

Useful Fables

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Table of Contents

The Fable of the Poisonous Tree	3
What the Dead Duck Thought Before Approaching the Decoy	5
The Cartoon Character	5
Good Cop, Bad Cop	5
Disagreement of the Plugs	5
Back from the Dentist	5
In the Valley of the Blind	6
The Salmon	6
Sorry	6
The Town	6
The Prospector	7
The Skeleton	7
Round and Round	7
The Proof	7
The Egotists	8
The Failure	8
The Failures	8
The Babe Couldn't Pass the Mustard	8
A Tale of One City	9
72°	9
Don't Go	9
The Culture of the Venn Diagrammers	10
The Scheming Boy Who Cried Wolf	12
Son of the Scheming Boy Who Cried Wolf	12
The Boy Who Couldn't Tell a Dog from a Wolf	12

The Fable of the Poisonous Tree

Once upon a time there was a town with a crisis: a poisonous tree had mysteriously appeared in Central Park, planted by one unknown. Not long after, a young boy ate fruit which dropped from this tree, and, alas, subsequently became what the town referred to as a “statistic”.

The boy’s distraught parents demanded that this matter be looked into. Luckily for the town, they had a group of six wise men who also happened to be the town fathers. These town fathers met in an emergency meeting to decide how to spend the \$10,000 in the budget that had been allocated for crises of this nature. When they assembled in the room, however, they noted that *seven* men were present — there was a “new man” on board.

“Are you a wise man too?” the wise men asked.

“Yup,” replied the “new man”.

The wise men glanced at each other, but the oldest among them, the last wise man, said “Okay, what’s your suggestion?”

“Took me only a second to think up, and it’s a cheap solution too, only [the current price of a stamp] — *write your congressman!*” The “new man” beamed all over.

At this the six wise men guffawed hysterically, and kicked out the impostor. “How dare you ask us to waste [the current price of a stamp]! And don’t come back!” they yelled as he tumbled down the stairs. As they went back to the conference table, the last wise man mulled the synchronicity of sending irrelevant messages through obsolete media, but was interrupted by “Back to business!”

The first wise man tugged at his collar, because he was pretty new to this himself, but he spoke up anyway. “Here’s my idea, and it will only cost \$9,000, saving us \$1,000. The sadness of the parents has pained me greatly, and I hate seeing people suffer. What I advocate is that we spend \$1000 on books on *how to cope with suffering* for the town library, and the other \$8000 for a psychotherapist who will teach these parents how to handle their grief.” The other wise men glanced at each other, saying nothing, but wondering silently about the personnel department.

The second wise man spoke up. “I have another idea, but this is cheaper: only \$7000. The antidote to this poison is very expensive. We should supply our hospital with enough antidote for thirty kids. If one kid a month eats poisonous fruit, this budget should take us into the third fiscal year. He got a few shrugs for his troubles, and more than one bad vibe.

The third wise man then decided to speak. “I have another idea, a lot cheaper — only \$4000. Let’s build a fence around the tree. Since the kids won’t be able to get to it, we don’t have to worry about kids eating poisonous apples, and then having to provide an antidote.” It was at this point that the wise men realized why they existed in a hierarchy.

The fourth wise man spoke up. “My idea is really cheap — only \$2000. If we hire fruit pickers to get to the fruit before it drops, we don’t need to worry about poisonous fruit dropping to the ground, and then have to solve the problem of kids getting to poisonous apples.”

The fifth wise man had been silent all this time, but he could contain himself no longer. “Guys, you’re spinning your wheels. What you ought to do is dig that tree out of the ground, burn it, and pour gasoline on the roots. Not only will this cost you just under \$1000, you won’t even have to confront the problem of poisonous trees at all! This means no fruit pickers, no fence, no antidote, and no psychotherapists and books on “coping strategies”! Finally, instead of always having to be in a crisis management mode, we can use our time to do POSITIVE things, instead of ending up with *nada* since all our precious time has been spent combating NEGATIVE things!” At this the table was silent for nearly a minute. The fifth wise man then patted himself on the back, since apparently nobody else was going to!

Finally, it was the sixth wise man’s turn. As the oldest and wisest of all, everybody turned to him. Now, the sixth wise man had to pause a little bit, because the fifth wise man had come up with a damn good idea: very workable! However, with a little bit of thought, the sixth wise man was able to top it — and that, after all, was what they paid him for.

