

Falsehood and Lies in Plato's Political Thought

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And I expect that the story of Odysseus came to exceed his experiences, through the sweet songs of Homer, since there is a certain solemnity in his lies and winged artfulness, and poetic skill deceives, seducing us with stories, and the heart of the mass of men is blind (Pindar, Nemean, 7.20-24)

Fiction is a lie that tells us true things, over and over (Gaiman 2013, xvi)

Abstract

In Republic VI, Plato argues that the philosophical soul has “the spirit of truthfulness [and] reluctance to admit falsehood in any form.” Yet, in books II and III, Plato stresses the importance of falsehood in the upbringing of the guardians and advocates for the use of “useful fictions.” However, if the rule of philosophers is justified by their love of truth and the complete absence of falsehood from their soul, their legitimacy could potentially be undermined by the presence of falsehood in their education and upbringing. To account for Plato’s solution to this potential threat, this paper explores the role of falsehood in Plato’s political thought. It shows, first, that Plato’s critique of democracy is deeply tied to the types of falsehood that proliferate under this regime. While Plato rejects the democratic use of falsehoods and fictions, he nonetheless recognizes the necessity of some falsehood in politics. Thus, this paper discusses the nature of the good and useful falsehoods that would be admitted to the ideal city, Plato’s justification for them, and the role they should have in the life and upbringing of the guardians and in maintaining order and stability. Focusing on the ideological function of the first half of the Noble Lie, this paper argues that the Lie solves the threat to the philosophers’ legitimacy by naturalizing their education and upbringing and thereby masking their false content.

1. Introduction

In book VI of the *Republic*, Plato lists the various characteristics of the philosophical soul, including his familiar claims about the philosopher’s superior rational capacity, bravery, and memory. More important for him, however, are the claims that the philosopher must have “complete absence of falsehood (*apseudēian*) and reluctance to admit falsehood in any form” (R. 485c) and that “the true lover of knowledge must, from childhood up (*ek nēon*), be most of all a striver after truth in every form” (R. 485d). At the same time, in books II and III, Plato stresses the importance of falsehood in the upbringing of the guardians and advocates for the use of “useful fictions” in their education and the life of the city. For example, he claims that “we begin by telling children fables (*mūthous lēgomen*),

and the fable is, taken as a whole, false (*pseudos*), but there is truth in it also" (R. 376e-377c) and that mothers and nurses "mold (*pláttein*) the souls of children by these stories (*mūthois*) far rather than their bodies by their hands" (R. 378e). Even more so, Socrates does not only expect that the philosophers and guardians will be persuaded by such falsehoods, but also insists that they will be chosen based on their capacity to guard the convictions that they had acquired during their formative years, despite their often false nature (R. 412b-414c).

How can we explain the apparent tension between these accounts? How can the philosopher-rulers display "the spirit of truthfulness" and admit no falsehood since childhood while being nourished by falsehood since childhood and required to maintain their loyalty to these falsehoods as adults? Adams, in his commentary on the *Republic*, have tried to solve this tension by claiming that the kind of falsehoods to be avoided by the philosophers is quite limited, and should cover only "the strict Platonic sense, as 'ignorance in the soul respecting the truth'" (Adams 1902, 4). In this, Adams refers to Plato's idea of a 'true falsehood' (*aleithōs pseudos*) or 'essential falsehood' (*to ontī pseudos*), which is, according to Plato, "that falsehood (*pseudesthai*) in the most vital part of themselves, and about their most vital concerns" (R. 382a). Unlike the "falsehood in words," which is "an imitation of the affection in the soul, an after-rising image of it and not an altogether unmixed falsehood (*akraton pseudos*)," the 'true' or 'essential' falsehood is "ignorance namely in the soul of the man deceived (*toū epseusmēnou*)" (R. 382a-c). While Plato holds that the 'true falsehood' will be hated by both gods and men (R. 382a), he often refers to the 'falsehood in words' as "useful falsehood" (*tō pseudos chreīsimon*), and offers two distinct justifications for it: it can be used against enemies and in help of friends, and then it becomes a "useful medicine" (*pharmakon chreīsimon*), or it can be used in fables (*muthologiais*) in cases where we are ignorant about the truth. Then, "we liken the false to the true as far as we may and so make it useful" (R. 382a-e).

If Plato's demand that the philosophers must display a complete lack of falsehood refers only to 'true falsehoods', then we have a simple solution to the potential contradiction, since Plato argues that the falsehoods included in the education and upbringing of children must not contain this kind of falsehood. However, as Guthrie holds, "one cannot help wondering whether, as he writes these stirring words, he still has in mind the distinction between intellectual and spoken falsehood and the property of a medicinal use of the latter" (Guthrie 1975, 459). And indeed, as Schofield rightly points out, Plato's statement in *Republic* 485c-d seems to be covering more than just 'essential falsehoods,' but also the broader category of falsehood in speech (Schofield 2007, 148), which does include the kind of falsehoods that the philosophers will be taught as children. Instead, Schofield argues that this statement exemplifies the tension between "their aspirations as philosophers and the constraints under which they must operate as rulers," and that what Plato has in mind here is that "even as they tell politically expedient lies, philosopher rulers will hate doing it" (Schofield 2007, 148).

While this may very well be the case with respect to Plato's claim that the philosophers must be lovers of truth and haters of falsehood, the puzzle nonetheless remains. Even if the philosophers will engage in lying only when necessary and will hate doing it, how can Plato demand that they will have "complete absence of falsehood" in their soul since childhood while holding that their education will include many such falsehoods? This question represents more than a mere theoretical puzzle, as it poses a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the rule of philosophers. Specifically, if the rule of philosophers is justified by their love of truth and the complete absence of falsehood from their soul, their legitimacy could potentially be undermined by the presence of falsehood in their education and upbringing and their unconditional loyalty to convictions that contain falsehoods. How, then, did Plato solve this tension and this potential challenge to the legitimacy of the philosophers' rule in the ideal city?

This paper argues that the solution to this potential contradiction is found in the famous 'Noble Lie.' Specifically, it argues that the first half of the Noble Lie solves this tension by *naturalizing* the falsehoods and fictions which the guardians received during their formative years and thereby *masking* their false and fictive nature. Naturalization—which has long been considered as an important function of any ideology (Althusser 1971; Mannheim 1954; Ricoeur 1986)—can be described in the context of Greek political thought as a transformation of a *nomos*—a law, custom or norm that is by definition a social artifice—into *phusis*—a fact of nature that is independent of society and its political life. Although the guardians and philosophers have been fed with lies since childhood, the Noble Lie's naturalization of their education and upbringing ensures that they can nonetheless view themselves, and be viewed by others, as displaying “a lack of falsehood” and “reluctance to admit falsehood in any form” and as striving towards nothing but the truth since childhood. Thus, by transforming the training and education of the guardians from a product of customs and norms (*nomos*) to the product of nature (*phusis*), the Noble Lie undermines the potential threat posed by these falsehoods to the legitimacy of the philosophers' rule.

