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Plato on Truth and Falsehood

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In the *Republic* (389b-c), Plato endorses for the guardians of his ideal polis, the principle of the medicinal lie. The principle can be briefly stated as: “It is appropriate for the guardians to lie to the citizens for the benefit of the polis, but it is subversive and destructive for anyone else in the polis to lie.” Given that the ideal polis Plato is describing is a just state, a morally healthy state, some writers with a post-Kantian moral sensibility have criticized his position as being both inconsistent and dishonest.¹

The argument of this paper is that Plato’s position is neither dishonest nor inconsistent, but that when adequately understood in its context, the account Plato gives of truth and falsehood offers valuable insights into the nature of each and the role both play in the moral life of the individual and state. In order to concentrate on the positive account of truth and falsehood found primarily in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, this paper will treat only briefly the criticisms of Plato’s position

To understand medicinal lying in its proper perspective, we must keep in mind certain obvious, but often overlooked, aspects of the *Republic*. First, the Republic is an imaginative construct and as Plato (592 a-b) suggests, the ideal does not and perhaps cannot exist anywhere as an historical state. What is important is to understand the principle of medicinal lying so that one can reflect on whether it can be applied in various moral contexts, and the criteria for applying it. The consideration of possible contexts of application is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, the justification for the medicinal lie occurs within the wider discussion of the definition of justice. A fundamental insight is that justice must give to each person his due and that persons differ widely in their native capabilities. Also central to the account of justice is the metaphysics of the person, that a human being is a composite of a reasoning capacity, **thumos** (emotions or passion) and appetite. Justice within a person is a harmony in which each of these aspects is doing its own job well, so that reason is giving good rules for the conduct of life, with the **thumos** supporting the dictates of reason and the appetites obeying the rules. Similarly, in the just state the reasoning function is making good laws, the protective function ensuring they are carried out, and the productive function following the laws. In the *Republic* the rulers have a wisdom that is lacking in the other citizens. The philosopher-king, qua philosopher, is depicted as a lover of **aletheia** (truth or realities), as knowing both what should be achieved in the polis and how to achieve it, and, qua ruler, as having the power to put in place the means to achieve it.

The distinction in the *Republic* (382 b-d) between two kinds of falsehood is pivotal for understanding Plato’s views on truth and falsehood. Essential falsehood which is ignorance or deception in the soul about realities is loathed by both gods and by men. Falsehood in words is loathed by the gods, but serviceable to men in three instances when it may be used without deserving our abhorrence: against enemies, against **philoï** to avert some evil arising from their madness or folly, and when used in edifying tales.

Thus, there are two types of falsehood, the veritable lie and the verbal lie. There are also two corresponding types of truth: essential or veritable truth when the soul apprehends **aletheia** (truth or reality); and truth in words or verbal truth that occurs when words accurately reflect how one thing is related to another.

¹For example, Gregory Vlastos, “The Theory of Social Justice within the Polis in Plato’s Republic,” *Interpretations of Plato*, ed. H.F. North (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J.Brill, 1977) questions whether a social system which entails the duty of lying deserves to survive, and Karl Popper. *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.138, sees the principle of medicinal lying recommended by Plato as a principle of “political expediency” and “totalitarian morality.”

Love of **aletheia** is characteristic of the philosopher, but to achieve clarity about truth and reality is a condition not readily attainable. Given the differences among persons in native ability, clearly indicated by Plato throughout the *Republic*, and captured in the Myth of the Metals (414b-415e), it is also not a condition that can be reached by everyone. People differ drastically in wisdom, in their understanding of the nature of things and of how healthy change can best be effected to bring a person or a state closer to the ideal of justice. This is a truth Plato recognizes, and it is a truth still.

Wisdom alone is not enough to bring about a just state. One may be wise and willing to help establish justice and yet fail, as Plato discovered in Syracuse, where the long delayed and inadequate education of Dionysius II and political intrigues defeated Plato's efforts. Nonetheless, the principle is correct: people with native ability, given appropriate education, are wiser than others, and part of their wisdom is knowing the character of persons and situations.