"Okay, here’s my solution. This one’s a little more expensive, since it incorporates my brother’s idea. First, we spend the \$1000, and get rid of the poisonous tree. Then, we make a small investment: \$100. That’s \$98 for a .32 caliber pistol, and \$2 for six bullets. We get some volunteers to go to the park at

the night, and wait for this guy who's going around planting poisonous trees. When we find him, we put a bullet through his head. Then we won't have to have meetings like this anymore!"

With that, they all voted and chose the fifth wise man's idea, because while these wise men were indeed wise, they were also gutless. And the meeting was adjourned.

Pity that the town did not have a few more wise men. They never did hit upon the REAL answer.

What the Dead Duck Thought Before Approaching the Decoy

“If it *looks* like a duck and *walks* like a duck and *quacks* like a duck, it’s a duck.”

The Cartoon Character

The cartoon character walked off the cliff into the air, and stayed suspended there. Suddenly, the cartoon character realized this was impossible. At that moment, he fell.

Good Cop, Bad Cop

Two men were left on earth. Man A went into a deserted store and took some food. Man B, a cop, arrested him.

Disagreement of the Plugs

Once there was a plug in the wall that had no cord, and a plug not in the wall that did have a cord. They argued over whose was the greatest tragedy.

Back from the Dentist

Back from the dentist pumped up with Novocaine, he realized that while he was no longer in pain, he could no longer taste.

In the Valley of the Blind

He went to the valley of the blind. “We can see!” they proclaimed. They pointed out that they were capable of identifying large shapes, blurred though they were.

The Salmon

The salmon knew he was driven — he was one of the top producers in his firm. He felt he was out of place; but in a strange way, his deepest urge was satisfied.

Sorry

Mr. X punched Mr. Y. “Sorry.” said Mr. X. Then he punched Mr. Y again. “Sorry.” said Mr. X.