In arguing so, this paper joins a growing body of literature that moves away from the common post-war interpretation of the Noble Lie as the vehicle of totalitarian politics and propaganda (Popper 1950; Crossman 1959; Annas 1981). At the same time, it also departs from a conventional interpretation that takes the Noble Lie to be a (more or less justified) tool to be used on the lower classes *by* the philosophers in order to secure the order and stability of the state (Page 1991; Monoson 2000, 128; Dombrowski 2004; Kamatekar 2004; Reeve 2006, 212; Rinella 2007). Instead, it follows a group of scholars who take the Noble Lie to be primarily directed at the rulers themselves (Guthrie 1975, 463), and as a means of securing a patriotic ideology (Schofield 2006, 287), shielding the young from the full complexity of the truth (Ferrari 1990, 113), or naturalizing certain social fictions and falsehoods (Kasimis 2016).

The Noble Lie consists of two parts: the first (“Cadmian” or “Hesiodic”) part provides a mythical account of the autochthonic origin of the citizens and their formation under earth; the second part, also known as the ‘myth of the metals,’ offers an explanation and justification of the class structure in the ideal city. Despite this bipartite structure, much of the scholarly discussion of the Noble Lie has focused on its second half. In fact, it is not uncommon for commentators to entirely equate the Noble Lie with the myth of metals, or even treating them as synonyms (Cornford 1935, 104; Monoson 2000, 172; Samaras 2002, 49; Reeve 2006, 183, 210; Allen 2013, 65). As a result, much of the analysis of the ideological function of the Noble Lie has stressed its role in justifying and regulating the city’s class structure (Cornford 1935, 104; Dombrowski 2004; Kamatekar 2004; Rinella 2007; Monoson 2000, 128; Samaras 2002, 50; Reeve 2006, 211). By focusing on the second half of the Noble Lie, however, we run the risk of missing the full complexity of its ideological function in society. Focusing on the first half instead, this paper argues that it provides not only a “foundational myth” (Schofield 2006, 290; Carmola 2003, 52) or an ideology directed at the rulers and encouraging patriotism and genuine care for the city and its interest (Schofield 2006, 223-224, 286), but also another element in the city’s ideology – securing the legitimacy of the philosophers’ rule.

To fully grasp the regulatory and ideological function of the first half of the Noble Lie, however, the paper first establishes Plato’s position on the necessity of falsehood in politics. The first section argues that while Plato thought that some measure of falsehood is necessary in politics, he did not consider all falsehoods to be equally morally and politically permissible. Specifically, it shows that Plato’s critique of democracy is closely tied to his rejection of the uses of falsehoods and fictions in the Athenian democracy. Finally, the paper turns to Plato’s account of morally and pragmatically justified use of fiction and falsehood in the *Republic*. It explores the regulation of the production of falsehoods in Plato’s educational program and further contextualizes the use of the Noble Lie as a solution to the problem of falsehood in the education and upbringing of the guardians and the rulers.

2. Plato's Critique of the Democratic Falsehoods

Before turning to Plato's construction of morally and pragmatically justified falsehoods in the ideal city (*Kallipolis*), it is worthwhile to examine his evaluation of the use of falsehoods under the non-ideal conditions of the Athenian democracy. This will allow us to establish that although Plato considered some measure of false and fictive content to be unavoidable in social and political life, he nonetheless did not consider all falsehoods to be of equal moral worth or equally politically permissible. To see this, this section will consider, first, Plato's claim about the necessity of some measure of falsehood in politics; and second, Plato's critical evaluation of the Athenian democracy's misuse of such false and fictive content.

2.1 *On the Necessity of Falsehood in Social and Political life*

Plato's argument for the the necessity of falsehood in social and political life is found most clearly in his account of the education and upbringing of children, and of the ways in which social and cultural knowledge is transmitted in early age through formal and informal education, and by means of stories, myths, and fictions. The primary reason for Plato's concern with education and upbringing is that "the beginning in every task is the chief thing, especially for any creature that is young and tender. For it is then that it is best molded (*plattetai*) and takes the pattern (*tupos*) that one wishes to stamp upon it" (R. 377a-b). Furthermore, mothers and nurses "mold (*plattēin*) the souls of children by these stories (*muthois*) far rather than their bodies by their hands" (R. 378e).¹ As we will consider in detail later, the fictive tales told to children are considered by Plato to be part of the 'falsehood in speech.' Specifically, he holds that "we begin by telling children fables (*muthous*), and the fable is, taken as a whole, false (*pseudos*), but there is truth in it also" (376e-377c). The effects of the early exposure to cultural content

¹ Dodds suggests that this Platonic insight is novel, especially with respect to religious training and education. According to him, "no one before Plato seems to have realized the importance of early religious training as a means of conditioning the future adult" (Dodds 1971, 222).

mediated by the fictive and often false narrative of a story are long-lasting and hard to alter. Specifically, Plato expresses his concern that “the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory, but whatever opinions are taken into the mind at that age are wont to prove hard to wash (*duseknipta*) and unalterable (*ametastata*)” (R. 378d-e).

While the effects of such falsehoods are felt most strongly in childhood, they remain significant throughout adulthood as well. As Janaway notes, “however rationally governed and however much in command of the distinction between reality and artistic make-believe (as children are not), a part of each of us still craves emotional expression and likes to indulge itself in a welter of powerful images” (Janaway 2006, 391). Clear evidence for this is found in the *Phaedo*, where much of the later discussion of the immortality of the soul is shadowed by the “childish fear” (*dedienai ta ton paidon*) of Cebes and Simmias. At a critical moment in the dialog, Cebes asks Socrates to “assume that we have that fear, and try to convince us; or rather, do not assume that we are afraid, but perhaps there is a child within us, who has such fears. Let us try to persuade him not to fear death as if it were a hobgoblin.” Socrates, in response, advise him to “sing charms (*epadein*) to him every day until you charm away his fear” (*Phaedo* 77d-e), and later in the dialog (*Phaedo* 114d) provides his interlocutors with a myth to be used precisely as such a charm.²

Socrates' use of a story that is largely false to ease the childish fear of his friends thus provides us with a second example of the use of falsehood, one that is not limited to the upbringing of children. Together, these two examples represent instances of what Socrates calls in the *Republic* ‘falsehood in words’ (*to en tois logois pseudos*). We will consider this concept in detail later in the paper, but for now it is worth noting that this type of falsehood appears to be an integral part of social and political life and

² Socrates concludes his mythical tale of the soul's afterlife by arguing that “now it would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I have described it, but that this or something like it is true concerning our souls and their abodes, since the soul is shown to be immortal, I think he may properly and worthily venture to believe; for the venture is well worth while, and he ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were magic charms (*epadein*), which is the reason why I have been lengthening out the story (*mython*) so long” (*Phaedo* 114d).

can be justified on both moral and pragmatic grounds. Specifically, just like in the *Phaedo*, it can be used in help of friends (or against enemies), and then it becomes a “useful medicine,” and it can be used in fables (*muthologīa*) in cases where we are ignorant about the truth (R. 382a-e). Therefore, Plato's awareness of the effects of falsehood is not limited to children but remains a concern later in life as well. Such false and fictive content has a significant presence in society's cultural and symbolic realms, with potentially longstanding effects on children and adults alike.

2.2 Plato's Critique of the Democratic Falsehoods

Thus far we have established that Plato considered some measure of false and fictive content to be unavoidable in social and political life. At the same time, as we will now begin to see, Plato did not consider all falsehoods to be of equal moral worth, and thus did not consider them to be equally politically permissible. Before we turn to Plato's construction of a morally and pragmatically permissible use of falsehoods in politics, it is worth considering how his view of the use of falsehoods in the Athenian democracy fits within his broader critique of this regime.

