

Persuasion and Agreement: “the Noble Lie” in Plato’s *Republic*, III

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In this paper, I will discuss Plato’s *Republic* III, 414b-415d. Here Socrates proposes that the citizens in the ideal city should believe a fictional story called “the Noble Lie.” Socrates recounts that during their education, the citizens were nurtured within the earth, and that the god used gold as part of mixture for those fit to rule; silver for the auxiliaries; and iron and bronze for the farmers and the craftsmen. Beginning with Rowett’s illuminating interpretation of that passage, I will argue that Socrates addresses the political question of how to educate ordinary citizens so that agreement among all social classes can be attained. According to this view, Plato assigns substantial roles to images such as stories and analogies for persuading when one communicates philosophical truths to non-philosophers. Then, I will assert that the above-mentioned general conclusion can be arrived at without taking Rowett’s potentially problematic approach of reading 415c7-d4.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss an aspect of political philosophy presented in Plato’s *Republic* by considering a story Socrates narrates toward the end of Book III. This story is typically referred to by interpreters as “the Noble Lie.”

Before proceeding to the main subject, I will briefly explain the broader context of the *Republic*, which is relevant to the purposes of this paper. In Book V of this dialogue, Plato, or the character Socrates, states that the ideal city (hereafter, Callipolis), which he constructs in speech, should be governed by philosophers, who have knowledge (*epistēmē*) as their cognitive state rather than mere belief (*doxa*). Knowledge and belief are distinguished in terms of the types of objects each are concerned with. That is, knowledge is concerned with the Form, a transcendent entity that can be grasped only by our intellect (*nous*), whereas belief relates to sensible entities, such as sounds and colors. In Books VI–VII, Socrates describes how toilsome the epistemic advance required to acquire knowledge is when he discusses the Form of the Good, also described as the “largest thing to learn” (*megiston mathēma*) for those who rule the city properly. According to Socrates, what enables such an epistemic advance is dialectic (*dialektikē*)—the method that he regards as starting with the Form, proceeding through the Form, and ending with the Form (VI, 511b-c).

While the issue of how to add substance to the content of this dialectical method is highly controversial, for the purposes of the present paper, it suffices to say that Socrates characterizes knowledge as something that can be acquired only by “intellectual elites.”

Callipolis, however, does not consist solely of rulers as philosophers. There exists a social class known as the auxiliaries, whose main job is to support the rulers. There is also another social class known as the producers, who are the largest in terms of population and whose role is to produce and trade stuff. Although Socrates seems to imply that the auxiliaries by definition collaborate with the rulers, and hence share much of the information available to them, it is unclear how the producers would agree with a regime in which they are deprived of political power, or indeed how much information is available to them. This is partly because Socrates, in attributing mere belief to the producers in Callipolis, does not dwell on their cognitive state.

This lack of explanation leads Popper and others*1 to claim that the rulers acquire and maintain their political power over the producers through a form of deception. Therefore, according to this line of interpretation, most of the citizens in Callipolis are *manipulated* by rulers who employ the Noble Lie as a means of deception. As a matter of fact, there appears to be no other place in the *Republic* where Socrates explicitly discusses what is to be delivered to the

ears of most citizens, namely the producers. Therefore, if the Noble Lie is designed to induce such a perpetually delusive situation, and if this is the situation in which most of the citizens in Callipolis are placed, then we have to conclude that Callipolis is in fact an extremely unjust society. Hence, Socrates substantially fails to describe the most just city (cf. IV, 427e), despite his later contention that he does so when he utilizes Callipolis as a paradigm upon which one should arrange one's own city (IX, 592b).

Nevertheless, as I argue momentarily, we need not impute this obviously uncharitable interpretation to Plato. Catherine Rowett has recently offered an illuminating interpretation of the Noble Lie, according to which Socrates, in this passage (or, for that matter, anywhere in the dialogue), does not maintain that the rulers deceive the producers into regarding their governance as the most legitimate. Rather, in the Noble Lie, Socrates is to be viewed as striving to create an agreement among the three classes as to who should rule the city.*2

In the following section, I scrutinize the Noble Lie passage in detail (Section 2). I then briefly introduce Rowett's interpretation and explore a potentially problematic point arising from her interpretation, although I agree with her in terms of what to make of the Noble Lie in general (Section 3). I then provide and support an alternative interpretation of a specific passage in the Noble Lie, my reading of which deviates from that of Rowett (Section 4). I conclude this paper by first summarizing my discussion and then raising a question for future inquiry (Section 5).