(To conserve space, the rest of this fable will be written in pseudocode):

```
repeat until death of X or Y
  Punch (X,Y)
  SaySorry (X,Y)
end repeat
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The Town

The town had a disease spreading through it, and there was a wall around this town. The media reported, “the wall keeps out invaders” — unfortunately, the people knocking at the gates were not *invaders*, but *doctors*.

The Prospector

The prospector, searching for gold, cursed the shards of diamond that damaged his spade.

The Skeleton

A skeleton held a bird between its long bony fingers. The bird died, and eventually turned into a skeleton.

At that precise moment, the skeleton let it go.

Round and Round

A roomful of people were discussing a plan of action, but couldn't agree on which course to take. Finally, someone said, "Let's take a vote — *majority* rules."

Then someone else said, "Wait a second — who says the *majority* should rule? I say the *most enlightened* people should rule."

"Which one of these systems should we use to make our decision?" the first man asked the others. "Let's vote on it. *Majority* rules."

"No." said the second man. "The *most enlightened* people should decide what system we use to make our decision."

"And who are the *most enlightened* people?" asked the first man.

"Only the *most enlightened* people can decide that!"

"Well, I say the *majority* should rule on who is *most enlightened*."

"No — the only people qualified to rule on enlightenment are the *most enlightened*."

They're still deciding.

The Proof

A man decided that he would prove “curiosity killed the cat” by killing a curious cat.

The Egotists

A man finished climbing the highest mountain in the world, and said, “I’ve been higher than any other man in history.” And the people said, “What an egotist!”

Another man went to the lowest part of the world in a bathyscaphe. When he came up he said, “I’ve been lower than any man in history.” And the people said, “What an egotist!”

The Failure

A aimed for 20 stories, and hit 20. “I’m a *Success*,” said A.

B aimed for 40 stories, and hit 30. “I’m a *Failure*,” said B.

The Failures

A failed to climb Mt. Everest.

B failed to change the law of gravity.

C failed to raise his kid properly.

D failed to be a millionaire.

E failed to kill innocent people, as ordered.

And F, he was just a *Failure*.

Period.

The Babe Couldn't Pass the Mustard

A: Babe Ruth is a great athlete.

B: We'll see if he's a great athlete!

The Bambino was put through a series of tests — throwing and catching a football, hitting a putt, diving, swimming, broad jump, javelin, shotput, parallel bars, shooting from the foul line, dribbling, discus, figure skating, etc.

All these tests he failed at utterly and completely.

A Tale of One City

Pompeii.

Vesuvius.

Eruption.

Death.

Ruins.

Tourists.

72°

The temperature outside was 72°. Inside, the husband decided he was warm, and so turned the air conditioner down to 68°. But now his wife was cold. To counter the cold from the air conditioner, she turned the portable heater to 76°.

The husband retaliated by turning the air conditioner down to 64°. The wife responded by turning the heater to 80°. And so forth. By the time they were finished, the temperature still hovered around 72°. They quit their squabble, and the temperature remained 72°.

Don't Go

A band of boys painted a *Don't Go* sign and put it up by a road. A man in a car drove up and stayed, just as commanded. Terrible things happened there (a storm, etc.), but still he stayed.

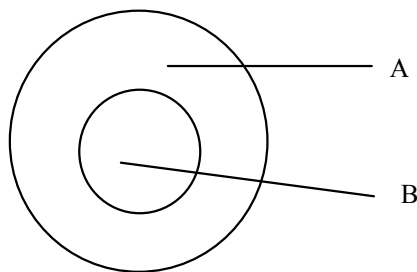
Another band of boys painted a *Don't Go* sign and put it up by a road. This time, however, the boys had uniforms with the words “government employee” plastered over the front, which the boys *made themselves*. Another man in a car drove up and stayed, just as commanded, since he believed that the boys were employees of the government, and therefore had the authority to tell him what to not do. Terrible things happened there (a storm, etc.), but still he stayed.

Finally, a third band of uniformed boys painted a *Don't Go* sign and put it up by a road. This time, however, a third man had *himself* provided the boys with their “government employee” uniforms. This third man drove up just like the other two and just like the other two, stayed just as he was commanded.

Terrible things happened there (a storm, etc.), but still he stayed.

The Culture of the Venn Diagrammers

For centuries they'd been using the following format of circles *within* circles to describe reality:

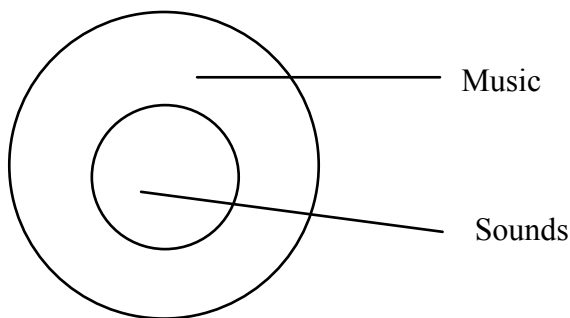


The philosopher Venn discovered this great truth (that one circle could fit inside another), and thus was labeled a “great philosopher.” (As the civilization

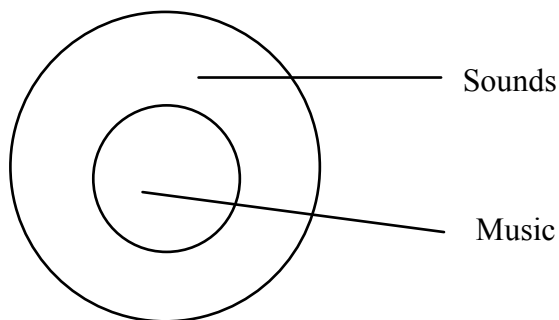
advanced, however, the idea was thought to be great because Venn was a “great philosopher,” and “great philosophers think great thoughts”).

Then one day a mutation occurred — a boy who couldn’t seem to internalize commonly accepted truths without subjecting them to the ultimate test — *seeing if they reflected reality*.

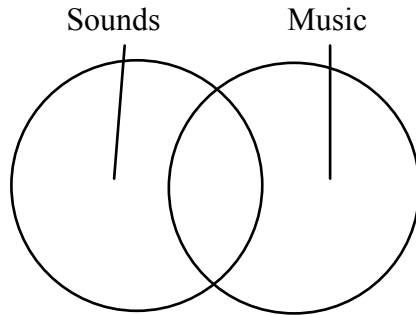