The first thing to consider about Plato's critique of the Athenian democratic use of falsehoods is that it represents what Plato views as the worst kind of falsehood. This is what he calls ‘true falsehood’ (*aleithōs pseūdos*) or ‘essential falsehood’ (*tō ōnti pseūdos*) and defines as “that falsehood (*pseūdesthai*) in the most vital part of themselves, and about their most vital concerns.” More accurately, he explains that what he has in mind is a “deception in the soul about realities (*peri tā ōnta pseūdesthai*), to have been deceived (*epseūsthai*) and to be blindly ignorant and to have and acquire the falsehood (*keketeisthai tō pseūdos*) there [in the soul].” Plato considers this kind of falsehood to be the worst, because unlike the “falsehood in words,” which is “an imitation of the affection in the soul, an after-rising image of it and not an altogether unmixed falsehood (*ākraton pseūdos*),” the ‘true’ or ‘essential’ falsehood is “ignorance namely in the soul of the man deceived (*toū epseusmēnou*)” (R. 382a-c). Thus, it represents

an 'unmixed falsehood' in the soul, which seems to be unaware of the false nature of its beliefs about things of the 'most vital concerns.' Thus, the major problem with this type of falsehood is that it represents a genuine self-deception, or "saying something false in your own mind to yourself, particularly something false about 'the most important things'" (Schofield 2006, 298). Furthermore, as Gill shows, "while such a state consists, in part, in having false ethical beliefs, it is clear from the larger context that such 'falsehood' is a property of the personality as a whole, and one which derives from the implanting of the wrong patterns of aspiration and desire" (Gill 1993, 45).

In Books II and III of the *Republic*, the idea of the 'true' or 'essential' falsehood is primarily associated with the products of poetry and the sort of false beliefs about the 'most vital concerns' that it legitimizes and disseminate.³ Particularly, as Baima notes, the poetic 'true falsehoods' with which Plato is concerned are those about ethics, about "how one should live and what one should pursue" (Baima 2017, 1, 8). Plato associates the perverse ethical teachings of the poets with "the greatest lie about the things of greatest concernment" (R. 377e), a description that fits his definition of the 'true' falsehood and includes their mythic tales of Gods and heroes. These tales include the story of Uranus and Cronos (R. 377e), accounts of fighting and struggles among the gods (R. 378b), the claims that God may cause evil (R. 380b) or deceive humans (R. 380d), or stories about heroes that may encourage uncourageous or inappropriate conduct (R. 387b-d, 392a-c). Thus, as Gill argues, "poets are, typically, 'false,' it would seem, because their representations, produced by people who are ignorant in their psyche 'about the most important things,' instill falsehoods in the psyche of their audience" (Gill 1993, 45). Such 'true falsehoods' are not limited to the work of poets, however, and often gain their influence through the official democratic ideology. For example, as Plato's observes in the *Menexenus*, the Athenian myth of autochthony carries not only an essential falsehood about the moral equality of

³ On this point, see also Gill (1993, 44-45).

individuals, but also leads to erroneous moral and political conduct and to demands for political equality.⁴

The problem with the Athenian democratic use of falsehoods has to do not only with the type of falsehood that is being used, but even more so with the ways in which it reinforces the hold of these falsehoods on the soul in a 'vicious cycle' of corruption. While Plato does not refer to such a cycle explicitly, we may think of it in contrast to the virtuous 'cycle of growth' described in *Republic* IV. There, Plato holds that "the state, if it once starts well, proceeds as it were in a cycle of growth (*küklos aüxanomēnei*). I mean that a sound nurture and education if kept up creates good natures in the state, and sound natures in turn receiving an education of this sort develop into better men than their predecessors both for other purposes and for the production of offspring as among animals also" (*R.* 424a-b). Just as good nature and good education produce a virtuous cycle of growth, so we can assume that bad nature and bad education would result in a 'vicious cycle of corruption.'⁵ In the case of Athens, the democratic institutions and the dynamic between the various mimetic artists and the *demos* lead to a mutual reinforcement of harmful falsehoods and fictions in such vicious cycle of corruption with potentially disastrous consequences.

Mimetic and imitative art, according to Plato, operates on the lower, irrational part of the soul. And indeed, Plato asks, "is it not obvious that the nature of the mimetic poet is not related to this better part of the soul and his cunning is not framed to please it, if he is to win favor with the multitude,

⁴ Specifically, Plato comments on the subtle causal relationship between the ideas of natural and political equality: "We and our people, on the contrary, being all born of one mother, claim to be neither the slaves of one another nor the masters; rather does our natural birth-equality *compels* (*anagkázdei*) us to seek lawfully legal equality, and to yield to one another in no respect save in reputation for virtue and understanding" (*Mene.* 239a). The close relationship between autochthony and democracy is, of course, a common *topos* in the Funeral Oration, which can also be found, for example, in *Lysis* (*Lysias* 2.18-19). For a further discussion of Plato's critique of democratic equality, see Bobonich (2002), Cornford (1935), Keyt (2006), and Kraut (1999).

⁵ This idea fits well with Plato's worry about the harmful long-term effects of being "nourished among images of evil, as it were in a pasturage of poisonous herbs" (*R.* 401b). A support for the notion of a vicious cycle of corruption can be also found in the *Menexenus*, where Socrates provides the two sides of this equation, arguing that "for a polity is a thing which nurtures men, good men when it is noble, bad men when it is base" (*Mene.* 238c).

but is devoted to the fretful and complicated type of character because it is easy to imitate?" Even more so, Plato holds that the mimetic artists "stimulates and nourishes this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part," and thus "sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution (*kakein politeian*) by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element" (R. 604d-605c). Thus, the first element in the democratic vicious cycle is given by the corruptive influence of mimetic art, which takes advantage of the irrational part of the soul and weakens its rational capacity, and which is the most common way through which many of the Athenian democratic falsehoods gain their hold over the citizens.

At the same time, however, Plato's analysis of the Athenian democracy reveals that the mimetic artists are not alone to be blamed since they themselves are trapped in a power dynamic that forces them to feed and gratify the irrational part of the soul. The production of *mimesis* and imitation indulges the lower part of the soul, thereby making it stronger and undermines the power of the rational part, which produces greater demand in the soul for this kind of pleasures. This demand, in turn, is amplified and augmented by the power structure of the Athenian democracy and the multitude's monopoly over power. Plato is well aware of the enormous power of the assembled *demos*, asking, for example, "what private teaching do you think will hold out and not rather be swept away by the torrent of censure and applause, and borne off on its current, so that he will affirm the same things that they do to be honorable and base, and will do as they do, and be even such as they?" (R. 492b-c). This immense power creates a unique trap for individuals who depend on the approval of the *demos* for their living, such as poets, artists, orators and politicians, which are forced to rehearse "nothing else than these opinions of the multitude which they opine when they are assembled and calls this knowledge wisdom" (R. 493a). This power dynamic is perhaps best captured in Plato's Image

of the Beast,⁶ and especially in its conclusion that those who think they can control the *demos* because they know “the moods and the pleasures of the motley multitude in their assembly, whether about painting or music or, for that matter, politics” are, in fact, being controlled by the *demos* and forced to gratify the desires of the multitude (R. 493c-d).⁷

