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## *Problems with the Noble Lie*

**T**his paper will address the concept of the “noble lie” in Plato’s *Republic*. It will begin by explaining the justification for the noble lie given by Socrates in the passages of 389b-c, which foreshadow the direct discussion of the lie which appears later in the text. The paper will then reconstruct from passages 415b-d the explanation of the noble lie and its two parts. It will apply Leo Strauss’s interpretation to each part of the lie, through reference to his lectures published in *The Origins of Political Science and the Problem of Socrates*, and to his book, *The City and Man*. Finally, it will raise problems surrounding the noble lie, including those Strauss raises.

Before addressing the noble lie specifically, Socrates alludes to it and provides a justification for it. In the midst of a discussion on the poets and how the gods should be portrayed, Socrates notes that a high value must be placed on truth so that citizens will not get the wrong ideas about the gods and emulate the gods’ wrongdoing. However, though “falsehood really is of no use to the gods,” it is a “form of medicine” to men (Plato 235; 389b). This introduces the idea that a lie *used properly* may benefit patients, that is, the citizens of the Republic. These types of lies are appropriate not only to protect the state from enemies, but more importantly, to benefit the state.

However, laymen are not equipped to administer the “medicine” of lies, as they are not the “doctors”—the “doctors” will be the founders, and the first generation of rulers who will perpetuate the medicinal lie in order to benefit the state. Accordingly, “for a layman to lie to such governors . . . is a mistake on the same level, or even greater than a patient not telling his doctor the truth”

(235; 389c). If a layman tells lies, he must be punished for “introducing a practice that will disrupt and destroy the state” (235; 389d). Disruption or destruction would be the outcome, since he lacks the expertise needed to make good use of lies. The use of lies is forbidden to everyone but the expert “doctors.” When lies are used by the experts, Socrates and Glaucon agree that they would benefit the state, and therefore their use is justified.

Strauss further explains the justification of the noble lie. He argues that the whole scheme of the city can only be possible if the wise philosophers have absolute rule; the noble lie facilitates this. The founders are faced with the question of how best to achieve absolute rule, and they first decide that force is the way to rule the multitude of the unwise. This is why “the few wise need the support of a fairly large number of loyal auxiliaries” (*Origins* 185). But, of course, the auxiliaries are not wise themselves, but it is still necessary that they submit to the absolute rule of the philosopher kings. However, rather than using force to persuade the auxiliaries, they use persuasion. The auxiliaries are “persuaded by means of a noble deception” (185). The reason for this according to Strauss is that “even the most rational society, the society according to truth and nature, is not possible without a fundamental untruth” (185). The “medicine” of the lie is really the glue that holds the city together. It is put in place by the wise, to secure the best state, and a just state for the unwise.

A few passages after giving the justification of the lie, Socrates specifically introduces the noble lie, primarily as a way to persuade the rulers, and secondarily, to persuade the rest of the state. This lie would be “fabricated in a moment of need” (Plato 329; 414b). It would be “nothing new”—only a kind of “Phoenician tale” (possibly like those Odysseus tells in the *Odyssey*). Before stating the specific contents of the lie, Socrates provides further justification for it. He states that the telling of lies at the founding of cities “happened all over

the place in the past, as the poets say and have persuaded people” (331; 414c). Part of the justification is that, apparently, lies had been used recurrently in the past, as Socrates notes. Socrates attempts to portray the lie as a common feature of any society in an effort to justify its existence in the ideal city of *The Republic*. The lie would consist of the founders telling first the governors and the troops, and second, the rest of the state, that their childhood upbringing and education never took place. The founders would instead tell everyone, that all of this happened “in their imagination, while at the time they themselves, their weapons and the rest of their manufactured equipment were in reality being formed and nurtured down under the ground” (331; 414d). Then, the “earth, which was their mother, released them” from underground, and onto the land which they all live on (331; 414e). This way, the citizens would all treat the land they live on as if it were “their mother and nurse, and defend it themselves if anyone attacks it” (331; 414e). They would all be the earth’s children, and all brothers.

According to Strauss, the function of the first part of the noble lie is to establish the earth as the mother of all men. This means all men are brothers, as stated, but it also “[assigns] the natural status of the human species to a part of the human species, the citizens of a particular city” (*Origins* 185). In other words, the lie not only unites the citizens with each other as brothers, it also sets them apart as a populace. Part of the goal of the lie is to cause citizens to prize their status as members of the city and children of the land over their status as people. As Strauss puts it, the people of the city “[become] citizens out of mere human beings or out of what one may call natural human beings” (*City and Man* 102). Furthermore, “the fraternity of all human beings is to be replaced by the fraternity of all fellow citizens” (102). This would foster undying loyalty to the state. Strauss notes that the lie helps mediate “the tension between the impossibility of a universal political society on the one hand—universal is meant



here literally, embracing all human beings—and the essential defect of the particular or closed political society on the other” (*Origins* 186). The defect of the closed society is that it conflicts with the “natural fraternity of all men” (186). The lie solves this by switching how men in the city view their heritage. They are no longer children of the earth, but rather, children of *this part* of the earth—the part of the earth which is under the city. Their natural fraternity with all men is replaced by their natural fraternity with their fellow citizens. This mentality would also establish other states as strong enemies. Such fervent loyalty is necessary in order to secure

the rulers' absolute power. Strauss will later ask whether this type of loyalty is achievable.

