

THE VALUE TO FALSE BELIEF IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

RuoNan Liu

Keystone Academy, Beijing 100101, China.

Corresponding Email: lrn090920@163.com

Abstract: This paper examines the intricate role of false beliefs in Plato's Republic, particularly on the philosophical paradox presented by the "spirit of truthfulness" and the falsehoods and fictions that Plato incorporates into his educational system. Although Plato is often criticized for endorsing deception among political rulers, this study argues that he also emphasizes the importance of certain fictions in the pursuit of truth and social harmony. Beginning with an analysis of the cave allegory, the paper attempts to explain the epistemic obligations of philosopher-kings, to rule with accessible narratives, even if they involve falsehood. Furthermore, the paper explores how the noble lie naturalizes the education of the guardians, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the ruling class. Reciting diverse scholarly perspectives, it is underscored the ethical ramifications of using falsehoods in governance and their potential utility in fostering societal stability. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Plato's approach to falsehood provides foundational grounds for ruling towards common good, while also evoking discussions complexities of truth, ethical governance, and political authority.

Keywords: Epistemology; False belief; Ethics; Noble lie; Authority; Knowledge

1 INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have accused Plato of endorsing falsehood because of his account of the noble lie in final sections of *The Republic*, a concept that some false pre-assumptions are implemented for the sake of social order in ruling. In *The Republic*, Plato presents the cave allegory, a foundational metaphor that syphasizes the functioning of his ideal society, in which the spread to falsehoods can be recognized. However, as many later works have realized, the "spirit of truthfulness," which Plato claims philosophy-kings must pursue, contradicts the notion of a society like that in the cave allegory. This paper seeks to determine whether Plato provides a justification for this contradiction between loyalty to truth and the intrigue of lies, especially among philosophy-kings. After providing an account of the paradox, this essay will analyze existing literature to explore the implications of false belief. It will also examine whether Plato implied any necessity and value to lies and myths in his utopia. The central question of this paper is: how does Plato reconcile the necessity of false beliefs with commitment to truth? And what implications this has for the legitimacy of philosopher-kings? Together, this paper aims to provide a satisfactory answer to the role of false belief in the early Platonic societal system, helping us better orientate the seemingly self-contradictions of governance in Plato's political philosophy.

Firsthand, this paper contends that, while Plato rejects the democratic use of falsehoods in all forms, he acknowledges the necessity of such in the process of ruling. Through the noble lie, Plato presents a pragmatic approach to the fundamentals of ruling, aiming to maintain social order and promote the common good while resolving many identified contradictions.

2 THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD

2.1 The Cave Allegory

The famous Allegory of the Cave is found in Book VII of *The Republic*. It serves as the foundational metaphor upon which Plato's epistemology and political theory are based.

In the allegory, prisoners are confined in a dark cave and chained so that they cannot turn their heads. Behind them is a wall, and above that is a fireplace. The light of the fire casts shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners; of objects, animals, and other things passing by. These shadows are the prisoners' only source of knowledge. They compete to see who has the most knowledge by naming the objects that come and go, or predicting which ones will come next. When one prisoner escapes and discovers the outside world, he realizes that the shadows are illusions and that the sun and the things beneath it are unchanging facts, which he calls truth [1].

However, the allegory does not end there. Plato stressed that the enlightened people, becoming philosopher-kings, must return to the cave and govern the prisoners. They must use puppets and shadows to represent truth. However, these people suffer discrimination from the prisoners. The prisoners perceive their unadaptable eyes in the dark as a signal of danger outside the cave (Plato, 38a), and refuses to exit. Plato is one of those enlightened, as he navigates the reader closer to the truth in *The Republic*. He then orders that the philosopher-king rules based on an intrinsic pursuit of truth and justice. As Plato writes, "The unexamined life is not worth living," those who govern must possess a profound understanding of reality (Plato, 38a). Contrastingly, the philosopher-king's obligation to communicate these truths to the masses complicates their

role. They must articulate these knowledge in accessible terms using the same tactic as before—shadows, whom the prisoners deceived to only betrust in.

