



THE EVOLUTION OF STORYTELLING: A PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY INTO NARRATIVE AND MEANING

LARRY EBIKEKEME WADA

Department of General Studies,
School of Foundational Studies, Bayelsa State College of Health Technology, Bayelsa State.
wadalarry@gmail.com
08066565299

WINIKONUMO LEAH OGBARA

Department of General Studies,
School of Foundational Studies, Bayelsa State College of Health Technology, Bayelsa State.
winnieog65@gmail.com
08032646641

and

LADEBI OSULUKU OTORO

Department of General Studies,
School of Foundational Studies, Bayelsa State College of Health Technology, Bayelsa State.
ebiladei83@gmail.com
07069512216

Abstract

This study explores the evolution of storytelling as a profound philosophical practice that extends beyond entertainment and cultural preservation. From its origins in oral traditions to its current expressions in digital media, storytelling has remained central to how humans interpret experience, construct identity, and transmit moral values. Drawing on key philosophical insights from thinkers such as Paul Ricoeur, Martha Nussbaum, Hayden White, and Chinua Achebe, the research demonstrates that storytelling is not merely a cultural artifact but a vital tool for philosophical inquiry. It engages ethical, epistemological, metaphysical, and political questions by shaping how individuals and societies understand truth, time, memory, and agency. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive methodology, analyzing texts from classical philosophy, African oral traditions, and contemporary media theory. It highlights the significance of storytelling in shaping moral consciousness and amplifying marginalized voices, particularly through feminist and postcolonial perspectives. In doing so, it challenges the long-standing philosophical bias that separates narrative from reason. The study concludes by recommending a broader integration of storytelling into philosophical discourse and education, emphasizing its role in fostering empathy, critical thinking, and cross-cultural dialogue. Ultimately, the research affirms that the evolution of storytelling mirrors the evolution of human thought and ethical engagement.

Keywords: Ethical, Evolution, Narrative, Philosophical Enquiry, Storytelling

Introduction

Storytelling has always been an important part of human life. It helps people interpret their experiences and share meaning across generations. From early cave drawings to ancient myths, stories have been more than entertainment; they are powerful tools for preserving knowledge, passing on values, and shaping collective memory. Achebe (1975) explains that in African oral traditions, stories enable societies to recreate themselves by transmitting wisdom across generations. Similarly, Bruner (1990) shows that humans are naturally drawn to stories as a way of making sense of the world. These insights reveal that storytelling has always had a close connection with philosophy, especially in relation to questions of meaning, existence, and human action.



However, in spite of its importance, storytelling has often been marginalized in traditional philosophy. Analytic thinkers who privilege propositional logic and abstract reasoning tend to regard narrative as a secondary or even unreliable mode of inquiry (White 1973). This tension highlights the need to distinguish between narrative as a cultural practice that is rooted in rituals, traditions, and community identity and narrative as a philosophical method of inquiry that helps generate meaning and ethical reflection. While some scholars dismiss stories as anecdotal or imprecise, others argue that they offer unique epistemic authority by embodying lived experience in ways that formal logic cannot.

The rise of digital technologies further complicates this debate. Storytelling is no longer confined to oral traditions or written texts; it now thrives in digital memory, social media feeds, video games, and virtual spaces. Floridi (2014) remarks that these new environments create an “infosphere” where human and digital identities merge, raising philosophical questions about authenticity, misinformation, and the ethics of self-representation. The circulation of stories in these spaces can build solidarity but can also spread harmful narratives, making the ethical stakes of digital storytelling especially urgent.

Cultural diversity also reveals storytelling’s richness. In African traditions, griots function not just as entertainers but as custodians of moral and political wisdom (Soyinka 1990). Indigenous practices in North America, such as the use of oral stories as “cosmic maps” of responsibility (Swann 1994), demonstrate that narratives guide communities through both metaphysical and practical concerns. These examples show that storytelling is never only art; it is also a philosophical practice that bridges ethics, culture, and knowledge.

This study explores the evolution of storytelling from oral traditions to written texts and, most recently, to digital media. Drawing on philosophers such as Ricoeur (1984), Nussbaum (1990), and MacIntyre (1981), it investigates how stories reveal deep truths, cultivate empathy, and shape identity. At the same time, it engages opposing views, especially from analytic philosophy, that question the epistemic authority of narrative. Methodologically, the research is qualitative and interpretive, integrating philosophical writings, literary theory, and cultural perspectives from both Western and non-Western contexts. The central argument is that storytelling is not just an artistic form but a vital philosophical method. It enables people to reflect deeply on their experiences, confront ethical dilemmas, and connect with others across time and culture. By foregrounding storytelling as philosophy, this study recommends greater interdisciplinary attention to its role in moral education, intercultural dialogue, and digital ethics. In a rapidly changing world, stories remain one of the most enduring ways humans understand themselves, challenge dominant narratives, and imagine better futures.

