

Thought Crime

In Plato's *Republic*, while engaged in a discussion with other philosophers and elites of Athens, Socrates divulges his opinions on education, family, government, and society. In an attempt to find justice and the truth, Socrates creates and presents a radically reformed vision for society. He details a three-level class system, bronze, silver, and gold, and examines the roles of philosophers in society. Socrates investigates each part of the government - he pays attention to every detail, even ideas that seem insignificant to his original goal, the pursuit of justice and the truth. According to Socrates, the ideal system of government echos a tyranny, except that in Socrates' tyranny, the rulers of society, the philosopher kings, are committed to the welfare of the state and the people. While discussing the role of education and the value of poetry in society, Socrates says that gods and men alike detest *real* falsehood. Throughout *The Republic*, Socrates demonstrates his high respect and regard for the truth. However, only lines after honoring veracity, he goes on to introduce the idea of a spoken falsehood - what he considers a necessary untruth or a noble lie. The noble lie, according to Socrates, is a "convenient fairy tale" or a type of "fiction and deceit" employed only by the wise and educated rulers of society - the philosopher kings. Socrates formally introduces the idea of the noble lie almost halfway through the dialogue, but the idea of an essential fiction comes up many times in various contexts. In Plato's *Republic*, noble lies are not "excusable" lies, if such a thing exists, or white

lies - the noble lie is not a falsity to be taken lightly or to be used at random. Noble lies are the greatest untruths told to entire societies- they are lies about life told to the citizens of a state. By encouraging deceit, Socrates turns his citizens into zombies deprived of the truth. Today, in the 21st century, similar lies are being told by governments, some for our own protection, and some not. For instance, during the events leading up to the 2003 invasion to Iraq, the United States Government convinced the American and global publics that Saddam Hussein was in possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction. In reality, he was not. The U.S. is still at war and in millions of dollars in debt. In this example, the noble lie told by the government ended up hurting the American people. Telling a noble lie is the worst crime a person can commit against the minds of others.

The noble lie is particularly pertinent in four sections of *The Republic*. Each time the noble lie comes up, Socrates gives a justification of the necessary falsehood; in every example, Socrates describes why the noble lie is unavoidable and how it should be used in society and the state. The noble lie first comes up while Socrates declares that poets blaspheme the gods and turn children into cowards (Plato 381d). Before deliberating about lies, Socrates first devalues the truth, saying that “a false statement is merely some kind of representation of a state of mind” (Plato 382c), bearing no *real* significance in the scope of life. He goes on to say that spoken falsehoods are “on some occasions useful, and not then detestable” (Plato 382d). Even though he has demonstrated a high consideration for the truth, he is in fact in pursuit of the truth, Socrates believes falsehood is at times necessary - quite a contradiction, some might say. According to Socrates, the noble lie can be used “as a kind of preventive medicine

against our enemies” (Plato 382d). Socrates maintains that the noble lie should only be employed by the elite rulers, just as medicine should only be prescribed and applied by doctors.

Less than ten pages later, Socrates affirms his proclamation that the noble lie should only be used by the philosopher kings. “It will only be for the rulers of the city” (Plato 389c), Socrates says only lines after he articulates his belief that the people “must value truthfulness highly” (Plato 389c) - Socrates’ courtesy to the truth can be seen again. Here, Socrates defines the line between the rulers and the people - the rulers have power and the people are to obey the orders of their superiors. Socrates goes on to set up rules concerning the use of the noble lie. For instance, the rulers can only “use falsehood in dealing with citizen or enemy for the good of the state, no one else must do so” (Plato 389c). The noble lie is a power exclusive to the philosophers. If any resident tells a lie to the rulers, the government “shall regard it as a still graver offense than it is for a patient to lie to his doctor” (Plato 389c). Socrates says that the noble lie can only be used to ensure the welfare of society, not to satisfy one’s own needs. Anyone who is caught lying within the state “will be punished for introducing a practice likely to capsize and wreck the ship of the state” (Plato 389d). Socrates compares lying, when employed by the uneducated lower class, to threatening storms that ruthlessly destroy boats at sea and again to infectious diseases left untreated by doctors. According to Socrates, spoken falsehood is detrimental to society unless used by the powerful and educated elite in charge of the state.

While Socrates is discussing the role of the Guardians in society, he formally conceives the notion and the purpose of the noble lie. The role of the Guardians is to

“assist the rulers in the execution of their decisions” (Plato 414b). In other words, they are civil servants who have dedicated their lives to the state. Socrates wants to “contrive one of those convenient stories...some magnificent myth that would in itself carry conviction” to the society, including the Guardians (Plato 414c). Socrates wants to convince the community “that the upbringing and education [he] has given them was all something that happened to them only in a dream” (Plato 414d). Socrates believes that in order for the Guardians and the citizens of the state to be completely committed to the state and to each other, they must not know the true nature of their raising - in reality, “they were fashioned and reared” (Plato 414e). In relation to the citizens and the Guardians, Socrates thinks that such a fairy tale, or noble lie, “should serve to increase their loyalty to the state and to each other” (Plato 415d). In this passage, Socrates reveals his true intentions for the use of the noble lie. The noble lie is a tool employed by the creators and rulers of society *only* for the good of the people and the state. Even though Socrates has said many times that it is “a bad thing to be deceived of the truth” (Plato 413a), he truly believes that when creating a truly just, virtuous, and flourishing society, falsehood is necessary and at times obligatory.