This democratic ‘vicious cycle,’ in which bad and harmful falsehoods are mutually reinforced by the power dynamic between their producers and consumers, not only corrupts the souls of the citizens but also carries dangerous political consequences. This is made clear in Plato’s account of democracy in Book VIII of the *Republic*. There, Plato argues that the democratic desire for freedom leads to a constitution where “everyone would arrange a plan for leading his own life in the way that pleases him,” which leads democracy to be “the most beautiful of polities as a garment of many colors (*poikilon*), embroidered with all kinds of hues, so this, decked and diversified with every type of character” (R. 557b-c). This ‘multicolored’ constitution is associated by Plato with lawlessness (557e-R. 558a), anarchy (R. 558b-c), disrespect to the natural or customary order and hierarchies (R. 562-563c), and with linguistic instability (R. 560c-561a) of the kind that brings to mind Thucydides’ account of the *stasis* (civil strife) in Corcyra (*Thucydides* 3.82.4).⁸

⁶ On the importance of the Image of the Beast to Plato’s critique of democracy, see Schofield (2006). According to him, “the image of the Beast conveys a great deal of what Plato wanted to say about democracy. Fundamental is the thought that in a political system of direct popular rule, where key decisions are taken not by an individual or a body with restricted membership, but by an assembled populace itself, the people become the source of all values in the society. As we might put it, democracy is in this regard a totalitarian system. More specifically, the power of public opinion generates a radically corrupt system of values. This is because it is the passions and appetites of the populace which in the end dictate the content of what passes for wisdom” (Schofield 2006, 64-65) On this point, see also Ober (1998, 224) and Irwin (1992, 64).

⁷ This theme is, of course, explored in many other Platonic dialogues. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates points to Callicles’s inability to contradict his lovers, Demos son of Pylampes and the Athenian *demos*, and thus “in the Assembly, if the Athenian *demos* disagrees with some statement you are making, you change over and say what it desires” (*Gorg.* 481d-e). Similarly, the *Ion* exposes the rhapsode’s dependency on the *demos*, where Ion claims that “I have to pay the closest attention to them; since, if I set them crying, I shall laugh myself because of the money I take, but if they laugh, I myself shall cry because of the money I lose” (*Ion* 535d-536a).

⁸ Thucydides famously writes that during the *stasis*, “words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any. Frantic violence, became the attribute of manliness; cautious plotting, a justifiable means of self-defense” (*Thuc.* 3.82.4). This description is echoed in Plato’s account of democracy, where “they themselves prevail in the conflict, and naming reverence and awe ‘folly’ thrust it forth, a dishonored fugitive. And temperance they call ‘want of manhood’ and banish it with contumely, and they teach that moderation and orderly expenditure are ‘rusticity’ and ‘illiberality,’” and “in celebration

While Plato's direct object of criticism here is the endless democratic lust for liberty and its destructive consequences, this state of affairs is clearly connected to the problem falsehood in the Athenian democracy and to the 'vicious cycle of corruption' that it can cause. This is due to the fact that the lower part of the soul, the part that is at the center of this cycle, appears to be its most 'democratic' element. This is made clear by Plato when he describes this "irrational and idle part of us" as "involves much imitation and color" (*polleîn mimeisin kai poikizeîn*) (R. 604e) and as he argues that "the nature of the mimetic poet is not related to this better part of the soul and his cunning is not framed to please it, if he is to win favor with the multitude, but is devoted to the fretful and multicolored type of character (*poikilon êthos*) because it is easy to imitate" (R. 605a). Plato's use of the same term, multicolored (*poikilos*), to describe the democratic constitution and the element in the soul that is most exposed to the harmful and corrupting effect of mimetic art is telling. It suggests that by strengthening this irrational and 'multicolored' part of the soul, the democratic 'vicious cycle' of corruption reinforces and contributes to the unstable and anarchic tendencies of this regime and its eventual deterioration into tyranny.⁹

of their praises they euphemistically denominate insolence 'good breeding,' license 'liberty,' prodigality 'magnificence,' and shamelessness 'manly spirit'" (R. 560c-561a). The comparison with Thucydides' *History* may be even broader. As Taylor notes, "If we read the description side by side with the famous Funeral Oration in Thucydides, we shall see at once that the very notes of Athenian life which Pericles there selects as evidence of its superiority are carefully dwelt upon by Socrates for the opposite purpose of proving that, for all its surface brilliance, such a life is at bottom so diseased that society is one the verge of complete collapse" (Taylor 1926, 296-297).

⁹ This account of the democratic 'vicious cycle' and its relation to the unstable nature of the democratic regime calls into question interpretations of Plato that highlight his view of the positive potential of democratic freedom. Kraut, for example, argues that Plato "must be assuming that Athens deserves credit for allowing its citizens to move past the lowest stage of moral education. To go beyond conventional moral opinion, one must be able to recognize the limitations and defects of one's childhood training; and this recognition can come only when one's assumptions are challenged in free and one debate" (Kraut 1999, 44). The discussion above, however, suggests that we may have some good reasons to question the claim that Plato saw democracy as providing the grounds for questioning and challenging one's childhood training and the conventional moral opinions that come with it. In contrast, democratic freedom seems to be associated with the active reinforcement of bad fictions and their hold on the citizens' souls. Instead of encouraging citizens to question the falsehoods received during their childhood training, democratic freedom thus secures and solidifies them.

3. Plato's Solution to the Problem of Falsehood in *Kallipolis*

We are now finally in a position to evaluate Plato's construction of a morally and pragmatically permissible set of falsehoods in his ideal city. This final section first explores Plato's educational program in *Kallipolis* (the ideal city) and his design of a proper set of falsehoods that will ensure a virtuous cycle of growth in the city. It then considers the dangers posed by changes to the symbolic and fictive environment and Plato's elaborate plan to guard against such change. Finally, it revisits the claims about the truthful nature of the philosophers' soul in light of the prevalence of falsehood in their education and upbringing, and claims that the Noble Lie is, in part, a device designed to solve this potential tension and contradiction.

3.1 Reforming the Democratic Falsehoods: Plato's Educational Program in Kallipolis

As we have already seen, while Plato recognized the necessity of some falsehood in social and political life, he did not believe that all falsehoods and fictions enjoy an equal moral standing or are equally politically permissible. Specifically, we saw that Plato rejects what he calls 'true falsehood' or 'essential falsehood', which represent "deception in the soul about realities, to have been deceived and to be blindly ignorant and to have and acquire the falsehood there [in the soul]" (R. 382a-c). Much of the fictive tales of epic poetry, according to Plato, consists of this harmful sort of falsehood (R. 377c-378a). The 'true falsehood' stands in contrast to the 'falsehood in words' (*tō en tois logos pseūdos*), which is not an "unmixed falsehood" and can be morally and pragmatically justified. Plato often refers to this sort of falsehood as "useful falsehood" (*tō pseudos chreisimon*), and offers two distinct justifications for it: it can be used against enemies and in help of friends, and then it can become a "useful medicine"

(*pharmakon chreḗsimon*), or it can be used in fables (*muthologías*) in cases where we are ignorant about the truth. Then, “we liken the false to the true as far as we may and so make it useful” (R. 382a-e).¹⁰