Origins of Storytelling in Oral Cultures

Storytelling began long before the invention of writing. In early societies across Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, people used spoken words, gestures, music, and performances to communicate their histories and values. These stories passed knowledge from one generation to the next, taught moral lessons, preserved cultural traditions, and built collective identity. Finnegan (2012) argues that oral storytelling should not be dismissed as a lesser version of written literature; instead, it represents a complex and meaningful tradition that relies on memory, performance, and communal participation. Comparing oral and written traditions reveals distinct strengths and weaknesses. While written texts preserve fixed versions of arguments, oral narratives allow for flexibility, adaptation, and communal interpretation—features that give them their own epistemological power.

In Africa, oral storytelling traditions were highly esteemed. Storytellers, often known as griots, served as historians, poets, musicians, and political advisers. They transmitted moral truths and communal wisdom through proverbs, folktales, and epics. Soyinka (1990) highlights that African oral narratives are deeply philosophical, conveying symbolic meanings that provoke ethical reflection. A well-known example is *The Epic of Sundiata*, which teaches values such as courage, resilience, and leadership. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) emphasizes that oral traditions in Africa were never “mere entertainment” but social instruments for teaching right and wrong, shaping identity, and grounding communities in moral order. Beyond Africa, oral traditions flourished in Asia and Oceania. In India, the great epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* were transmitted orally for centuries before being written down, functioning as moral and spiritual guides for entire societies. In Oceania, Aboriginal Australian “Dreamtime” stories connected people to their land, ancestors, and cosmology, framing both ethics and



ecological responsibility. These examples show that oral storytelling was not confined to local folklore but served as the backbone of cultural, philosophical, and spiritual life across diverse civilizations.

In North America, Indigenous peoples used stories as “cosmic maps” to link human communities with the universe. Swann (1994) explains that Native American narratives served as guides through time, space, and moral responsibility, often shared during rituals, seasonal gatherings, or healing ceremonies.

Similarly, Ong (2002) notes that oral cultures developed strategies such as rhythm, repetition, and communal participation to preserve stories accurately despite the absence of writing. These methods also counter critiques that oral traditions lack reliability or precision. While some philosophers argue that oral storytelling cannot sustain the complexity of systematic reasoning, its resilience across millennia demonstrates that oral narratives are equally capable of transmitting profound philosophical, moral, and cosmological ideas. Importantly, oral storytelling is not just a relic of the past. Contemporary forms such as spoken word poetry, community memory projects, and digital storytelling show that oral traditions continue to shape identity and ethics today. Digital platforms now allow oral narratives to circulate globally, blurring the boundary between orality and literacy. This continuity underscores that oral storytelling is not only the foundation of written literature and philosophical thinking but also a living, evolving practice that adapts to new cultural and technological contexts. In summary, oral storytelling has always been central to human life. It is a dynamic mode of inquiry and expression that, when compared with written traditions, shows distinct epistemological strengths. Far from being unreliable or inferior, oral traditions reveal how humans across cultures and times have used stories to search for meaning, guide moral choices, and sustain collective memory.

The Shift to Written Narratives

The invention of writing marked a major turning point in the history of storytelling. When written language was developed, people could record stories and keep them for a long time without relying on memory. Unlike oral storytelling, which needed performance and audience participation, writing allowed for more detailed plots, careful thinking, and deeper analysis. It also made it possible for stories to reach wider audiences across time and cultures. One of the earliest examples of written storytelling is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, written on clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia around 2100 BCE. This story combined myth, history, and moral lessons. It has survived for thousands of years because it was written down. Similarly, Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, which began as oral poems, were later written down and became key texts in Western literature. West (2003) comments that to convert oral stories into written forms can change them into texts that could be studied from time to time.

The move from oral to written storytelling also brought new philosophical ideas. In *Phaedrus*, Plato warned that writing might harm memory and reduce the value of face-to-face discussion. He believed that written words could not replace the live exchange of ideas between people. Plato wrote, “Writing will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it” (*Phaedrus*, 275a; Plato, 1997). Still, Plato used writing himself to share his dialogues and preserve them for future generations. While Plato had concerns, his student Aristotle saw writing in a more positive way. In *Poetics*, Aristotle analyzed the parts of a good story such as plot, characters, and themes. He showed how storytelling could bring about emotional and moral understanding (Aristotle 1996). For Aristotle, writing helped organize knowledge and allowed philosophy and literature to deal with deep questions about ethics, politics, and human life.

