

The Noble Lie

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Abstract

With the recent appearance of Tara Reede and her accusations of sexual misconduct by Presidential candidate Biden, proponents of democracy are faced with new dismay. All sides are accusing the others of lying and fomenting fake news. What seems obvious to progressive-minded citizens is just amateur psychology to the true believers, the faithful followers of the dream to return to a golden era. While those motivated by uncompromising ideological convictions are hardly to be expected to develop an interest in fact-checking, one can only hope that this could be achieved to prevent civil war. This is especially dangerous if a civil war could develop into World War in which the US has no allies.

Keywords

Noble Lie, Democracy, Little Buddha

1. Introduction

It has been proposed that no candidate can win without lying because she must please such a wide range of constituency and must, therefore, promise everything to everyone, while delivering little or nothing to anyone.

Constant accusations of lies and fake news from both sides of the ideological fence have led here into a consideration of the term “Noble Lie”. On the face of it, the term itself seems to indicate some justification for an occasion in which the tactic of lying could be validly employed.

2. Noble Lie

The term “Noble Lie” was introduced by Plato to explain his continued use of myth to explain his philosophic theories when philosophy was supposed to replace the mytho-poetic era by the introduction of reason. Plato makes use of myth quite often besides the Ring of Gyges and the familiar Myth of the Cave,

and he introduces the “Noble Lie” in Book 3 (414b-e) of the Republic in a manner reminiscent of the anthropological conception of the Ages. For example, the Homeric epics were seen to have taken in the Bronze Age.

The myth that Plato uses claims to explain human nature as autochthonous and divinely dispensed from precious metal in a hierarchically way. Accordingly, the elite guardians, that are the natural rulers, are seen as fashioned by the god from gold. The citizens are then divided among those formed of gold and those formed of silver. The rest, the farmers and the craftsmen are related to iron and bronze. This story of the natural heritage of the Athenian Greeks, related to the earth and metaphorically to types of metal, then constitutes what is termed a “Noble Lie”.

That a myth is being called an equivalent to a lie amounts to the first problem for contemporary Americans. One might be reminded of the story in the film “Little Buddha”, where the Buddhist llamas are teaching the candidates for reincarnation of a recently deceased llama. Historically revolutionary, one of the candidates is an American boy. When the American boy’s father hears the story of Buddha’s birth, walking and talking with lotus leaves appearing where he stepped, he has to interrupt that that is just a myth. His astonishment is met by that of the head llama who can not believe that the American does not understand mythology and its usage. The American adult sees myth as another word for falsehood, and she wants the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Whereas lie, falsehood and fiction might be seen as equivalent, Plato’s translator, F. M. Cornford, called it a “bold flight of invention”. The point here is that Plato is not trying to deceive anyone, but to explain the situation in such a way that even the less sophisticated can understand it. “If people can be made to believe it, they will be strongly motivated to care for the city and each other”¹.

More recently, Karl Popper criticized the irony in the case where Plato argued against the Sophists with their subversive conventionalism while making the basis for highly influential religion an invention. In reporting this, Wikipedia stresses that we must assume that Plato was sincere.

This brings up yet another problem characterized by the event in which J. Derrida tried to explain to J. Searle that it is difficult to determine from the written word whether it is intentionally false, ironic, misleading, skeptical, cynical or just ambiguous.

Narrative explanation for redemptive purpose was occurring in the East as well, but for religious ends rather than civic. “Upaya” is the term in Mahayana Buddhism which refers to a means that achieves some goal, such as enlightenment.

The narration in Chapters Two and Three of the Lotus Sutra has a similar function to the “Noble Lie” of Plato. The conversation that forms the lesson is asking the question: “If there is a higher enlightened understanding, what justi-

¹Ferrari, 2007: 138-165.

fies this ordinary metaphoric fiction”? The answer is that the enlightened state is beyond the reach of the average person, but if they can get the picture with these ordinary language stories, then that is justified usage of skillful or expedient means.

The story goes that the sons of a rich man are trapped inside a burning house. They are absorbed in play and do not respond to his efforts to get them to jump out to the ground outside. So he promises them that there are splendid chariots waiting for them. So they do jump out. When they ask for their chariots, he gives them one bigger and better chariot.

Each teaching was designed to go beyond the previous teaching in a hierarchical progression without revealing the ultimate truth, for which the novices were not ready. And thus, the doctrine of expedient means proceeded from the simple toward enlightenment².

While self-help mindfulness programs have brought progress, if not enlightenment, to a large audience that would never have thought of trying it in classical terms, the movement has been criticized for secularizing and commodifying the practice, so that it is not grounded in classical ethics; therefore, not real, not produced by expedient means.

By the time of European Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason of the 18th Century, there was much reform of the political aspects of organized religion. The attitude of some of the greatest thinkers is ambiguous, especially when viewed from the hindsight of a more secular era. It has often been thought that the real meaning of one of Voltaire’s famous sayings could be read between the lines.

Thus, from the phrase, “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him” one could suppose that the esoteric meaning of this “Noble Lie”, as it were, would be that since God does not exist, we had to invent Him. While this might be a likely inference to many, if not most today, scholars perusing Voltaire’s writing with close reading in context find that Voltaire did not intend to make this statement as an ironic quip.

In fact, it seems that Voltaire was writing “The Three Imposters” from which the quote came, as a reply to the atheist clique that whether or not God exists, the belief in God is a good thing, and atheism is bad for society³.