In Book 1 of the *Republic*, there is an adumbration of the nature of the medicinal lie and its relation to the principle of justice. Here (331c), Cephalus and Socrates agree that truth-telling and paying back what one has received do not define justice since each of these actions may sometimes be just and sometimes unjust. Verbal truth, in and of itself, is not a fundamental moral principle; it must be further evaluated in light of the principle of justice. In brief, verbal lying, being context dependent, has an inconstant value and justice as a moral principle trumps truth telling.

In the *Statesman*, as in the *Republic*, the statesman is said to be analogous to the physician. Plato claims that what is true of the physician is also true of the statesman:

So long as they control our health on a scientific basis they may purge and reduce us or they may build us up, but they still remain doctors. The one essential condition is that they act for the good of our bodies to make them better instead of worse, and treat men's ailments in every case as healers acting to preserve life. We must insist that in this disinterested scientific ability we see the distinguishing mark of true authority in medicine and of true authority everywhere else as well (*Statesman*, 293 b-d).

In the polis, the medicinal lie must be administered on the basis of scientific knowledge, i.e., by one who understands the nature of health in a state and how to obtain it. A corollary is that it should not be administered by one who does not have a proper knowledge of statesmanship, and therefore should be administered by no one except the rulers. Hence the inequality by virtue of which rulers may, under certain conditions, lie to citizens, but not vice versa. The lie must be such as to preserve the state and make it (morally) better, not worse.

Plato describes two cases in which he thinks the use of the medicinal lie would be justifiable. In the first case (459c-460a), concerning marriage regulations, he specifically invokes the principle of the medicinal lie, "It seems likely that our rulers will have to make considerable use of falsehood and deception for the benefit of their subjects. We said, I believe, that the use of that sort of thing was in the category of medicine." In order to achieve as many marriages as possible between the best people and the fewest between the worst with the least possible dissension, the rulers are to determine how many marriages there are to be and which persons are to marry, but are to use a system of "ingenious" lots so that "the inferior man at each conjugation may blame chance and not the rulers."

In the second case (414b-415e), Plato recommends that the rulers contrive a 'noble' lie, which, if it does not persuade the rulers, might at least persuade the rest of the city. The story, or myth, to be told is that all the citizens are children of the same mother, Earth. Although they are siblings, God mingled gold in the generation of the rulers, silver in the auxiliaries, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen as a consequence of which their natural abilities differ. Each person should be assigned status in the state on the basis of his nature. Included in the myth is the oracle that "the state shall be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian." Such a story, if believed in later generations, would have the good effect of making the citizens more inclined to care for the state and for one another.

Critics of Plato's view have centered especially on the ingenious marriage lots, a device which some have claimed violates Plato's own criteria of when a verbal lie is justified: it is not an edifying

fable, it is not used against enemies, and the young guardians with whom it is used are neither mad nor foolish. Now, while it is true that the young guardians are neither mad nor foolish, they are yet *young* guardians who lack experience and in whom the sense of honor is strong. If some among them were told outright they were less worthy than others to breed with the best mates and that they should produce fewer children, this could understandably lead to their resenting both those making the regulations and those more favored. The result would be disharmony and strife within the guardian class. This would not be for the advantage of the polis, which advantage we recall, is the only reason statesmen are permitted to lie. On the other hand, the marriage lots device will let those not allowed to marry or procreate believe this to be a result of chance, the luck of the draw, and not a deliberate decision that highlights their (relative) inferiority. The device, a medicinal lie, prevents unnecessary resentment and disharmony among the guardians, and being for the advantage of the state, is therefore, on Plato's own principles, justifiable.²

In the context of the *Republic*, the medicinal lie would be justifiable if and only if it is instrumental in producing an essential harmony in the state (social justice) and personal justice in the individual. Education develops this harmony. Edifying fables, songs, and other types of "enchantments," for example, the preambles in the *Laws*, are all components of the musical paideia which persuades citizens to learn to like what the law enjoins and dislike what it forbids.