Other ancient cultures also used writing to protect and shape their storytelling traditions. In Egypt, *The Instructions of Ptahhotep* shared moral lessons through stories. In early China, Confucian texts like *The Analects* used short stories and sayings to teach important ideas about society and values. These examples show that writing helped move storytelling from spoken word to written wisdom, often with powerful cultural and philosophical impact. Writing also changed how stories were told and received. In oral settings, storytellers were present and could adjust their stories for the audience. In written storytelling, the author is not there, and readers must interpret the story on their own. Derrida (1976) explains that writing creates a distance between the message and the speaker. This space allows readers to discover new meanings and understand stories in personal ways. To sum up, the shift to written narratives added new depth to storytelling. It helped preserve culture, build complex ideas, and expand

the way stories are told. Writing did not replace oral storytelling, but it created a lasting form of communication that continues to shape how people think and share meaning.

Storytelling in Classical Philosophy

From ancient Greece through the Enlightenment, philosophers understood that storytelling was more than just entertainment as it was also a powerful way to explore deep philosophical ideas. Stories helped explain complex topics such as ethics, reality, and politics in ways that logical arguments alone sometimes could not. Classical philosophers often combined clear reasoning with the emotional and imaginative power of storytelling to teach and reflect on the human experience. Plato was one of the first philosophers to use stories to express philosophical ideas. In *The Republic*, he shares the famous “Allegory of the Cave,” a symbolic story that explains how people can be trapped in illusion and what it means to find truth and enlightenment (Plato, 1997, pp. 1132–1137, 514a–520a). Although Plato was critical of poets and storytellers in society—because he feared they could mislead citizens—he also understood that stories can make abstract ideas easier to grasp. As Annas (1981) explains, Plato used myths as a powerful way to combine emotion and logic, helping readers better understand his arguments.

Plato’s student Aristotle took storytelling even further in his work *Poetics*. He focused on how a well-told story, especially a tragedy, could produce *catharsis*, a release of emotions like pity and fear, leading to personal and moral growth (Aristotle, trans. 1996, 1449b–1450b). For Aristotle, stories reflect human actions, helping people think about ethical choices and their consequences. Nussbaum (1990) builds on Aristotle’s ideas by saying that literature puts readers inside the moral struggles of characters, helping them grow in empathy and moral awareness. Other classical thinkers also valued storytelling. The Roman philosopher Cicero believed that storytelling was a key part of persuasive speech. In *De Oratore*, he writes that good speakers must connect with their audience’s emotions and imagination, making stories a central tool in both philosophy and politics (Cicero 1942, 2.51). Stoic thinkers such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius also used short stories, personal reflections, and imagined conversations to teach about self-control, resilience, and the nature of freedom.

In the medieval and early modern periods, storytelling remained important in philosophy. Augustine of Hippo wrote *Confessions* as a personal story that explored memory, sin, and God’s grace. His storytelling helped connect philosophical ideas with personal experience. Boethius, in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, used a mix of dialogue and poetry to reflect on fate and happiness. Wetzel (1992) notes that Augustine’s use of narrative shaped Christian philosophy by showing how personal stories could support deep thinking about faith and ethics. Overall, these early philosophers showed that stories could do more than entertain. Through allegories, myths, and personal stories, they explored questions about truth, justice, and the meaning of life. Their work laid the foundation for the idea that storytelling is a serious and meaningful way to do philosophy—a view that still influences modern thinkers today.

Storytelling and Human Identity

From ancient Greece through the Enlightenment, philosophers wrestled with the place of storytelling in philosophical inquiry. Stories were never simply entertainment; they carried the power to illuminate questions about ethics, politics, and reality. Yet philosophy often positioned itself as the pursuit of clear, rational argument, creating a productive tension between logical analysis and narrative imagination. This tension is visible in how classical thinkers alternately resisted, critiqued, and embraced storytelling as a tool for expressing and examining philosophical ideas. Plato is one of the earliest philosophers to demonstrate this ambivalence. In *The Republic*, he narrates the “Allegory of the Cave,” a myth that powerfully illustrates the movement from illusion to truth and enlightenment (Plato, 1997, pp. 1132–1137, 514a–520a). At the same time, Plato was wary of poets and storytellers, fearing their power to seduce citizens away from reason. As Annas (1981) observes, this duality shows how Plato both distrusted and relied upon myth: he rejected storytelling as dangerous but also deployed it as a vehicle for making his philosophical claims vivid and accessible.