The second part of the noble lie specifies that, although they are all brothers, the citizens' *souls* are nonetheless constituted of different materials. When each citizen was created, "the god mixed gold in the production of those . . . who are competent to govern" (333; 415b). The souls of auxiliaries contain silver, and the souls of the farmers and artisans contain iron and bronze. Souls of offspring would usually be of the same constitution as their parents, but occasionally offspring are born bearing the quality of a different metal. In such cases, it is vitally important they be raised according to the material in their soul. So essential is it that the character of these metals be respected, that Socrates builds the myth into the noble lie, recommending that an oracle warn that the city will be destroyed on the day when a "guard with iron or bronze in him is on duty." In view of such consequences, citizens will fear lying about their children's souls (333; 415c). Socrates then acknowledges that it will be difficult to convince the first generation to believe this lie, but also notes that the later generations will be more likely to accept the lie if it becomes popular tradition. The second part of the lie needs to become incorporated fully into the society so that the class system established according to the metal in people's souls will not be challenged.

Strauss explains that the second part of the noble lie is so powerful because it ascribes the social hierarchy of the city to the divine will of the god. "Identifying the existing social hierarchy with the natural hierarchy" makes the class divisions indisputable (*Origins* 185). The second part of the noble lie, "by adding divine sanctions to the natural hierarchy, supplies the required incentive for the soldiers to obey the rulers and thus to serve the city wholeheartedly" (*City and Man* 103). If the noble lie is internalized by the society, the auxiliaries will

be loyal, and fully able to maintain control over any unwise people who require the use of force because they were not persuaded completely by the lie. The absolute rule of the philosopher kings will be established firmly through the cementation of the class system. However, Strauss notes the implications of the necessity of the lie. If the social hierarchy must be ascribed to a natural hierarchy in order for this city to be the best, that means “even the polis according to nature is not simply natural, or even the most rational society is not rational” (*Origins* 185). Essentially, the necessity of the noble lie means that a just city is incomplete unless it has this artificial, contrived aspect. The most rational society is not rational because it requires more than pure reason to function properly. Strauss notes just how crucial this makes the art of persuasion. Thrasymachus’s talent of rhetoric becomes the missing piece of the puzzle which the rational society requires to function. The transformation of the city into the best city “would be wholly impossible if the citizens of an actual polis could not be persuaded to bow to the absolute rule of the philosophers,” and the only way they are persuaded is with the noble lie (185). Strauss also states, “the good city . . . cannot exist in the element of truth, of nature” which is interesting because it implies that the best, just city is not natural or true (*City and Man* 102). One question remains—could the rhetoric of the lie really be the glue which holds the city together? It certainly seems that the noble lie is expected to have a great deal of persuasive power—maybe unrealistically so.

There are many problems with the notion of the noble lie. Firstly, the success of the noble lie depends on how well the founders and philosopher kings can persuade the citizens of it. For this reason, according to Strauss, “the action of the republic turns around the strength and weakness of rhetoric” (*Origins*, 186). Rhetorical persuasion is expected to be more and more convincing—the “expectation from rhetoric is greatly increased” (186). First, it is only expected

that the citizens who grew up in the city and received the proper education are expected to believe the lie. Then, they are expected to submit to the philosopher kings. Furthermore, the philosopher kings must convince the citizens of their ability to rule using persuasion if they want political bliss. But the fact is, it is not likely that the citizens will be persuaded to “undergo what they regard as the greatest misery for the rest of their days so that future generations will be blessed” (186). The noble lie would require major changes in culture which would not likely be possible unless the founders were starting with a completely new generation of citizens. As Strauss says, “political bliss will follow, not if the philosophers become kings, but when the philosophers have become kings and if they have rusticated everyone older than ten, and they bring up the children without any influence whatever of the parents on the children” (186). What would really need to happen for the lie to take effect would be the total erasure of history. The only other conceivable way to change the society so drastically would involve the “sustained effort of every individual by himself”—it would necessitate that “all men . . . become philosophers” and the total transformation of human nature (186). It is highly unlikely that the noble lie would have the effect that Socrates argues it would have, for the simple fact that words will not convince people to change their human nature. ☾

## Works Cited

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