What this boy philosopher saw one day was that some sounds weren’t music (e.g., the sound of a jackhammer), and yet the Venn society had diagrammed sounds in this way:



Another philosopher would have said, “Okay, just replace the order of the words.”



But this boy philosopher had a more subversive notion. “Why not,” he asked, “have the circles *intersect*, since in reality they intersect anyway?” He drew the following:



This was revolutionary! However, the society rejected this notion of *intersection*, for no apparent reason. Soon, however, they had a reason. A Venn philosopher noted that there was no music that wasn't a sound — yet the diagram implied incorrectly that “some music is not sound.”

Big error on the boy philosopher's part! He was so exhilarated by his discovery that he forgot to make sure that it *reflected reality*. If he'd only thought a little longer on the problem with more critical eyes he would have found a pair of concepts that would have shown the new way of looking at reality to have some validity (e.g. *old people/Italians*). But he didn't do that, and for a few more centuries his example was used to prove to the children of the society that the new way of looking at the world was incorrect.

The Scheming Boy Who Cried Wolf

The boy who liked to cry wolf was upset. People were no longer coming when he would yell. Now, this young man happened to be resourceful, and a schemer as well. He decided to “prove” to the townspeople that he was telling the truth. He went to the village, and started saying things like “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “Triangles have three sides” and “Lovely day, isn’t it?” all statements considered by the townspeople to be “true.” And so the people came to the following conclusion: “He has told the truth; therefore, he is someone who tells the truth.”

The boy went out to the pasture, and then yelled “wolf,” and sure enough, the people came running.

Son of the Scheming Boy Who Cried Wolf

After the scheming boy who cried wolf died, his son decided to take up the calling. The son would cry “wolf,” but, as usual, the people stopped coming. However, the son decided to take a different tack from the old man, and decided to change his call. “Bear!” he yelled. It worked! The people came running. Why?

Because “bear” is *different* from “wolf,” therefore, *this situation is different*. The boy yelled “Bear!” until the people stopped coming, and then he started shouting “Lion!” — and guess what? The people ran up again!

This cycle extended throughout infinity.

The Boy Who Couldn’t Tell a Dog from a Wolf

A boy saw a Doberman, and cried “Wolf!” His parents looked out the window, and said “It’s only a dog.”

After dinner, the Doberman thought, “I’m going to like this neighborhood.”

The Fable of the Quicksand

“Tweet, tweet!”

Al opened his eyes. There, perched on his arm, was a little birdie.

“Hello, little birdie,” said Al. “Isn’t it a beautiful day today?”

“Yeah, real beautiful,” said the little birdie. “Just one small problem. While you’re out here basking in the beautiful sunshine in this bright green meadow, breeze blowing through your hair, romantic thoughts winding through your mind, others aren’t so fortunate.”

Al hoisted himself on his elbows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, unknown to you, there’s quicksand around here. And it just so happens that even as I speak there are 25 people in that quicksand. I suggest you try to save them.”

“But little birdie, I’m enjoying ‘pastorale bliss’!”

The little birdie was disgusted. “You egocentric slacker, you think this world was made just for you?” The birdie tossed him a rope made of hemp. “Get your butt over to that quicksand. Don’t test me. I was in *The Birds*.”

“Okay, okay!” said Al, and off he went to the quicksand, sulking, a very reluctant hero. He arrived at the quicksand. There they were, the hapless sinkers, all 25 of them.

Al was curious. “Hey, you guys, what are you doing in the quicksand?” he tersely asked.

Simultaneously, all replied: “We each have our own reasons!”

“Hmm, *individualists*,” thought Al. He thought it ironic that their “individual,” different, reasons put them all in the same mess, but then thought, “enough pondering.” His cavalry mission awaited!

“Okay, you people, I’m here to help you. Grab this rope!” He threw the rope out onto the surface, and waited. And waited . . . And waited . . .

No one was grabbing the rope! Instead, they stared blankly at him. Al was puzzled.

“Hey, what’s up?” asked Al. At first the people were silent. Finally, the replies came, one after the other, all different — all *individual*.

Bartholomew (a/k/a “young master Bartholomew”) was the first to reply. He said, “Hey, that rope’s made of *hemp* — I want a rope made of *velvet!*” Alas, no velvet rope was available. He sank down into the powdery liquid, and no trace remained of young master Bartholomew. 24 to go!

Curly said, “Hey, I’m not in quicksand — I’m on solid ground!” He too sank — *ploop!*

Don said, “If I grab the rope, I’ll drown.” Well, he got the “drown” part right.

Edna proclaimed, “I have a right not to grab the rope.” Absolutely correct. *Plup!*