Aristotle, Plato’s student, gave narrative a more systematic role in philosophy. In *Poetics*, he argued that tragedy produces catharsis, a purging of pity and fear that contributes to moral development

(Aristotle 1996, 1449b–1450b). For Aristotle, stories are not distractions from rational inquiry but structured reflections of human action, guiding audiences to consider ethical choices and consequences. Later, Nussbaum (1990) built on this insight, showing how literature immerses readers in moral struggles, deepening empathy and moral awareness in ways that abstract reasoning cannot. Other classical thinkers contributed to this dialogue between story and philosophy. Cicero, in *De Oratore*, insisted that persuasive speech must appeal to the audience's imagination and emotions, with storytelling at its core (Cicero 1942, 2.51). Stoics such as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius used brief anecdotes, imagined dialogues, and personal reflections to teach lessons about resilience, self-mastery, and the nature of freedom. These narratives were not just illustrative but central to their ethical pedagogy.

The medieval and early modern periods carried this dialogue forward. Augustine's *Confessions* is a personal narrative that integrates philosophy and theology, using memory and self-examination to probe questions of sin, grace, and identity. Wetzel (1992) emphasizes that Augustine's narrative method shaped Christian philosophy by demonstrating that personal storytelling can serve as a vehicle for rigorous thought. Similarly, Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* blended dialogue with poetry, showing how narrative and reason together could address profound questions of fate, suffering, and happiness. Rather than seeing storytelling as the "foundation" of philosophy, these examples reveal a long-standing dialogue and tension between narrative and rational analysis. Stories have been alternately distrusted and embraced, but they have consistently remained part of philosophy's method of inquiry. They remind us that philosophy is not only about abstract reasoning but also about lived experience, imagination, and the ways humans make meaning through narrative. This ongoing interplay continues to shape philosophical debates to this day.

Contemporary Forms of Storytelling

In the 21st century, storytelling has grown in new and exciting ways due to digital media, artificial intelligence, and interactive technology. These changes have opened up new ways for people to tell stories, including blogs, podcasts, video games, social media, virtual reality etc. Storytelling is no longer limited to books or oral traditions, instead it now includes many digital platforms that allow people from all over the world to connect, share ideas, and express their identities. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Facebook have made it easier for anyone to become a storyteller. This has given more people the chance to share their voices, challenge dominant ideas, and create collective memories. Jenkins (2006) calls this a "participatory culture," where users both consume and create content. He explains that people often tell stories across multiple platforms, sometimes in non-linear or collaborative ways. This kind of storytelling is interactive, decentralized, and socially connected.

Philosophers are also thinking about how digital storytelling changes how people understand themselves. Coeckelbergh (2011) argues that the way we interact online—through social media profiles and algorithmic feeds—affects how we see ourselves. He suggests that digital storytelling can be fragmented and performative, raising questions about privacy, identity, and what it means to be authentic. Similarly, Floridi (2014) describes the "infosphere" as a world where digital and real-life experiences mix, making it harder to separate online from offline identities. New technologies like virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) are also changing how stories are told. VR allows people to step inside a story, making them feel as if they are part of it. Ryan (2015) explains this as "narrative presence"—the feeling of being emotionally and physically involved in a story (p. 101). On the other hand, AI text tools and game engines can now generate stories automatically, raising philosophical questions about authorship and creativity. Can a machine truly tell a story? What does this mean for human imagination?

Even with these new forms, traditional storytelling is still important. In many African, Indigenous, and rural communities, elders continue to tell stories using proverbs, folktales, and epics. These stories pass down wisdom, values, and cultural identity. Nwachukwu-Agbada (2010) explains that African oral traditions are strong and adaptable, and they are often combined with digital tools to engage younger generations while keeping cultural roots intact. Rather than replacing older forms, digital storytelling often works alongside them. For example, some African storytellers use the internet to share oral



histories and reach audiences across the globe. This shows that storytelling is flexible and continues to change with culture and technology. Today's storytelling is diverse and constantly evolving. Whether through virtual spaces or face-to-face storytelling, its purpose remains the same: to help people make sense of their lives, connect with others, and build community. Stories continue to be one of the most powerful ways people share identity, values, and meaning in a changing world.