We will return to examine the full implications of the ‘useful falsehoods’ shortly when considering the Noble Lie, the most famous falsehood in this category. First, however, we should consider the role of such falsehood in Plato’s educational plan for *Kallipolis*. As we have already seen, Plato holds that “the beginning in every task is the chief thing, especially for any creature that is young and tender. For it is then that it is best molded (*pláttetai*) and takes the pattern (*túpos*) that one wishes to stamp upon it” (R. 377a-b) and that mothers and nurses “mold (*pláttein*) the souls of children by these stories (*múthois*) far rather than their bodies by their hands” (R. 378e). The fictive tales told to children are considered by Plato to be part of ‘falsehood in speech.’ Specifically, he holds that “we begin by telling children fables (*múthous légomen*), and the fable is, taken as a whole, false, but there is truth in it also” (376e-377c).¹¹ Importantly, these false and fictive tales seem to fit Plato’s definition of a ‘useful fiction,’ insofar as they convey truth about the ‘most important things’ and encourage the children to develop justified beliefs and virtuous character, even if they are overall false.¹²

Given the importance of falsehoods and fiction in the upbringing of children, and given how—as in the case of democratic Athens—they can easily lead to the long-term corruption of the individual soul and the community as a whole, we should not be surprised that Plato devotes much of the *Republic* for a detailed program of reforming and redesigning them. As Burnyeat sharply remarks,

¹⁰ ἀφομοιοῦντες τῷ ἀληθεῖ τὸ ψεῦδος ὅτι μάλιστα, οὕτω χρήσιμον ποιοῦμεν (R. 382d)

¹¹ ὅτι πρῶτον τοῖς παιδίοις μύθους λέγομεν; τοῦτο δὲ που ὡς τὸ ὄλον εἰπεῖν ψεῦδος, ἔνι δὲ καὶ ἀληθῆ

¹² In this, they reflect what Allen identifies as the “union of pragmatic truth with metaphysical falsehood.” Regarding the Noble Lie, she explains that “an utterance can be metaphysically false—a *pseudos*—but also ‘noble’ or ‘true to its birth,’ the core meaning of *gennaíos*, provided that it leads people to act more or less as they would act if they knew the truth” (Allen 2013, 22). A similar interpretation can be found, for example, in Schofield, who argues that “the culture is and must be saturated with myths that are literally false, and deceptive if believed to be factually true. But the deception is legitimate if like the Noble Lie and the stories Socrates *wants* the young to hear, they are morally admirable fiction that drug people into sound convictions and lead them to virtue” (Schofield 2006, 297). Similarly, Guthrie holds that “Plato’s own demand is that, though a myth may be invented, it should be true in the deeper sense of not misrepresenting the divine or heroic character” (Guthrie 1975, 457).

“the cave is not abolished in the ideal city, only purified” (Burnyeat 1997, 245). At the heart of the purification of the fictive and false cultural content transmitted by education, we find a set of “patterns” (*tūpoi*), the formulation of which is the subject of much of the discussion in books II and III. Plato holds that during childhood, the soul is “best molded and takes the pattern (*tūpos*) that one wishes to stamp upon it” (R. 377b). Accordingly, determining the shape and content of these patterns would have significant long-term consequences on society as a whole, and therefore deserves careful consideration.

The main set of patterns with which Plato is concerned applies directly to the content of the false and fictive tales to which children are exposed during their formative years. As Socrates and Adeimantus agree, it must be the job of the legislators and founders of the state to “know the patterns (*tūpous*) on which poets must compose their fables (*muthologeîn*) and from which their poems must not be allowed to deviate” (R. 379a). With respect to these tales, such patterns must ensure that “the true quality of God we must always surely attribute to him whether we compose in epic, melic, or tragic verse” (R. 379b). They include, first, the claim that God must be good and thus cannot be the cause of anything evil (R. 380b-c); and second, that God is completely free of falsehood, and that “God is altogether simple and true in deed and word, and neither changes himself nor deceives others by visions or words or the sending of signs in waking or in dreams” (R. 382e). Both of these claims are established by Socrates and Adeimantus as the patterns (*tūpoi*) and laws (*nōmoi*) according to which the poets and storytellers must abide.¹³

¹³ With respect to the first, it is concluded that ““this, then,” said I, “will be one of the laws (*nōmon*) and patterns (*tūpon*) concerning the gods to which speakers and poets will be required to conform, that God is not the cause of all things, but only of the good” (R. 380c); similarly, the discussion of the second pattern is concluded with Socrates’ question: ““you concur then,” I said, “this as our second norm or pattern (*tūpon*) for speech and poetry about the gods,—that they are neither wizards in shape-shifting nor do they mislead us by falsehoods (*pseudesai*) in words or deed?” and with Adeimantus responding that “by all means, I accept these patterns (*tūpous*) and would use them as laws (*nōmois*)” (R. 383a-c).

Additionally, and somewhat less explicitly, these patterns also limit the degree to which work of poetry can be *mimetic*. In Book III, Socrates offers a distinction between two types of poetic narration: “pure” and “mimetic.” In pure narration, “the poet himself is the speaker and does not even attempt to suggest to us that anyone but himself is speaking,” whereas in mimetic narration the poet “delivers a speech as if he were someone else” and “assimilates thereby his own diction as far as possible to that of the person whom he announces as about to speak” (R. 392b-393b). The problem with this sort of *mimesis*, however, is that it tends to cause the imitator to internalize the patterns of behavior which he imitates. Socrates argues that “imitations, if continued from youth far into life, settle down into habits (*ēthē*) and nature (*phūsin*) in the body, the speech, and the thought” (R. 395d).¹⁴ Thus, argues Socrates, while a moderate man will be willing to imitate the deeds and words of a fine man, he will “not wish to liken himself in earnest to one who is inferior” as he “shrinks in distaste from molding (*ekmáttein*) and fitting himself to baser patterns (*kaíōnon tūpous*)” (R. 396b-e). Thus, a third pattern is announced, concerning speech about humans, which holds that it should be one that “partakes of both, of imitation and simple narration, but there will be a small portion of imitation in a long discourse” (R. 396e).

While these three patterns are primarily designed to govern the production of poetry, Plato is explicit about their broader legal and cultural implications. When summarizing the discussion of these patterns, Socrates explains that “such would be the patterns (*tūpoi*) of their education and breeding. For why should one recite the list of the dances of such citizens, their hunts and chases with hounds, their athletic contests and races? It is pretty plain that they must conform (*epōmena*) to these principles and there is no longer any difficulty in discovering them” (R. 412b). This idea fits well with Plato's broad domain of cultural supervision in the ideal city, which includes not only poetry but is also

¹⁴ My discussion of imitation here focuses on Plato's earlier discussion of ‘imitation in speech,’ and not the later discussion of imitation in Book X. For an insightful discussion of the later form of imitation and the relationship between these two kinds of imitation in Plato's thought, see Ferrari (1990, 125-134), Allen (2013, 43-54) and Moss (2007).

concerned with keeping watch “over the other craftsmen, and forbid them to represent the evil disposition, the licentious, the illiberal, the graceless, either in the likeness of living creatures or in buildings or in any other product of their art” (R. 401b).¹⁵

In the absence of such supervision, as is the case in democratic Athens, children are “bred (*trephōmenoi*) among likeness of evil, as it were in a pasturage of poisonous herbs,” and “grazing freely and cropping from many such day by day they little by little and all unawares accumulate and build up a huge mass of evil in their own souls” (R. 401c). This aspect of Athenian cultural life contributes to what we identified as the democratic “vicious cycle of corruption.” By establishing the set of *topoi* that will govern the production of falsehood and regulate the cultural life in *Kallipolis*, Plato seeks to generate a “virtuous cycle of growth” that is diametrically opposed to its democratic counterpart. In the ideal city, children will be raised “in a salubrious region (*en hūgieinō topo*)” and would be surrounded by work of beauty that “from earliest childhood insensibly guide them to likeness, to friendship, to harmony with beautiful reason” (R. 401b-d). This will allow the legislator to secure “a cycle of growth (*kūklos auxxanomēnei*)” in which “a sound nurture and education if kept up creates good natures in the state, and sound natures in turn receiving an education of this sort develop into better men than their predecessors both for other purposes and for the production of offspring as among animals also” (R. 424a).

