

Aphorisms, Allegories, Parables, and Fables

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Many common and well-known aphorisms, as well as longer allegories, parables, and fables, are not necessarily correct nor invariably true. Some examples:

It's always darkest before the dawn.

No, it's not. The darkest point is about halfway through the night, many hours before dawn. As dawn approaches, the skies lighten gradually. The aphorism can be defended, of course, since it doesn't explicitly state how soon dawn arrives, but the implication that things will get better is dicey nonetheless.

A barking dog never bites.

Yeah, sure. This one is totally false. Barking dogs do bite. The aphorism suggests that human blowhards may not be such formidable enemies, but the analogy is ridiculous and incorrect.

You can't cheat an honest man.

Oh no? Supposedly, an honest man will be immune to taking the bait that leads to being cheated. That's true sometimes, but not always. Honesty does not prevent naiveté, misplaced trust, or other foolishness.

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

While failure, defeat, and suffering may at times build character and contribute to maturity, the assertion that they make us "stronger" is a misnomer. Even if some disease, accident, or harmful interaction fails to kill you, it can and often does cause damage in ways that are sometimes permanent, thus weakening you.

Other examples of potentially false or misleading aphorisms include:

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.
A good beginning makes a good ending.
A jack of all trades is master of none.
A little learning is a dangerous thing.

Sometimes two aphorisms seem contradictory and describe apparently opposite truisms, each of which is potentially relevant and correct, depending on the circumstance. Rather than expressing total contradiction, these pairs usually lean in divergent directions that might seem opposite at first glance, but aren't actually mutually exclusive. They just take a different slant and may even complement each other subtly, providing alternate perspectives:

A stitch in time saves nine.

But — ***Haste makes waste.***

All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

But — ***Idle hands are the devil's playthings.***

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

But — ***Absence makes the peter wander.***

Birds of a feather flock together.

But — ***Opposites attract.***

You can't judge a book by its cover.

But — ***Where there's smoke, there's fire.***

Better safe than sorry.

But — ***Nothing ventured, nothing gained.***

He who hesitates is lost.

But — ***Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.***

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

But — ***Never too old to learn.***

Two heads are better than one.

But — ***Too many cooks in the kitchen spoil the broth.***

If at first you don't succeed, try try again.

But — ***Insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting different results.***

The pen is mightier than the sword.

But — ***Actions speak louder than words.***

Don't sweat the small stuff.

But — ***The devil's in the details.***

This too shall pass.

But — ***The more things change, the more they stay the same.***

The list goes on and on.

Are any popular aphorisms always true? Maybe, but I can't think of any. All the aphorisms I've come across describe a perspective that might apply in a particular situation, but isn't the only possibility. As in so many of life's experiences, we select our aphorisms to suit the paths we were going to choose anyway.

Allegories, parables, and fables are longer than aphorisms — imaginative stories rather than catchy phrases. An allegory is a story in which the characters represent ideas. Parables are a type of analogy or metaphor. Their stories teach an instructive lesson and sometimes a moral or religious principle. Fables are a subset of parables where animals are the characters or tell the stories. Aesop's well-known fable, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, is technically a parable, since the protagonist is human. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a fable.

Fables are the most accessible. Their metaphors and meanings are obvious. Some parables, such as many of those in the Bible, and extended allegories, such as in literature (Kafka, Brecht, etc.), are more abstruse and require hints, explanations, or deciphering to be clearly understood.

All three of these longer, story-telling formats present mythic versions of truth, but they tend to be conditional rather than universal, so — like aphorisms — they too can be false or misleading.

My all-time top candidate for an utterly false parable is that of the *Boiling Frog*. According to the story, if you place a frog in a pot of boiling water, it will immediately jump out. But if you put that same frog into a pot of tepid water, then slowly heat up the water, the frog will not notice the gradually increasing temperature and end up being boiled alive.

That's a total crock, of course. Like most creatures on earth, frogs are endowed with sophisticated temperature sensitivity, and it works beautifully, whether the temperature shift is sudden or incremental. Once the water in the pot becomes even slightly too warm for comfort, the frog will attempt to escape.