The noble lie makes its last significant appearance in the context of the family and the role women should play in the family and the state. In this instance, Socrates does not hesitate to speak his mind:

“This - that our Rulers will have to employ a great deal of fiction and deceit for the benefit of their subjects; and you will remember that we agreed that they might be used as a kind of medicine.” (Plato 459d).

Socrates repeats himself, only this time he is more honest about his true desire and intent. He continues on to say “there will be considerable scope for this ‘right use’ in marriage and procreation” (Plato 459d). Socrates devises a plan that will allow his society to contain only perfect citizens. He aspires “to be consistent” and wants a “real pedigree herd” (Plato 459e). Socrates wants only the best people in his society. He would construct “statutory festivals,” where the leaders “mate the best of [their] men with the best of [their] women as often as possible...and bring up only the offspring of the best” (Plato 459e). Socrates wants to turn the citizens of the state into servants of the government - individuals who would be wholly committed to the security and prosperity of the nation. Socrates is certain that the state and the citizens of the nation will both profit if the noble lie is exercised by the philosopher kings - the educated rulers of society.

In 2002 to 2003, the Bush administration lied to the world. Bush attempted to convince the American public that Iraq was a great threat to the United States by claiming that Saddam Hussein was in possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Consequently, the U.S. invaded Iraq and is currently acting as an occupation force in the region. American taxpayers will be paying for this war for many years to come, as the country is now billions of dollars in debt. In an article and interview written and conducted by Danny Postel, a journalist and activist, with Shadia Drury, a political commentator from Egypt, Drury compares the intentions of the Bush administration to the ideas and values of Leo Strauss, a supporter of Plato and one of the proclaimed fathers of neoconservatism. According to Drury, Strauss believes noble lies are necessary “to spare the people’s feelings and to protect the elite from possible

reprisals” (Postel). Strauss goes further, believing that “deception - in effect, a culture of lies - is the peculiar justice of the wise” (Postel), says Drury. Strauss’s view of the noble lie is not for the benefit of the people or society, but satisfies a self-centered need. Strauss believes that the noble lie should be employed for the protection and security not of the public, but of the rulers of the state.

The way Strauss characterizes the noble lie is the way it is employed today and the way the Bush administration used it against the American public in 2003. The Bush administration lied to the general public not to preserve and defend the country, but for their own personal gain (some people believe that the war in Iraq was to increase oil interest in that region - these beliefs cannot be substantiated, they are only rumors). If anything, the Iraq war has damaged the United States’ reputation around the world. Even Americans are tired of Bush, as is shown by his 75% disapproval rating. Strauss’s use of the noble lie would disrespect the minds of the people. Strauss would use the noble lie to save himself from persecution, thus disregarding the welfare of the citizens of a state. Telling a noble lie does not harm a person physically, but it hurts her mind instead. When being lied to, a person has no defense - one has no way of knowing whether she is being lied to. When someone is told an untruth, she unknowingly bases decisions she makes on false ideas. Upon discovering the truth, one would, and should, be devastated, just as the American people were after five years of war and no WMD’s found. Even the international community felt betrayed by the U.S. government. Telling a noble lie is a particularly grave offense, for it is not a white lie, as discussed earlier, or a lie told only from one person to another. Instead, noble lies are told to people by the hundreds, thousands, and millions. The severity of the crime also depends on the

intensions and desires compelling one to commit such a crime. If one tells a noble lie the way Socrates meant for it to be used, for the good of the people and society, her punishment should be significantly less than that of one who tells a lie out of pure self-centeredness - such a lie cannot even be considered "noble." Telling the lie of our self-gain damages the minds of others. Such an offense is the worst crime a human being can commit against other people.

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates is on a quest for the truth. He believes that in order to find justice and the truth, he must design his idea of an ideal society. Throughout the dialogue, he details every part of his new society, including education, the role of women, and a class system, among other things. Even though Socrates has an obvious love of the truth and knowledge, he brings up the idea of a noble lie or a necessary untruth at least four times. According to Socrates, the noble lie is an untruth employed by the rulers of society to make the people believe in what is other than the truth. This necessary falsity is a power reserved for the elite. Socrates' noble lie is also only supposed to be used to protect and secure the state - the noble lie should only seek to improve and sustain the good of society and the people. Today, Socrates' view of the noble lie has been skewed by individuals like Leo Strauss, who believe that the noble lie serves to protect the elite rulers from persecution, not to preserve society. Such a lie cannot even be considered noble, for it is exercised with complete disregard of the state and the people. The noble lie is an offense against the minds of other human beings. The noble lie convinces them of a false idea - the victims of such wrongdoing might as well be in a dream.

Works Cited

Plato. The Republic. Trans. Desmond Lee. New York: Penguin Classics, 2007.

Postel, Danny. "Noble Lies And Perpetual War: Leo Strauss, The Neo-Cons, And Iraq" Information Clearing House October 18, 2003.