

The Ethics and Politics of the 'Noble Lie' (Plato, *Republic* 414b7-5d1)

Three Questions:

- What exactly is said *within* the Lie, *by* the Myth? (sections I-III)
- What is Plato saying *about* the Lie in calling it a lie? (IV)
- What political ideas does Plato express *through* the institution of the Lie? (V-VI)

I. The Passage: see other handout for text and translation

II. What the Lie Is Not:

**IIa.** The closest thing to a standard interpretation is what we might call the *Farabian*<sup>1</sup> reading. The Farabian reading involves three claims:

- (i) the primary *addressee* of the Lie is the third class of the Just City, the 'moneymakers'
- (ii) the central content or *message* of the Lie is the model of the metals (section 4a)
- (iii) the *function* of the Lie is the manufacture of consent: getting the moneymakers to accept Guardian rule. The arguments which warrant the rule of the Guardians cannot be understood by the third class; hence recourse to myth is necessary.

[Examples: R. Nettleship (1897): "What will be the basis on which patriotism (the sense of belonging to a community) and submission to authority will rest in the minds of the bulk of the community? Plato's answer, when rationalized, comes to this, that the mass of the people really cannot understand the reason of these principles, and... therefore they can best be maintained by being associated with a myth, a story of past events.... the rest are to be encouraged by a myth to hold a belief about the order of the community, which is somewhat analogous to the belief in the divine right of kings." (R. Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1968: first published 1897), 134.

And D. Allen (2013): "The point of the noble lie is to tell citizens a story that will cause them to act as they would if they were in fact able to cognize the truth of justice. The noble lie does not give citizens access to the metaphysical claim that justice lies in ensuring that each part of the soul does its job and is properly related to the other parts of the soul. But it provides a basis for the ... social stability that would result from universal acceptance of Socrates' metaphysical truth. The noble lie... will be pragmatically efficacious for the whole citizenry, implanting principles and rules for action that could just as well have flowed from the metaphysical beliefs that Socrates propounds but which he is unable to bring a whole citizenry to see through dialectic." (*Why Plato Wrote* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 66; cf. likewise J. Thakkar, *Plato As Critical Theorist* (Cambridge MA, 2013), 178-9)]

**IIb.** Against the Farabian reading:

- Claim (i) is false to the text. See the underlined passages in sections 1a, 1b, and 4c of the passage: all specify that the primary audience -- 'first' [*prôton*] or 'above all' [*malista*] or both -- are the Auxiliaries and/or Guardians ('Rulers'). Likewise the commands in 3a and 4c are necessarily intended for the Rulers.
- Claim (ii) represents at most a small part of the content of the Myth: it neglects the divine command in 4c, which the model of the metals is used to ground.
- Without claims (i)-(ii), there is no reason at all to accept claim (iii).

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<sup>1</sup> I am not attributing this reading to al-Farabi, but only noting the resemblance: the true ruler, according to Farabi, "truly understands reality and its underlying principles and is able to verify her knowledge demonstratively. However, she also has the ability to 'translate' her knowledge into metaphors and symbolic representations and present them, by means of rhetorical devices, in a convincing fashion." -- N. Germann, 'Al-Farabi's Philosophy of Society and Religion', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-farabi-soc-rel/>

- Moreover, on the Farabian reading the Lie is not really a lie at all, as Socrates tells us it is, since (metaphorically interpreted) the model of the metals is true.

Conclusion: the Farabian reading is not really about Plato's text, but projects modern worries about elitism, legitimation, and the consent of the governed.

### III. What Does the Myth Say?

**IIIa.** Note the argumentative structure: the story of the earthborn (2) supports the first injunctions (3); together with the model of the metals (4a), these support the principle of recirculation (4b) ('So, because...'). And (4b) in turn supports 4c ('Hence...'), the divine command, which is in turn reinforced by the oracle (5). So:

- the whole Myth depends, either directly or indirectly, on (2) the story of the earthborn.
- the whole Myth leads up to and is organized around (4c), the divine command.

So what the Myth is centrally *about* is therefore what (4c) is about, namely *social mobility*.<sup>2</sup> The principal message of the Myth is that the 'greatest imperative' for the ruling elite of a Just City is ensuring reliable, meritocratic social mobility.

**IIIb.** But *why* is social mobility so important? It is a necessary condition for a Just City in at least two ways:

*Social Mobility and the general principle of justice:* Without social mobility, some people will practise the wrong occupations and the Just City will not instantiate the appropriate work principle, which Plato takes to be constitutive of political justice: it will not in fact *be* a Just City.

*Meritocracy and the special principle of justice:* Without social mobility, there can be no *meritocracy*: the most important jobs will not go to the people best suited for them. And without the best people as Rulers, Guardians, and Auxiliaries, the Just City will collapse, as when the oracle is fulfilled in Book VIII (546c-7a).