Frank stated, “This rope idea won’t work.” Unfortunately, Frank didn’t have time to realize that it was *not* grabbing the rope that “wouldn’t work,” except faster! At this point, Al was beginning to cock his head, kind of like “Nipper,” the *his-master’s-voice* dog.

According to Gene, “I’m busy. I don’t have *time* to grab the rope.” It’s amazing what a lack of time will do for one’s future!

Harry muttered, “No energy.” He didn’t say any more words because he didn’t have the energy. He lost the bout with gravity in one round.

Irving said, “I don’t need to grab the rope, because I knew someone who didn’t grab the rope, and they lived.” Indeed he did. That slurping sound you just heard was Irving sinking fast.

Jack shook his head, and remarked “Those people are crazy!” Al was hopeful — his mind had been snarling at the little birdie for interrupting his bliss. Jack had the right idea, but, unfortunately, didn’t *act* on his insight. He failed to counter his downward motion with upward motion, and so he too joined his former companions.

Kerry was unconvincible: “How do I know that’s a rope? How do I know that there isn’t poison on the rope? How do I know what I’m going to be pulled *to*? Prove that’s a rope!” Annoyed, Al dipped into his bag of proofs, and provided the *proof*, complete with logical arguments, physics formulas, and schematic diagrams. Unfortunately, Kerry was wearing sunglasses, and her ears were filled with quicksand, so she could not receive the messages Al was sending. Kerry yelled, “you haven’t proved it yet!” Down the briny deep descended she.

It was at this moment that Al had one of those all-too-rare epiphanies. Like a flash, Al suddenly realized that *ignorance* was not merely a lack of knowledge that could be corrected by “fixing a hole.” Now, he realized that the word he had seen as a *noun* was actually a *verb* — *ignore-ance*! Kerry’s sunglasses and quicksand-plugged ears were mere irrelevancies; Al now knew that even the most beautifully conceived and designed arguments and charts would be *ignored*. These individuals simply weren’t going to budge from their positions; at least, not of their own accord. His subsequent experience confirmed his intuition.

Larry said, “I’m not going to grab the rope — it will break!” *Slort!*

Moe was a skeptic of a different sort. “Prove I’m in quicksand,” he said. Since Moe knew nothing about physics, nor geology, Al saw no point providing proof. Moe sunk low.

“I *like* being in quicksand,” said Nettie. “It’s so warm and comforting, like a jacuzzi. My beautician uses it as a mud pack, to keep those nasty wrinkles at bay.” Hmm, a savvy beauty tip! From then to eternity, Nettie’s face was as smooth as a baby’s bottom.

Oscar said, “I’m going to pray to G-d. He’ll save me.” Unfortunately for Oscar, he assumed that G-d was his *servant*, not his *partner* — very egocentric, and, as it turned out, inaccurate.

Paul was asleep, so he didn’t say anything. He snored right up to the moment his nostrils hit the surface, and that was the final snore the earth would hear from Paul.

Qwarky, the space visitor, said “My grandparents didn’t grab any rope, and they didn’t die in quicksand.” Qwarky, your grandparents weren’t in quicksand!

Ralph was depressed about what he perceived as the *inevitability* of being in quicksand — sobbing, he never looked up at the rope. He went down bawling.

Serena (a pretty name!) said “My nails will break on that rope.” Her ferocious fashion sense was quickly quicksand quelled.

Ted “knew” a technique you could use that would let you live under quicksand, and was “sure” it would work. It didn’t.

Ub said, “I don’t need to grab the rope, because someone will come along and pull us out.” In your dreams, Ub.

Vinnie said, “grabbing a rope is the lazy way out.” Instead, he took the lazy way in.

Walter said, after a discussion with the others still alive, “we have made the decision not to consider the rope at this time.” Very formal, Walter, you ex-human!

Xerox (the copycat!) said, “I’m going to go with the flow.” He did.

Yenta said, “Let’s establish a committee, and hold hearings. After six months, we’ll put out a report with our recommendations.” Alas, by this time, nearly all the potential committee members were historoids.

Zeno had been listening to all this with a combination of amusement and horror. However, while he was aware of the foolishness of the arguments that were employed, he didn’t raise his voice in protest — after all, “every man for himself.” He grabbed Al’s rope, and was about to be pulled to safety, but then discovered something horrible — unbeknownst to him, his ankle had been chained to the others’! Unfortunately, Zeno was not strong enough to resist the collective weight of his dead brethren, and he sank too. Suddenly, silence.

The surface of the quicksand was once again still. The storm which had so disturbed the tranquility of the pasture had passed.

Al, disgusted, dropped the rope, and returned home to continue his interrupted reverie.

And the little birdie? By this time he had flown the coop, out of the cavalry business for good.

Moral:

Quicksand is nature’s way of weeding out poor thinkers.