¹⁵ As Burnyeat notes, Plato did not have a narrow understanding of social and cultural institutions, but was rather well aware of “all the influences, all the ideas, images, and practices, that make up the culture of a society” (Burnyeat 1997, 217). These ideas are reflected in Schofield’s observation that Plato was seeking not only to reform the educational system but to constitute “an entire cultural environment designed with the single-minded aim of fostering virtue and the desire to become ‘a perfect citizen.’” This is because he recognized that “it is the unconscious even more than the consciousness of the young that needs to be permeated with influences making for virtue: above all with grace and beauty” (Schofield 2006, 37).

3.2 On the Problem of Change in Kallipolis

So far, we have seen that Plato's educational reform in *Kallipolis* is designed, in part, to exclude certain harmful falsehoods and fictions and to construct a positive alternative to the corrupt and corrupting democratic use of fiction. As is hinted by the above quote, however, the ideal city's "virtuous cycle of growth" is not self-enforcing. Unlike the self-enforcing democratic "vicious cycle of corruption," the virtuous cycle of growth in *Kallipolis* will remain stable only if the "sound nurture and education" of the citizens will be "kept up" or "saved" (*sozdomēnei*) (R. 424a). This is not an easy task, however, first and foremost because changes in the symbolic and fictive environment are slow, insidious, and hard to discern. Just as the negative influence of daily exposure to bad falsehoods may "little by little and all unawares accumulate and build up a huge mass of evil in their own souls" (R. 401c), so do changes in the *topoi* and the cultural landscape may go unnoticed. Socrates and Adeimantus, for example, argue that "it is certain that this is the kind of lawlessness that easily insinuates itself unobserved" and that "by gradual infiltration it softly overflows upon the characters and pursuits of men and from these issues forth grown greater to attack their business dealings, and from these relations it proceeds against the laws and the constitution with wanton license, Socrates, till finally it overthrows all things public and private" (R. 424d-e).

Plato addresses the problem of how to "keep up" the sound nurture and education in *Kallipolis* explicitly and vigorously immediately after posing it. In the passage that follows the introduction of the virtuous 'cycle of growth,' he states that

"it is to this that the overseers of our state must cleave and guard (*phulāttōsi*) against its insensible corruption.¹⁶ They must throughout be watchful (*phulāttōsi*) against innovations in music and gymnastics counter to the established order, and to the best of their power guard against them (*phulāttein*) [...] For a change to a new type of art (*mousikeis*) is something to beware of as a hazard of all our fortunes. For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions" [...] "It is here, then,"

¹⁶ The relationship between the 'overseers' of the state and the 'keeping up' or 'saving' of the order and way of life in *Kallipolis* is already established earlier. When introducing them, Socrates asks "and shall we not also need in our city, Glaucon, a permanent overseer (*ἐπιστάτου*) of this kind if its constitution is to be kept up (*σώζεσθαι*)?" (R. 412a).

I said, "in the art (*mousikēi*), as it seems, that our guardians must build their guard-house and post of watch (*phūlaxin*)" (R. 424b-c)

The dangers posed by the slow and insidious change in the *topoi* are thus considerable. Such changes in the fictive and symbolic order are bound to cause broader social and political change, to destabilize "the most fundamental political and social conventions" and to produce the kind of "lawlessness" and "wanton license" that results in a complete overthrow (*anatrēpsei*) of order (R. 424e). To prevent this sort of change and to secure the continuity of the virtuous 'cycle of growth,' the guardians and overseers of the state must take it as one of the central, if not the primary, objects of their concern, and even make it into "their guard-house and post of watch."

How can the founders and lawgivers of *Kallipolis* ensure, however, that a task of such paramount importance will be kept? Given the ways in which falsehoods and fictions operate on the soul and given the slow and insidious impact of changes in the accepted *topoi*, how can they ensure that the guardians and overseers themselves would not lose faith in the city's falsehood and fiction or be tempted to change their content or patterns? Plato is well aware of this potential difficulty and spends much of his discussion of choosing the right guardians addressing it. In fact, the guardians will not be chosen based on their rational capacity, courage, moderation, or any of the other virtues. Instead, they will be chosen based on their capacity to keep and maintain a certain set of convictions and opinions. As Plato explains,

"Then we must pick out from the other guardians such men as to our observation appear most inclined through the entire course of their lives to be zealous to do what they think for the interest of the state, and who would be least likely to consent to do the opposite." "That would be a suitable choice," he said. "I think, then, we shall have to observe them at every period of life, to see if they are conservators and guardians (*phulakikoi*) of this conviction (*dogmatos*) in their minds and never by sorcery nor by force can be brought to expel from their souls unawares this conviction (*doxan*) that they must do what is best for the state" (R. 412c)

The prospective guardians, argues thus Plato, must be tested since childhood to ensure that this opinion remains stable in their soul and withstands various challenges. Specifically, these tests will establish the guardian's capacity to guard against involuntary "exit of a belief (*dōxa*) from the mind." The guardians will have to demonstrate the stability and resilience of their beliefs through a series of tests, which will be "testing them much more carefully than men do gold in the fire, to see if the man remains immune to such witchcraft and preserves his composure throughout, a good guardian of himself and the culture (*mousikeēs*) which he has received, maintaining the true rhythm and harmony of his being in all those conditions, and the character that would make him most useful to himself and to the state" (R. 413d).¹⁷ Then, the "man endures the test and issues from it unspoiled (*akeiraton*)" will be chosen as a guardian, and the guardians will be established as the "helpers and aids for the convictions (*dōgmasin*) of the rulers" (R. 414a-b).

As is hinted by the above quote, while Plato is concerned here with a specific opinion or conviction (according to which the guardians' interest is identical to the interest of the state), the claims about the guardians' capacity to guard their convictions have much broader implications. Specifically, a guardian that will pass the various tests must be "a good guardian of himself and the culture (*mousikeēs*) which he has received," which must include the various *topoi* discussed in Books II and III and the fictions and falsehood he received in his education.¹⁸ This is made clear in the Simile of the Dye, where Socrates claims that "you must conceive what we too to the best of our ability were

¹⁷ The guardians' virtue of courage is similarly defined in terms of their capacity to guard the convictions which they receive. As Socrates explains, "bravery too, then, belongs to a city by virtue of a part of itself owing to its possession in that part of a quality that under all conditions will preserve (*sōzei*) the conviction (*dōxan*) that things to be feared are precisely those which and such as the lawgiver inculcated in their education. Is not that what you call bravery? [...] A kind of conservation (*soteirian*)," I said, "is what I mean by bravery." "What sort of a conservation?" "The conservation of the conviction which the law has created by education about fearful things—what and what sort of things are to be feared" (R. 429b-d)

¹⁸ As Taylor argues, "since the whole of the early education contemplated in the Republic is based on an appeal to taste and imagination, it follows that, as Socrates is careful to insist, the 'goodness' it produces, though it will be quite sufficient for every class except the statesmen, is not the true and philosophic goodness of which the Phaedo speaks. As we are carefully reminded, the self-devotion of even the gifting force of the reformed city is founded on 'opinion,' not on knowledge; their virtue is absolute loyalty to a sound tradition which they have imbibed from their 'social environment,' not loyalty to the claims of a summum bonum grasped by personal insight" (Taylor 1963 [1926], 280).

doing when we selected our soldiers and educated them in music and exercises of the body. The sole aim of our contrivance was that they should be convinced (*peisthētes*) and receive our laws like a dye as it were, so that their belief (*dōxa*) and faith might be fast-colored both about the things that are to be feared and all other things because of the fitness of their nature and nurture” (R. 429e-430a). Therefore, the prevention of change in the cultural content in *Kallipolis* is closely tied to the choice of the guardians based on their capacity to maintain a set of beliefs and convictions, including the broad cultural education they have received, and guard them against potential threats.