**IIIc.** Still, why is social mobility singled out by the Lie as the *greatest* imperative for the Rulers? A hypothesis: the profound power of nepotism/homophily (which will unfortunately be *reinforced* by the measures taken in Book V to create solidarity within the elite) means that the task will be psychologically extraordinarily difficult for them.

### [[ IV. Why is the Noble Lie a Lie? Lying in the Republic

**IVa.** In Book II of the *Republic*, Plato has distinguished two classes of lies (382a-e, cf. 377aff., 389b-d):

*True Lies* [*to hōs alēthōs pseudos*] (382a-c): are located in the soul (ie, are beliefs), are about the most important matters [*ta kuriōtata*], are never accepted voluntarily, and are always hateful.

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<sup>2</sup> This generally goes unnoticed, but see C. Rowett, 'Why the Philosopher Kings Will Believe the Noble Lie', *OSAP* 50 (2016), 67-100), C. Arruzza, 'The Private and the Common in Plato's *Republic*', *History of Political Thought* 32:2 (2011), 215-33 at 226-7; and D. El Murr ('L'Amitié (*philia*) dans le système sociale de la République', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 110:4 (2012), 586-604 at 601-2.

*Useful Lies* (382c-e, 389b-d): lies which are "useful, so as not to be deserving of hatred" (382e8), are told in speech and fall into three sub-categories:

(i) *lies to enemies*

(ii) *apotropaic lies*: told "as a preventative, like a drug, for so-called friends when from madness or folly they attempt to do something bad" (382c).

(iii) *legend-lies*: stories about the remote past: "told because we don't know where the truth about ancient things lies -- likening the lie to the truth as best we can, don't we also make it useful?" (382d, cf. 377aff., 382d)

**IVb. The Noble Lie is a *useful lie*:** "one of those lies that come into being in case of need, of which we were just now speaking" (414b8-9).

**But (despite some misleading similarities) the Myth does *not* fit into class (iii):**

- it is a story about the *present*, at least for the first generation of Auxiliaries, and probably for every generation after that (cf. Rowett 2016) -- not the ancient past.
- it does *not* tell a 'likely story' where knowledge cannot be had. So the exculpation available for genuine cases of (iii) is *not* available for the Myth.

**The Myth *does* fit category (ii), the apotropaic lie:**

- it is told to friends, in order to prevent their irrational doing of 'a bad thing'
- that bad thing involves a failure to recognise true friends and kin, as in the canonical scenario for the apotropaic lie (cf. *Rep.* 331c and the stories of Ajax and Heracles).

Might the Myth also be a True Lie?

- the categories True Lie and Useful Lie are orthogonal to each other, and it cannot be excluded that a Useful Lie might instill a True Lie in the souls of its audience. To count as a True Lie, a Myth would have to instill importantly false beliefs about intelligible realities, not merely about contingent historical or physical facts. If the Myth *is* a True Lie, this would explain why Plato presents it *as* a Lie, when he could have used the non-deprecating term 'myth'. But what in the Myth is importantly false?

## V. The Myth as Ideology:

**Va.** Read metaphorically or allegorically, the Myth unfolds in three theses, which together ground the divine command in (4c):

*The story of the earthborn* (2) says: We are all born from and bound to this place as our mother, and to each other as brothers and sisters: ie *our community is given by nature*;

*The model of the metals* (4a) says: We have by divine creation different kinds of soul, suited to different work and different political roles;

*The recirculation principle* (4b) says: But since we are all akin (as per the story of the earthborn), these natures are not transmitted reliably from parents to children; there is some recirculation with each new generation.

**Vb.** If the Myth is a lie, one of these claims must be false. Which one could it be?

- the model of the metals, is true, as is the principle of recirculation
- but the story of the earthborn, allegorically interpreted, *is still false*

The story of the earthborn is false because it attributes to nature [*phusis*] as a causal power, symbolized by Mother Earth, what really belongs to convention [*nomos*], and

to the contingent conventions of the Just City in particular. Since the story grounds the whole argument of the Myth, its falsity transmits to the Myth as a whole.

Moreover, this falsehood is the core *ideological* content of the Myth, which can now be seen as having a double content/purpose. To the rulers it gives a special command: enforce meritocratic social mobility! To all the citizens it gives a general command: think of all your fellow-citizens as your brothers and sisters! The structure of the Myth, in which the story of the earthborn leads to the divine command, expresses the thesis that only a city which follows the general command can follow the special one.

**Vc.** The Lie can now be seen as Plato's vehicle for a set of four connected theses:

- (1) The social mobility necessary for a Just City depends on solidarity among its citizens, particularly between elite and non-elite, so as to overcome the inevitable elite tendency to homophily/nepotism.
- (2) What produces that solidarity is ideology: the myths the City tells itself about itself.
- (3) In particular, the ideology which produces social solidarity is one which represents the bonds among its citizens as sibling-like: i.e. natural, i.e. as given, reliable, involving a common good, and generating reciprocal sympathy and affection.
- (4) But this ideology is always false, because what creates those bonds is *not* nature but culture, and more precisely (as per 2 above) the ideology itself!