The noble lie clearly falls under the category of edifying fables. Music is education for the soul and is to begin, in the form of tales or fables, earlier than gymnastic. The educator will make use of one sort of false tale, namely, the fable, which "taken as a whole is false, but which contains truth also" (*Republic*, 377 a) and will scrupulously avoid another sort of false tale, namely the sort which Homer, Hesiod and other poets relate to us containing false pictures of the gods. The lie is "not a pretty one when anyone images badly in his speech the true nature of gods and heroes, like a painter whose portraits bear no resemblance to his models" (377 d-e). Fables of the first sort are familiar to anyone who has read Aesop. Fables of the second sort should be banned because they are false in every way, and can do moral harm to one who hears and accepts them.

There is more to edifying fables and other methods of persuasion than first meets the eye. Their use in education of the moral sentiments rests ultimately on the metaphysics of the person. A person is not a disembodied intellect but a delicately balanced composite of both reasoning and affective aspects. As Plato shows in the third speech in the *Phaedrus* (243 e-257 b), the most effective persuasion is that which appeals to the reason by stating what is true and to the emotions by presenting the truth beautifully.

It is on this basis that Plato in the *Laws*³ speaks frequently of "persuading," "charming," or "enchanting"⁴ the citizens in order to produce a concord between reason and emotion. Plato (781 b) comments on persuasion, "...the laws' method will be partly persuasion and partly (when they have to deal with characters that defy persuasion) compulsion and chastisement..." Popper sees this persuasion as "largely lying propaganda,"⁵ but this interpretation is flawed because the "charms" which Plato is recommending in this passage and in the passages immediately following are not *lies* in any sense, but are merely attractive presentations of the truth.

²For an elaboration of this rationale, and for a review of well known criticisms of Plato's views on lying, see Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Justice and Dishonesty in Plato's Republic," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.21, pp.79-96, Spring, 1983.

³For example at *Laws*, 659 d-e; See also 664 b, 665 c, 670 c, 671 a, 773 d, 812 c, 873 e, 887 d, 903 b and 944 b.

⁴ Glenn Morrow, "Plato's Conception of Persuasion," *Philosophical Review*, 1953, pp.238-239, discusses the term 'enchantment' and its connection with education. "Education [in the *Laws*] is essentially a training of the sentiments, from earliest years onward, into accord with the standards set by the law (653 b-c). But in the later work we are given a clearer view of what Plato thought this training involves. He calls it explicitly and repeatedly a process of "enchantment" In order to produce this effect, chants [*odai*] appear to have been invented, which are really enchantments [*epodai*], and are designed to implant the harmony of which we speak (659 d-e). But the word, **epodai**, and its cognates appear with notable frequency in all later discussions of education, and we can only conclude that Plato is deliberately emphasizing a definite technique. And this is strange, for **epodai** are most commonly connected, elsewhere in Plato and in Greek writers generally, with magic or sorcery. They are the spells with which the sorcerer charms snakes, or drives away diseases, or averts divine wrath.

⁵ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, pp.270-271, notes 5-10, especially note 5.

Concerning persuasion, the Athenian (*Laws* 664 a) declares that the legislator can persuade the young of anything, "...the youthful mind will be persuaded of anything, if one will take the trouble to persuade it," Even if, *per impossible*,⁶ there could be a strong argument showing that for the individual who gets away with injustice, the unjust life is more pleasant than the just one, the legislator could still consistently recommend that the just life be *presented* as the happy and pleasant life. But why? Because believing that the just life is a pleasant and happy life will induce the citizens to practice justice thus, on the whole, bringing about the greatest good and happiness to the state and to the citizen.