This point of view would seem to resonate with earlier “Noble Lies” and particularly with the doctrine of Expedient Means, if not in essence of meaning, at least in methodology. However, in the later part of the Enlightenment Era, we find Immanuel Kant putting an end to the pursuit of useful “truths”.

For Kant, the Categorical Imperative provides the basis for the view that we should NOT lie under any circumstance. Kant’s argument is that we do not know with certainty what the results of any action will be. They might well turn out to be harmful. With this in mind, the correct response would be to refrain from committing a known wrong action—lying.

²Watson, 1993: 56-57.

³Yeh, 2011.

There would seem to be some limits to this maxim in the real world. In fact, this leads to the famous case of the Inquiring Murderer. As Kant's view has been interpreted, if a potential killer asks you for the whereabouts of someone dear to you, under the universality of the Categorical Imperative, you must reply truthfully. I would say that this shows the inadequacy of Kant's duty ethical theory for any other occasion besides one on one.

Julia Driver has argued that you can universalize a different maxim: "I will lie to save an innocent life". Kant would likely argue that any time we lie, we destroy the faith that civilized society is based on.

Another view is that this sort of question is a trap that destroys your autonomy when asked. Therefore, it does not deserve a truthful reply. There are other possibilities, such as saying that you do not know, which, if you can not see her, is literally true, but is likely to lead the inquiring murderer to guess the actual truth⁴.

The Strauss Wars have continued for decades, and like the Korean War, seem unlikely to ever come to an end. This has to do with the meaning, purpose, and perhaps hidden agenda to the political writing of Leo Strauss. Strauss (1899-1973) was an American academician whose writings have been very influential.

Strauss's early writing spoke of esoteric writing that "outwardly veils a secret teaching of some sort". While the writing that Strauss examines teaches outwardly that philosophy and revelation are irreconcilable and seems to suggest that philosophy is not a challenge for revelation, the secret elite readers can find the opposite meaning: "that philosophy is not just a challenge for revelation, but a supremely dangerous challenge"⁵.

This sets the stage for his later detractors to suspect that he never changed from his earlier perspective. Shadia Drury is perhaps the leading scholarly critic of Strauss and has written several books criticizing him and his presumed followers, the neo-conservatives. According to Drury, Strauss was a great believer in the efficacy and usefulness of lies in politics. She has, perhaps, been most effectively replied to by Peter Minowitz of Santa Clara University.

Minowitz accuses her of "exaggerations, misquotations, contradictions, factual errors and defective documentation". If that is not enough, neo-conservative Paul Wolfowitz has asserted that the Iraq War was not about weapons of mass destruction anyway. While this excuse tends to indicate a secret elite agenda, I find it to be on the same level as Jean Genet's defense that the crime was committed by someone else with the same fingerprints as his. Or, you might try that the American Civil War was not about slavery.

There is more irony here in that so many people are unwilling to forgive Martin Heidegger for his brief but unrepentant flirtation with fascism, in spite of his post war rejection of the will to power while trying to replace it with non-willing *Gelassenheit* (which seems to have been influenced itself from the Taoist concept

⁴McCarty, 2012: 331-343.

⁵Leo, 2010: 1-10.

of *wu wei*). And yet so many people of the New World Order are anxious to forget the early writing of Leo Strauss.

What remains clear to all is that Strauss depicted politics as an epic battle between uncompromising enemies for POWER. There are so many undreamed-of problems today that this controversy is more ignored than resolved. The Straussian aspect to the very influential neo-liberals has been ignored so well that the very powerful BBC documentary film by Adam Curtis entitled *The Power of Nightmares* has not been shown for the most part in the U.S.

This film describes the rise of the neo-conservatives and attributes their influence to consist in the dissemination of “Noble Lies” concerning Gorbachev’s USSR and later about al-Qaeda. It maintains that the clear and present danger of those entities was grossly and purposefully overstated in spite of evidence to the contrary. Though the neo-cons, of course, deny this, their major thinkers are given ample time in this three-hour documentary to explain their truth. And they explain that they had the big-hearted motive to want to share America’s greatness here at the end of history with the less developed nations that had not been so blessed to be exclusive.

This explanation does not seem to have been well thought out since a major factor in America’s greatness has been the disproportionate share of natural resources it has enjoyed. For the less developed countries to become more like America would require using more resources, leaving America less like America.

And, while the neo-cons maintain that the American system has no alternatives (*There Is No Alternative* was the battle cry of Margaret Thatcher), mainland China’s economy is expected to overtake that of America within the decade. Of course, Steve Bannon is behind the scene, steadily employing the very same tactics that the neo-cons had used before; this time to demonize China.

If there is anything to take away from all this, it is that there was a major flaw in Platonic thinking concerning the “Noble Lie”. And that is that the elite, though having souls of gold, would not have the best interests of all in their “hearts”. When individualism sociology, laissez faire economics, and neo-Darwinian biology prevail, it is hard to imagine an empire concerned about the plight of the have nots. Plato himself thought that it would only work if the elite governors themselves bought into the story. In today’s America, we have to be more worried that the “Noble Lie” will turn into Hitler’s BIG LIE!

Unfortunately, it seems that the town hall rationality to determine decision making for public policy as outlined by Jurgen Habermas is unlikely to work in a social situation where it would be impossible to get a majority to agree on any form of fact-checking.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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