**Vd.** This is good news and bad news for anyone aspiring to be part of a just society:

- *The good news (Plato as optimist):* Social solidarity is the product of ideology, which is a work of culture. There is no need for ethnic homogeneity, a physical 'motherland', etc.: you can build a Just City anywhere, with whoever shows up.
- *The bad news (Plato as pessimist):* A Just City produces the solidarity it needs by way of an ideology which is necessarily false -- a True Lie -- about this very point.

## VI. Belief and the Lie:

**Via.** Can the pessimistic side of this stance be softened? Must the citizens of the Just City, Guardians included, really be committed to a True Lie about their society?

- NB in section (6) of the text, Socrates agrees that the first generation will *not* believe the Myth; but he does not treat this as a problem. So somehow the Guardians can obey the command *even without believing* the Myth.
- So, might the Guardians merely *accept* the Myth pragmatically, or as fictionalists,<sup>3</sup> acting on it without any belief? But then how would the Lie be a lie at all?

**Vib.** Two suggestions:

- There are many attitudes in between full belief and fictionalism or mere pragmatic acceptance, especially in the case of ideological commitments: the belief of the Guardians probably belongs somewhere here in the realm of *quasi-belief*.
- By giving us mixed, indecisive signals, Plato leaves us with some pointed and still-unanswered questions: What kind of belief or quasi-belief in a shared ideology is necessary to instill social solidarity? How close to full transparency can the ideological work of a just society come, and still be efficacious?

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<sup>3</sup> As per R. Joyce, *The Myth of Morality* (Cambridge, 2001)

The Noble Lie passage: Text and Translation (Republic 414b7-5d1):

**[1. Preliminaries: 1a. First introduction]** "Could we," I said, "somehow contrive one of those lies that come into being in case of need, of which we were just now speaking, some one noble lie to persuade especially [*malista men*] the Rulers themselves, but if not *ei de mē*], the rest of the city?"

-- "What sort of a thing?", he said.

"Nothing new," I said, but a Phoenician thing, which has already happened in many places before, as the poets assert and have caused others to believe, but one that has not happened in our time -- and I don't know if it could -- one that requires a great deal of persuasion."

-- "How like a man who's hesitant to speak you are," he said.

"You'll think my hesitation quite appropriate, too," I said, "when I do speak."

-- "Speak," he said, "and don't be afraid."

**[1b. Second introduction]** "I shall speak. And though I don't know what I'll use for daring in telling it, or what sort of speeches, I will attempt to persuade first [*prōton*] the Rulers themselves and the soldiers, then [*epeita de*] the rest of the city, that **[2.-5. The Myth: 2. The Story of the Earthborn]** the rearing and education we gave them were like dreams; they only thought they were undergoing all that was happening to them, while, in truth, at that time they were under the earth within, being fashioned and reared themselves, and their arms and other tools being crafted. When the job had been completely finished, then the earth, which is their mother, sent them up.

**[3. First Injunctions: 3a. Duty to the Motherland]** And now, as though the land they are in were a mother and nurse, they must plan for and defend it, if anyone attacks, **[3b. Solidarity]** and they must think of the other citizens as brothers and born of the earth."

-- "It wasn't," he said, "for nothing that you were for so long ashamed to tell the lie."

"It was indeed appropriate," I said. "All the same, hear out the rest of the tale. 'All of you in the city are certainly brothers', we shall say to them in telling the tale, '**[4. The Divine Demiurgy: 4a. The Model of the Metals]** but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honoured; in auxiliaries, silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen. **[4b. The Principle of Recirculation]** So [*oun*], because [*hate*] you're all related, although for the most part you'll produce offspring like yourselves, it sometimes happens that a silver child will be born from a golden parent, a golden child from a silver parent, and similarly all the others from each other. **[4c. The Divine Command]** Hence [*oun*] the god commands the Rulers both first and above all [*kai prōton kai malista*] to be of nothing such good guardians and to keep over nothing so careful a watch as the children, seeing which of these metals is mixed in their souls. And, if a child of theirs should be born with an admixture of bronze or iron, in no way are they to take pity on it, but they shall assign the proper value to its nature and thrust it out among the craftsmen or the farmers; and, again, if from these someone should naturally grow who has an admixture of gold or silver, they will honor such ones and lead them up, some to the Guardian group, others to the Auxiliaries, **[5. Conclusion of the Myth: the Oracle]** believing that there is an oracle that the city will be destroyed when it is guarded by a Guardian of iron or bronze.'

**[6. Reception of the Myth:]** So, have you some device for persuading them of this tale?"

--"None at all," he said, "for these people themselves; however for their sons, and the next generation, and the other human beings who come afterwards."

"Well, even that", I said, "would be good for making them care more for the city and one another. For I understand pretty much what you mean." (Bloom translation, revised)