Tension arises from Plato's claim that philosopher-kings must adopt complete absence of falsehood (*apseudeia*) and reluctance to admit falsehood in any form (R. 485c) and that the true lover of knowledge must, from childhood on, be above all a striver after truth in every form (R. 485d). In books II and III, however, Plato stresses the importance of falsehood in the upbringing of the guardians, and namely advocates for the use of "useful fictions" in their education. For instance, he asserts that "we begin by telling children fables (*muthos legomen*), and the fable, as a whole, is false (*pseudos*), yet it contains an element of truth" (R. 376e–377c) and that "mothers and nurses mold the souls of children through these stories far more than they shape their bodies with their hands" (R. 378e) [2].

Now, Plato leaves the question: How can philosopher-rulers display "the spirit of truthfulness" and admit no falsehoods while being nourished by falsehoods since childhood and required to maintain loyalty to them as adults?

Some scholars, like Guthrie, argue that Plato distinguishes between intellectual and spoken falsehood. According to this view, spoken falsehoods used in education are excluded from the spirit of truthfulness, a term that only refers to intellectual knowledge [3]. Alternatively, opponents like Schofield propose that even if they tell politically expedient lies, the rulers will hate doing it [4], raising a ideal scenario where the contradiction does not apply. These attempts offer good explanations that dissolve the contradiction and propose that deception is a mere positive strategy employed solely for education. In essence, that falsehood is easily distinguished from truth and reality and is highly functional. However, while Plato never makes these justifications himself, Schwartz presents a convincing image with which this essay complements, linking the noble lie to resolve the contradiction.

2.2 The Noble Lie

To begin with, the noble lie is a myth and, as far as the general concept is concerned, it is prone to education in Plato's Republic. Allegories, untruthfully told to prisoners, are part of the lie. However, Plato himself introduces the lie by admitting: it is merely a lie that the populace and their social roles are innately determined by inherent qualities represented by gold, silver, or bronze in their souls. Whereas, to citizens, they are only born to put faith that, the metals of each soul were doomed, and education is considered the process of inspiring and developing the potential of each metal.

By recognizing this foundation as a myth, Plato hints that false beliefs are the basis of a stable society. The effect of the lie answers part of the research question: The lie itself fosters acceptance of one's place in society and promotes stability, ultimately legitimizing the rulers' authority and reinforcing the structure of the city. As Plato articulates, the noble lie is intended to ensure that "all citizens believe that they are part of a larger whole, serving the common good" (Plato, 414b). Thus, the noble lie, though being falsehood, is an eternal unchallenged base of *The Republic*, and becomes a vital tool for social cohesion, prospering the legitimacy of philosophy kings.

Furthermore, the concept of the "noble lie" is a fundamental element in education since its earliest forms. This notion has been posited as a potential explanation for the question posed in the cave allegory, and it has been further elaborated in numerous subsequent works by scholars. A concept referred to as "naturalization in falsehood," argued that noble lies played an essential role in the development of an individual's character and moral compass during their formative years. By presenting these falsehoods as essential truths, philosopher-kings are able to maintain their authority while providing guidance to the populace. Schwartz also proposes that the noble lie, being a false essential ground of all society, not only justifies the rulers' authority but also masks the fabricated nature of the societal roles assigned to citizens [5]. Contrarily to the aforementioned points, the context of the image can also be refined as Jowett proposes. It is conceivable that the rulers will discern the myth's underlying truth, a discernment that may elude other citizens. But despite the rulers' belief in the myth and their commitment to imparting it to the populace in an honest manner, the myth will remain, at best, a believable one for the public. Only the philosophers will discern its veracity and the underlying reasons for its truth. Therefore, a discrepancy exists between their epistemic relation to their beliefs and the persuasive efficacy achieved. The rulers will accept and comprehend the reasons for this, while the people will simply accept them (and this will also be a form of wisdom for them) [6]. This, in turn, redirects us to the concept of the noble lie, which posits that the deception perpetrated against individuals predisposed to certain forms of metal or fixed social mobility is impervious to alteration. This cycle ultimately reverts to the fundamental principles underlying Plato's societal model.