I especially love parables that illustrate the all-too-human risks of dogma in judgment, teaching instead the wiser spiritual path of embracing ambiguity and uncertainty. My two most cherished of this allegorical genre are *The Chinese Peasant Farmer* and *The Young King and the Wise Men*.

In *The Chinese Peasant Farmer*, various unexpected or unpredictable events occur that affect a farmer's life. Each time, the villagers (who are presented as fools) interpret the events as "lucky" or "unlucky" for the farmer, who staunchly resists their judgments. The circumstances in each succeeding chapter of the story contradict those of the previous chapter. The farmer's son breaks his leg, and the villagers bemoan the farmer's "bad luck" in at least temporarily losing the help of his son for working the farm. In the next chapter, however, a warlord

sweeps through the village impressing all the young men into his army, but the farmer's injured son is passed over and remains at home. The villagers unanimously deem that blessedly "fortunate" for the farmer.

In each recurring chapter, the farmer replies to the villagers' premature judgments, saying "Maybe, maybe not." The parable goes on, chapter after chapter, flipping reality each time. With each reversal, the farmer maintains his poised, calm centeredness, responding to the villager's judgments of implied praise or blame for the farmer's presumed fate by saying "Maybe, maybe not."

In *The Young King and the Wise Men*, an adolescent Prince ascends to the throne of his country upon the untimely death of his father, the former King. Wanting to be a good ruler but knowing that he lacks experience and maturity, the newly crowned King calls together all the learned wise men of his country — professors, priests, and sages — and gives them a daunting task: In five years, they must return and present him with all the Great Truths of Life condensed into a single page of wisdom. If the learned men fail in this task, he tells them, he will chop off their heads.

Five years pass, and one day the most senior of the learned men shows up at the King's palace. He hands the King a piece of paper on which is written a single word. The word is "Maybe."

I treasure both of those parables, not because they're paeans to human ignorance (that's not their lesson), but because each affirms the importance of humility in acknowledging that life's unpredictability and bewildering complexity transcends human knowledge, expectations, and understanding.

What all aphorisms, allegories, parables, and fables attempt to achieve — whether true or false, effective or not — is the revelation of a guiding principle in a way that makes remembering that principle easier for people.

While useful and sometimes even invaluable in illustrating and explaining our thoughts, feelings, and actions (and even defending or justifying them), I remind myself frequently that these forms of shorthand and story-telling are subject to life's contradictions and paradoxes. This is inherent to all human language and perhaps even to consciousness itself. What we say and write in communicating our beliefs often conceal more than the words reveal and thus can misinform as much as inform.

I close this commentary with the lyrics of the song, "*It Ain't Necessarily So*" by George Gershwin, from his 1935 Broadway musical/folk opera, *Porgy and Bess*:

*It ain't necessarily so
It ain't necessarily so
The t'ings dat yo' li'ble
To read in de Bible
It ain't necessarily so*

*Li'l David was small, but oh my!
Li'l David was small, but oh my!
He fought Big Goliath
Who lay down an' dieth!
Li'l David was small, but oh my!*

*Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale
Fo' he made his home in
Dat fish's abdomen
Oh Jonah, he lived in de whale*

*Li'l Moses was found in a stream
Li'l Moses was found in a stream
He floated on water
Till Ol' Pharaoh's daughter
She fished him, she said, from dat stream*

*Well, it ain't necessarily so
Well, it ain't necessarily so
Dey tells all you chillun
De debble's a villun
But it ain't necessarily so!*

*To get into Hebben
Don' snap for a sebben!
Live clean ! Don' have no fault!
Oh, I takes dat gospel
Whenever it's pos'ble
But wid a grain of salt*

*Methus'lah lived nine hundred years
Methus'lah lived nine hundred years
But who calls dat livin'
When no gal will give in
To no man what's nine hundred years?*

*I'm preachin' dis sermon to show
It ain't nessa, ain't nessa
Ain't nessa, ain't nessa
Ain't necessarily so!*