3.3 Naturalizing the Falsehood – The Noble Lie

Thus far, we have established that Plato's concern with preventing any cultural change (including the fictive and false narrative told to children and the *topoi* that will govern the production of poetry) have led him to devise a series of tests that will ensure that the guardians will be least likely to accept such change. At this point, it is worth noting that among the guardians, Socrates identifies the philosophers as those who appear most “competent to guard the laws and customs (*epiteideumata*) of society” (R. 484b). Specifically, in Book VI, Socrates reminds his interlocutors of the earlier discussion of the method by which the guardians will be chosen, and that “they must approve themselves lovers of the state when tested in pleasures and pains, and make it apparent that they do not abandon this fixed faith (*dōgma*) under stress of labors or fears or any other vicissitude.” Now, however, this recapitulation leads to a new conclusion, according to which “as the most perfect guardians we must establish philosophers” (R. 502e-503b).

With this conclusion, we find ourselves back at the puzzle with which this paper opened. As we now see clearly, the guardians will be chosen in accordance with their capacity to maintain the opinions and convictions which they received since childhood, and the philosophers appear to be superior to the other guardians in this respect. These opinions and convictions, however, which have

been acquired since childhood through education, are largely false, or at the very least contain some measure of falsehood. At the same time, Plato explicitly states that the philosophers must display “a complete lack of falsehood (*apseudeian*), reluctance to admit falsehood (*pseudos*) in any form, the hatred of it and the love of truth,” and furthermore argues that “the true lover of knowledge must, from childhood up, be most of all a striver after truth in every form” (R. 485b-d). How can we square these two contradictory demands? How could the philosophers completely lack falsehood and be reluctant to admit *any form* of falsehood, while at the same time being fed and nourished by falsehood and fiction since childhood and chosen based on their capacity to maintain the beliefs formed by these falsehoods? As mentioned, this contradiction may pose a severe challenge to the legitimacy of the rule of philosophers. Specifically, if the rule of philosophers is justified by their love of truth and the complete absence of falsehood from their soul, their legitimacy could potentially be undermined by the presence of falsehood in their education and upbringing and their unconditional loyalty to convictions that contain falsehoods.

The key to solving this puzzle and to secure the legitimacy of the philosophers' rule is found in the first half of the Noble Lie. The Noble Lie is introduced by Socrates immediately after his discussion of the method of choosing the guardians. He asks “how, then, might we contrive one of those opportune falsehoods (*pseudōn*) of which we were just now speaking, so as by one noble lie (*gennaion* [...] *pseudomēnous*)¹⁹ to persuade above all (*mālista*) the rulers themselves, but if not, the rest of the city?” What Socrates has in mind here is a sort of “Phoenician tale,²⁰ something that has happened in many parts of the world, as the poets say and have persuaded (*pepeikasin*), but that has not happened

¹⁹ As many commentators have noted, *gennaion pseudos*, which is commonly translated as the “Noble Lie,” is more accurately translated as a noble *falsehood* or a *falsehood true to its birth*. For a discussion of this term, see, for example, Guthrie (1975, 462), Allen (2013, 22), Schofield (2007, 138), and Rinella (2007, 151).

²⁰ For a helpful account of Plato's description of the Noble Lie as “something Phoenician” (Φοινικικόν τι), see especially Page (1991).

and perhaps would not be likely to happen in our day and demanding no little persuasion to make it believable" (R. 414b-c). Using this falsehood, they will

“undertake to persuade (*peithein*) first the rulers themselves and the soldiers and then the rest of the city, that in good sooth all our training (*etrepromēn*) and educating (*epaideuomen*) of them were things that they imagined (*edokoun*) and that happened to them as it were in a dream (*oneirata*); but that in reality (*tei aleitheia*) at that time they were down within the earth being molded (*plattōmenoi*) and nourished (*trephōmenoi*) themselves while their weapons and the rest of their equipment were being fashioned (R. 414d-e).

The second half of the Noble Lie contains, of course, the myth of the metals and the justification for the class division in *Kallipolis*, which is the center of much of the scholarly work on the Lie and is often treated as its synonym (Cornford 1935, 104; Monoson 2000, 172; Samaras 2002, 49; Reeve 2006, 183, 210; Allen 2013, 65). For the purposes of our discussion, however, we should focus our attention on the first part of the Lie, which exposes another important element in its ideological function—namely, securing the legitimacy of the philosophers' rule. Here, the key message of the Noble Lie is that the entire process of training and education that the guardians and rulers have received since childhood was nothing but a fancy. “In truth,” they were born out of the earth as they are now, having been already molded and nourished by the earth.

Among other things, this message allows the founders and legislators of *Kallipolis* to solve the contradictions between the philosophers' complete lack of falsehood and their nourishment in falsehood during childhood. The first part of the Noble Lie does this by *naturalizing* the falsehoods and fictions which the guardians received during their formative years and thereby *masking* their false and fictive nature. These things have never been told to them, but rather they were born with them and thus have always known them. While the ideological function of the Noble Lie has long been recognized (Schofield 2007, 156), the naturalizing function of its first half provides an additional important element in the city's ideology. As many have argued, ideology's powerful influence on social and political life has to do, in part, with its capacity to naturalize social and political fact, and making

the appear as natural, ahistorical, and objective, rather than social, historical and open to interpretation (Althusser 1971; Mannheim 1954; Ricoeur 1986). In the context of Greek political thought, one may think about the naturalizing effect of the Noble Lie as a transformation of a *nomos*—a law, custom or norm that is by definition a social artifice—into *physis*—a fact of nature that is independent of society and its political life.

