antiphanes represents the poet as propounding riddles in the following manner. Sappho says: "There is a feminine being which keeps its babes safe beneath its bosom; they, though voiceless, raise a cry sonorous over the waves of the sea and across all the dry land, reaching what Mr. L's they desire, and they may hear even when they are not there; but their sense of hearing is dull." Someone solves this by saying: "That being of which I speak is the state, the babes she nourishes within her are the politicians. These, by their bawling, draw hither receipts across the sea from Asia and from Thrace. The people, meanwhile, sit near them while they feed and brawl continuously, neither hearing nor seeing anything."

Sappho responds as follows: "You talk nonsense always. For how, father, could a politician be voiceless? B. If he is convicted three times of unconstitutional measures! So there! I thought I understood what you were talking about. However, tell me yourself." Then Antiphanes represents

Sappho as solving the riddle thus: “The feminine being, then, is an epistle, the babes within her are the letters it carries round; they, though voiceless, talk to whom they desire far away; yet if another happen to be standing near when it is read, he will not hear.”

Riddle of Diphilus: Diphilus, in *Theseus*, says three Samian girls were once propounding riddles while drinking-at the festival of Adonis; and one put to them the following riddle: “What is the strongest thing in the world?” One of them answered, “Iron,” and produced the proof of this, saying, because men dig and cut everything with it and use it for every purpose. After she was applauded the second girl proceeded and said that the blacksmith possessed much greater strength, for he, in doing his job, bends the iron, no matter how strong, softens it, and does anything he pleases with it. But the third declared **“**Love: iron is strong, but the blacksmith is stronger than iron, and love can subdue the blacksmith.”

Riddles of Calchas and Mopsus: The 12thcentury C.E. Byzantine mythographer John Tzetzes reports anecdotes of the prowess of Mopsus. Having been consulted, on one occasion, by Amphilochus, who wished to know what success would attend his arms in a war which he was going to undertake, he predicted the greatest calamities; but Calchas, who had been the soothsayer of the Greeks during the Trojan War, promised the greatest successes. Amphilochus followed the opinion of Calchas, but the prediction of Mopsus was fully verified. This had such an effect upon Calchas that he died soon after. Apollodorus describes the death of Calchas to his being defeated in a battle of riddles that he and Mopsus asked each other in a contest of skill in divination. Calchas first asked his antagonist how many figs a neighboring tree bore; “Ten thousand and a bushel”, replied Mopsus, “and one fig over.” The figs were gathered, and Mopsus’ answer was found to be correct. Mopsus now, to try his adversary, asked him how many young ones a certain pregnant sow would bring forth, and at what time. Calchas answered “eight”, whereupon Mopsus smiled and said: “Calchas, you fall short of true prophecy but I, who am the son of Apollo and Manto, have a wealth of keen vision. I say that there are not eight as Calchas says, but nine in the womb, all males and that they will be born together exactly at the sixth hour.” The morrow proved the veracity of his prediction, and Calchas died through the grief which his defeat produced and was buried at Notium (*Apollodorus,.271, Epitome 6: 2-4).*

A Riddle of Theodectes. Theodectes of Phaselis was very competent in discovering the answer to a riddle put to him. “What thing in its nature is largest at its creation and at its decline, but is smallest at its prime.” He puts it thus: '”What thing is that which is not among all the things that Earth, the nurse, brings forth, nor the sea, nor has any growth in its limbs like that of

things mortal, yet in the time of its earliest bargain and generation is largest, but at its midmost height is small, and at old age itself is again largest in shape and size?" His answer: "One's shadow." (Kannicht, Snell and Radt, 1971-2004, Fragment 18).

It is very difficult to draw any lessons or knowledge from these riddles. They seem to be merely puzzles. Unlike the biblical parables we will discuss in the next chapter, these riddles seem to provide very little useful information. Let us turn now to some better-known Greek riddles to see if the pattern holds.

The Riddle of Homer. According to legend, Homer did not know where he was born and he once stopped at Delphi to see if the Oracle could help him. He was told, "The isle of Ios is your mother's country and it shall receive you dead; but beware the riddles of young children." As an old man, he happened to visit the island of Ios, and when he sat on the shore one day he met some children of local fishermen coming back from the sea and asked them what they had caught. They replied: "What we caught we threw away, and what we didn't catch we kept" While Homer was trying to figure out the riddle, he remembered the oracle and realized his time was up. He slipped, bumped his head and died. (The Oxford Classical Dictionary, Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi, p. 224; Landesman, 1965; Mandilaras, 1992).

What in the world is the meaning of this riddle? What life lessons can one draw from it? It seems the meaning we can draw from the story is that one should pay attention to what one is doing and not be distracted. But this is exactly what riddles do,- they distract one from real life issues, and make one vulnerable to disastrous accidents and life-events. This is exactly the opposite of the function of biblical parables described in the following chapter which teach you to better cope with real life issues.

A Riddle in Herodotus: A typical example of a Delphic riddle was the one given to the Spartans, as narrated by Herodotus (Herodotus, *Histories of the Persian War, 1. 67).* This was a potentially helpful riddle, as the oracle told the Spartans that they would defeat the Tegeans only when they had brought back the bones of Orestes, son of Agamemnon. However, there was one catch. No one knew where Orestes had been buried. So the Spartans again inquired of Delphi and were told that Orestes was buried somewhere at Tegea, "where fettered winds reluctant roar; stroke falls on stroke, and bane on bane."

However, the Spartans could not make heads or tails out of this incomprehensible message. As Delphi seemed to weary of their repeated questioning, the Spartans had to remain satisfied with this riddling message though it left them no wiser than before. Luckily, Lichas, a young Spartan appointed for public service, was able fortuitously to decipher the riddle.