In introducing the three choirs which are to "enchant the souls of children," (664 b-c), the Athenian says,

I maintain that our choruses—all three of them—should charm the souls of the children while still young and tender, and uphold all the admirable doctrines we have already formulated, and any we may formulate in the future. We must insist, as the central point of these doctrines, that the gods say the best life does in fact bring most pleasure. If we do that we shall be telling the plain truth, and we shall convince those whom we have to convince more effectively than if we advanced any other doctrine.

The remaining comments we find in the *Laws* on lying condemn it. In the preamble to commercial law (916e-917), the citizens are enjoined not to cheat each other, not to swear false oaths, and not to lie to superiors. They should not break their word or contract (920 e- 921 a). There are also injunctions against bearing false witness in a court proceeding (937c). Finally, Plato quotes Hesiod, this time with approval, "Justice is the daughter of Respect and both are the natural scourges of falsehood" (916 e).

In the persuasive, but not lying, general preamble to the legal code, Plato moreover provides a beautiful tribute to truth:

Truth heads the list of all things good, for gods and men alike. Let anyone who intends to be happy and blessed be its partner from the start, so that he may live as much of his life as possible a man of truth. You can trust a man like that, but not the man who is fond of telling deliberate lies (and anyone who is happy to go on producing falsehoods in ignorance of the truth is an idiot). Neither state is anything to envy.

This encomium does not say that one must *always* tell the truth; it says that anyone who wants to be happy and blessed should live *as much of his life as possible* as a person of truth. The point is that, on the whole and in general, telling the truth is morally and socially preferable to telling a lie. If we love essential truth, we will abhor and try to avoid the essential falsehood, or ignorance of soul. This love of **aletheia** will help bring about one's own moral and intellectual development. But *telling* the (verbal) truth also has a positive social value. One trusts a person who tells the truth, and trust is an important, rather essential, element in uniting persons to form a stable social unit.

When all these threads are pulled together, we are left with a picture of statesmen who love **aletheia**, and who, while they must make considerable use of the verbal (medicinal) lie, are yet not habitual liars, i.e., they do not lie because they are fond of lying, but in every instance only for the good of the state. They recognize and encourage truth-telling as essential among citizens carrying out various legal, social and contractual obligations. They condemn any lie that presents the gods or heroes as evil.

In contemporary moral discourse there has been a tendency to treat all instances of lying as morally objectionable. The aversion most of us feel to lying has been justified on the basis that there is something inherently wrong in lying. Kant, for example, holds that it is always a duty to oneself to tell the truth since, "A lie is an abandonment, or as it were, an annihilation of the dignity of man."⁷ Is it possible that the modern critic who emphasizes the "dishonesty" of Plato's view on lying is falling into the very

⁶ This sort of case is considered at *Laws*, 663 e.

⁷ Immanuel Kant. *The Doctrine of Virtue*. trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). P.92.

fault that Plato identifies and describes in the Republic? “Just as too great a devotion to either music or gymnastic causes an undesirable imbalance in the soul,” he says, “so too, in respect of truth, we shall regard as maimed in precisely the same way that soul that hates the voluntary lie and is greatly angered by it in others, but cheerfully accepts the involuntary falsehood and is not distressed when convicted of lack of knowledge” (535 e).

The judicious Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics*,⁸ observes that the absolutist position that holds a lie is never justifiable is difficult to maintain for there are circumstances under which honorable persons would think it right to lie. Plato also takes this position. In the political dialogues examined here, he offers a nuanced treatment of the topic by distinguishing different types of truth and emphasizing how one can be persuaded to love truth. While his position cannot, strictly speaking, be classified as either utilitarian or consequentialist, it nonetheless allows for important contextual features to be part of the moral calculation. Clearly one should love essential truth, and verbal truth as a general rule; the difficult task, for those not perfectly wise, is to determine when the verbal truth should not be told.

⁸ Henry Sidgwick. *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1907), pp.312-319, discusses the so-called duty of veracity.