By naturalizing the content of the guardians' education, the Noble Lie ensures that it no longer appears as false. Therefore, although the guardians and philosophers have been fed with lies since childhood, they can nonetheless view themselves, and be viewed by others, as displaying “a lack of falsehood (*apseudeian*)” and “reluctance to admit falsehood (*pseudos*) in any form” and as striving towards nothing but the truth since childhood (R. 485b-d). Thus, it secures the legitimacy of the philosophers' rule by reconciling the appearance of a potential tension between the philosophers' alleged complete lack of falsehood and absolute love of truth and the fact that they were nourished and molded by falsehoods and that the culture which they are committed to guard is still of these very same falsehoods.²¹

Therefore, the Noble Lie may be viewed as an important regulatory device within the ideal city. Just like the Athenian myth of autochthony, we can expect it to become a part of the city's foundational and continuous political activity (Kasimis 2016, 349). This is made clear by Glaucon, who expresses his doubts that the founders of *Kallipolis* will be able to make the guardians believe in this story but is more hopeful about their ability to do so with “their sons and successors and the rest

²¹ At the same time, as Kasimis and Carmola have shown, Socrates' frankness and openness about the false nature of the Noble Lie may suggest that it does not only serve as a device of naturalization in *Kallipolis*, but also reveals the ways in which this kind of naturalization operates as a regulatory device in every society. Thus, Kasimis holds that “what makes the noble lie subversive is not that it invokes deception *per se*. The invocation of lying is provocative because it is uttered in an Athenian setting where foundational lying is a familiar practice and can enable insights into democracy's own symbolic practices” (Kasimis 2016, 347). While Kasimis focuses on questions of citizenship and of the polis's boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, Carmola argues that the Lie reveals the centrality of intergenerational tensions in politics. According to her, “Socrates stresses the link between such institutionalized lies and justice, and thereby reveals the unjust nature of the true relationship [...] The noble lie thus serves to emphasize for Glaucon the specific conflict that needs to be hidden from the imaginary citizens” (Carmola 2003, 51).

of mankind who come after" (R. 415d). This suggests that the Noble Lie is not designed to be a one, single utterance, but rather something to be repeated many times by many different generations. In this, we may imagine the Noble Lie as having a function similar to the Athenian Funeral Oration or the Oath of Demophantos. In the Funeral Oration, a speaker chosen by the state delivered a public speech that typically rehearses a number of well-known *topoi*. These *topoi* include the Athenian mythical history, the catalog of military successes, and the Athenian myth of autochthony, to which Plato alludes explicitly in his Noble Lie.²² Being thus rehearsed publicly and regularly, the fictions and falsehoods delivered in the Orations become an integral part of the Athenian collective identity, and the boundaries between the mythical and historical or the fictive and the real becomes blurrier. The Oath Demophantos, on the other hand, was a public oath taken by all Athenian citizens, which established their commitment to kill "anyone who overthrows the democracy at Athens, and anyone who, when the democracy has been overthrown, holds any office thereafter, and anyone who aims to rule tyrannically or helps to set up the tyrant."²³ According to Teegarden, this Oath served an important regulative function in the Athenian democracy, as it established not only the citizens'

²² The Noble Lie includes the statement that "the earth as being their mother delivered them, and now as if their land were their mother and their nurse they ought to take thought for her and defend her against any attack and regard the other citizens as their brothers and children of the self-same earth" (R. 414e). This statement bears a clear resemblance to the *topos* of autochthony found in the Orations. Lysias' Funeral Oration, for example, includes the statements that "the very beginning of their life was just. They had not been collected, like most nations, from every quarter, and had not settled in a foreign land after driving out its people: they were born of the soil (*autochthones*), and possessed in one and the same country their mother and their fatherland" (Lysias 2.17). Similarly, Demosthenes states in his Oration that "the nobility of birth of these men has been acknowledged from time immemorial by all mankind. For it is possible for them and for each one of their remote ancestors man by man to trace back their being, not only to a physical father, but also to this land of theirs as a whole, a common possession, of which they are acknowledged to be the indigenous children (*autochthones*)" (Demosthenes 60.4). Plato is surely aware of the centrality of this *topos* to the Funeral Oration and the Athenian imaginary. This is evident, for example, in his own Funeral Oration, which echoes these very same ideas in an almost identical fashion: "Now as regards nobility of birth, their first claim thereto is this—that the forefathers of these men were not of immigrant stock, nor were these their sons declared by their origin to be strangers in the land sprung from immigrants, but natives sprung from the soil (*autochthones*) living and dwelling in their own true fatherland; and nurtured also by no stepmother, like other folk, but by that mother-country" (*Menex.* 237b). For an insightful comparison of this *topos* across the surviving orations, see Loraux (2006, especially 145-155). For an evaluation of Plato's treatment of autochthony in this context, see Kasimis (2016, especially 342-347).

²³ For the full oath, see Teegarden (2012, 446-447).

credible commitment to protect democracy and fight tyranny, but also constituted this commitment as a common knowledge among citizens and potential tyrants alike (Teegarden 2012).²⁴

Therefore, the public and reoccurring nature of the Noble Lie are crucial for its function as a naturalizing device. It reflects Plato's understanding that the social and political effectiveness of falsehoods depends not only on their wide proliferation but also on their existence as common knowledge, as something that all citizens know and expect others to share as well. Among the various regulatory functions such fictions and falsehoods have in *Kallipolis*, the first half of the Noble Lie appears to be solving a potential threat to the legitimacy of the philosopher-rulers. If such legitimacy depends, in part, on the philosopher's love of truth and hatred of falsehood, it may be undermined by the fact that they, like the other guardians, have been nourished with falsehood since childhood and are committed to defending such falsehoods as adults. By naturalizing the false and fictive nature of the content of their education and upbringing, the Noble Lie solves this potential contradiction and thus helps to maintain the legitimacy of the rulers. Furthermore, the public and reoccurring nature of the Noble Lie ensures that the guardians and the philosophers would think of themselves as having nothing to do with falsehood and that everyone else would view them as such.

4. Conclusions

Contextualizing the Noble Lie and situating it within Plato's broader discussion of falsehoods and fictions and their role in social and political life thus helps us solving the potential contradiction with respect to the philosophers and the guardians. At the same time, it also tells us something important

²⁴ On the centrality of the ideal of tyrant-killing to the Athenian democratic ideology, see Raaflaub (2003) and Ober (2003). Another important public oath that had a similar regulatory function in Athens was the Ephebic oath. This oath, taken by the Athenian eighteen and nineteen-year old soldiers in training (the ephebes), established the citizens' commitment to preserve the secret rites and laws and to act with honor in the battlefield. Furthermore, it is stated to be witnessed not only by the gods, but also by the boundaries of the land (the *boroi* of the *patris*) and the fruits of the earth. For a discussion of the significance of this oath and of the meaning of *boroi*, see Ober (2005, 196-200).

about Plato's keen awareness of the important function of falsehoods, fictions, and lies and their existence as an integral part of the social and political fabric. With this in mind, Plato did not seek to purify politics of falsehoods, but rather to reform and institutionalize it to ensure stability and prosperity in a "virtuous cycle of growth" while preventing instability, anarchy and a "vicious cycle of corruption."

Of course, Plato's approach to the question of falsehood and lies would satisfy few, if any, modern readers and citizens of contemporary liberal democracies. Even if we agree with Plato that some measure of falsehood is unavoidable in social and political life, the idea that the state or its founders and rulers can or should hold a monopoly over the "means of falsification" is likely to be viewed as deeply disturbing and as incompatible with our moral and political commitments. Yet, even if we vehemently reject Plato's solution to the problem of falsehood and lies in politics, his concern with and conceptualization of this problem may be of special value to us today. Applied to the so-called 'post-truth' era, Plato's insistence on the importance of truth and the appearance of truth in politics and his complete rejection of certain falsehoods as unacceptable under any kind of circumstances may carry some interesting insights. Plato's 'authoritarian' solution to the problem of falsehood and lies is extreme, but it also highlights the dangers of nihilism and of an 'anything goes' approach to politics that looms behind the gradual erosion of the value of truth. Thus, while we can safely reject Plato's solution to the problem of falsehood and lies in politics, it can nonetheless offer us an important reminder that even in politics, some falsehoods are better (or worst) than others.

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