The ethical implications of the noble lie are complex. On the one hand, it can be regarded as a necessity that maintains societal harmony and stability. Conversely, this approach gives rise to substantial concerns regarding moral integrity and the possibility of authoritarian practices. The employment of noble lies, as explained by the justification for their use, suggests that the ends may justify the means. This challenges traditional notions of honesty in governance. According to Plato's philosophical framework, the rulers' objective is the welfare of the *polis*. As Zembaty notes, Plato's acceptance of the noble lie reflects a practical and rounded approach to governance, where the ethics are considered secondary to the stability of the state [7]. This perspective prompts a deeper examination of the ethical implications of employing falsehoods in the context of political leadership.

3 THE VALUE OF FALSE BELIEF IN GOVERNANCE

Overall, the role of false beliefs in the education of guardians is a vital part of Plato's argument. He suggests that certain fictions can benefit the development of a person's moral character and instill the virtues necessary for effective governance. Philosopher-kings can promote social cohesion and stability by employing falsehoods, intending for common good. Plato also argues that the education of guardians should evolve around convincing the sense of duty and faith, which may necessitate the use of noble lies. Adding to this idea of using lies to cultivate virtues, many scholars now remain questioning the existence of heaven, proposed by Plato, with a clear intention to push bravery and the will to die in soldier-guardians. This strategy is also predominant as we observe many militaries in the history. Thus, falsehoods become instrumental in cultivating the principles necessary for a harmonious society. Similarly, as Shklar suggests, Plato's endorsement of false beliefs imply that political leaders will face moral dilemmas requiring difficult choices between truth and the greater good, sometimes recognizing or unknowing the act of deception [8].

Today, many scholars engage with Plato's ideas, defending the use of falsehoods in political contexts. For example, many argue that, in complex societies, rulers or leaders must employ such trusted false beliefs to navigate the intricacies of human behavior and societal dynamics. They assert that falsehoods can facilitate effective governance and contend that the ethical implications of deception are context-dependent. Upon them is Leo Strauss, arguing that myths are necessary to provide meaning and purpose to a society, similar to the example of heaven, and suggesting that deception can serve a valuable role in political life [9]. Undoubtedly, this perspective aligns with Plato's view that false beliefs can be instrumental, supported by practical scenarios historically.

Conversely, critiques of Plato's endorsement of falsehoods raise concerns about moral integrity and the potential for abuse in governance. They argue that a reliance on false beliefs can erode the trust between rulers and citizens, thereby undermining the legitimacy of authority. This perspective emphasizes the risks of allowing falsehoods to permeate political discourse and remains that the pursuit of truth should be paramount to ethical leadership. Popper is one who criticizes Plato's acceptance of deception, asserting that it leads to authoritarianism, wherein the ruling elite manipulate truth to maintain control, "the justification of noble lies can lead to a slippery slope where the integrity of political discourse is compromised" [10].

4 CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the judgment as to whether Plato's myth is justifiable in *The Republic* remains controversial. While Plato and many later scholars have offered valid justifications for the intrinsic value of false beliefs, the myth itself is still criticized for contradicting the roots of pursuing truth and knowledge. Nevertheless, Plato's ideas on such beliefs have unarguable implications for contemporary political thought and ethical leadership as the foundation of modern education and society. As modern societies grapple with issues of trust, transparency, and the role of false facts in governance, Plato's insights remain relevant.

Lastly, though this paper makes a widely summarized account of contexts evolving around the allegory of the cave and the noble lie, it ignores many details. Of which, the ignorance of the prisoners is highly discussable. To consider the ignorance of citizens in determining the ideas to spread (whether true or false) may lead to more profound insights. Besides, in practical context, future research could further explore the balance between truth and deception in modern governance, particularly in democratic societies. The ethical implications of political communication, the role of misinformation, and leaders' responsibilities to uphold truth in the public sphere warrant deeper investigation. Examining these issues through the lens of Plato's philosophy provides valuable insight into the continuing difficulties of truth and ethics in achieving an utopia.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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