Philosophical Implications of Storytelling in Digital Narrative

Storytelling has always been more than entertainment; it is a way of making sense of the world and transmitting values across generations. Walter J. Ong reminds us that "orality is not simply an alternative to literacy, but a mode of thought and expression with its own rules" (*Orality and Literacy* 8). Storytelling, in this sense, shapes how communities think, remember, and interpret their existence. Karin Barber likewise observes that in African societies, "texts and performances are the media through which people engage in philosophical reflection, interpret social life, and express their collective identity" (*The Anthropology of Texts* 27). Western philosophy has long acknowledged the power of stories. Plato used myths such as the allegory of the cave—not to entertain but to reveal truths about justice and reality (*Republic* Waterfield 2007). Aristotle saw tragedy as a medium through which humans could confront "fear and pity" and achieve catharsis (*Poetics* Heath 1996, p. 37). Paul Ricoeur advances this further, stating that "time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative" (*Time and Narrative* 52). For Martha Nussbaum, literature is not just a cultural artifact but a moral resource: "stories cultivate our ability to imagine the lives of others and to recognize their dignity" (*Love's Knowledge* 95).

African and Indigenous storytelling traditions echo these philosophical concerns. Isidore Okpewho argues that "African oral literature represents an intellectual tradition that confronts questions of morality, destiny, and the human condition" (*African Oral Literature* 18). J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada demonstrates that Igbo folktales are "not idle fictions but moral allegories that instruct and sustain communal values" ("Igbo Folktales" 110). Karin Barber makes a similar point when analyzing Yoruba proverbs, noting that sayings such as *iwà l'èwà* ("character is beauty") reveal "an ethical philosophy in miniature, articulating the primacy of virtue over appearance" (*The Anthropology of Texts* 119). Comparable insights appear in Indigenous studies: Keith Basso describes Western Apache stories as "moral compasses" that "place listeners in a moral landscape and direct them toward responsible living" (*Wisdom Sits in Places* 72). The digital age adds another layer of complexity. Mark Coeckelbergh notes that "when stories are mediated by algorithms, we must ask whether they still foster empathy and critical thought, or whether they risk reducing narrative to consumption" (*Human Being @ Risk* 141). Luciano Floridi goes further, arguing that the digital infosphere reshapes reality itself, as "to live is to live in the infosphere, and narratives produced there condition our moral and epistemic horizons" (*The Fourth Revolution* 94). These reflections show that new technologies do not remove the philosophical significance of storytelling; rather, they intensify it.

At the same time, oral traditions have not vanished but adapted. Barber observes that "the oral is not superseded by the written or the digital; it survives and coexists, finding new channels of expression" (*The Anthropology of Texts* 214). Nwachukwu-Agbada similarly argues that African folktales have proven resilient, "migrating into print, classrooms, and even digital archives, without losing their moral function" ("Igbo Folktales" 115). These perspectives underscore that storytelling traditions, whether ancient or modern, continue to guide ethical reasoning and cultural continuity. In sum, storytelling mirrors the evolution of human creativity and philosophy. As Nussbaum affirms, "narrative is a bridge between the world of fact and the world of value" (*Love's Knowledge* 105). From the fireside folktale to the algorithmic story on digital platforms, narratives remain indispensable in shaping human identity, ethics, and visions of a just future.

Conclusion

From the fireside tales of elders to the immersive worlds of digital media, storytelling has always been central to how human beings seek meaning. Philosophers as different as Plato, Aristotle, Ricoeur, and Nussbaum agree that stories are not simply diversions but vehicles of knowledge, ethics, and self-understanding. They provide a framework for grappling with suffering, cultivating empathy, and



organizing human action within broader questions of justice and responsibility. This confirms that storytelling is an intellectual as well as a cultural practice. African and Indigenous traditions reinforce this philosophical dimension. Scholars such as Isidore, Nwachukwu-Agbada and Karin have shown that proverbs, folktales, and oral poetry are forms of moral reasoning, transmitting communal wisdom and shaping identity across generations. Likewise, Keith Basso's study of Western Apache storytelling reveals how narratives function as "moral landscapes," guiding listeners toward ethical conduct. These traditions show that philosophy has never been confined to written texts but has always thrived in the spoken word, the shared performance, and the collective memory.

The digital age does not diminish this role but transforms it. As Mark Coeckelbergh and Luciano Floridi argue, algorithmic and virtual narratives demand new reflection on truth, empathy, and responsibility. The integration of traditional oral forms into digital archives, classrooms, and media further demonstrates that storytelling remains adaptive, ensuring continuity even in times of rapid change. In sum, storytelling is both a mirror and a guide for human life. It mirrors our search for meaning, our struggle with moral dilemmas, and our desire for justice. At the same time, it guides communities toward ethical living, empathy, and imaginative visions of a better world. As long as human beings continue to ask questions about existence and morality, storytelling will remain inseparably bound to philosophy, serving as one of its most enduring and transformative companions.

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