2. "THE NOBLE LIE"

In Book III, after depicting at length the elementary education provided to the guardians of the city, which consists of poetry and gymnastics, Socrates divides the guardians into two classes: the complete and finished guardians (*pylakas panteleis*) and the auxiliaries (*epikourous*), also known as the defenders of the rulers' belief (414b). The former refers to those who, having passed every type of test, are able to defend their conviction that, in any situation, they must do what they think is in the city's best interests (412d-414a). This implies that the "conviction" held by auxiliaries is not as firm as that of the completed and finished guardians, even though auxiliaries are superior to ordinary

citizens in terms of their general ability to govern a city.

Socrates goes on to ask the present interlocutor, Glaucon, one of Plato's older brothers, the following question:

"So," I said, "how can we contrive to use one of those necessary falsehoods (*pseudon*) we were talking about a little while back? We want one single, noble lie (*gennaion ti hen*) which will convince the rulers too, if that can be managed, but if not, all the rest of the city?" (414b7-c2, italics mine. Rowe's translation with modifications)

Does Socrates really feel that it is more difficult to convince the rulers than the rest of the citizens in Callipolis? If so, why? I return to this question in Sections 3 and 4. After telling Glaucon that the type of story he is about to narrate is nothing new—a story with a Phoenician flavor—and after showing some hesitation in narrating it (414c4-10, d1-2), Socrates finally starts divulging the content of the Noble Lie. This can be divided into two parts.

The first part is as follows. The entire upbringing and education Socrates gave the rulers and the soldiers (the latter probably identical with the auxiliaries) was something like a dream; throughout all the events that they imagined experienced, in reality, they remained deep under the ground, being molded, nurtured, and provided with their weapons and other equipment. When they were deemed completely finished, Mother Earth released them above the earth. From this point onward, it was their duty to defend their country against any attack, perceiving the earth to be their mother or nurse and the rest of the citizens as their brothers, born from the earth (414d4-e5).

Socrates then narrates the second part of the story, which he delivers directly to the citizens by addressing them as "you." Socrates recounts the first half of the second part as follows:

"The god who was molding you used gold as part of mixture for those of you fit to rule; silver for those of you fit to be auxiliaries; and iron and bronze for those of you fit to be farmers and craftsmen." (415a3-7)

Apparently reminding Glaucon of the myth of metals in Hesiod's *Work and Days*, Socrates

characterizes the three classes of people in Callipolis as citizens with gold, silver, and iron or bronze, respectively. Socrates continues to narrate the second half of the second part, which involves paying attention to social mobility among the three classes and god's instruction regarding such mobility:

“And because you are all akin to each other, though for the most part you will have children like yourselves, there are times when silver offspring will be generated from gold, or gold from silver, and so on with the other permutations. So the first and the most important instruction given by the god to the rulers is that they must guard over nothing as well or as watchfully as they do over each new generation, looking to see which metal it is that is mixed into their souls.” (415a7-b7)

In the remainder of the second half of the second part, god urges the citizens to secure mobility among the three classes by means of demotion and promotion. Thus, if an offspring among the rulers transpires to have bronze or iron, he or she must be, without mercy, demoted to the craftsmen or the farmers; if, by contrast, an offspring in the producers has gold or silver in their soul, he or she must be raised to be a ruler or an auxiliary, respectively (415b7-c6).

To conclude, Socrates asks Glaucon once again, “Can you think of any way of contriving that they believe this story?” (415c7-8). Notably, Glaucon replies, “No, not the actual people you tell it to. But their sons may, and later generations, and the rest of humanity after that” (415c9-d1). Socrates responds that even this would encourage them to care for the city and for one another, adding that *he kind of understands what Glaucon is getting at (schedon ... ti manthanō ho legeis, 415d2-3).*^{*3}

3. ROWETT'S INTERPRETATION

Rowett offers an insightful interpretation of the Noble Lie passage discussed in Section 1. This section considers how she addresses the following three interpretative questions: (1) How could the citizens have believed the apparently false story that, during their education, they were in reality being molded deep under the earth? (2) Was the Noble Lie designed to be delivered only

to the first generation of citizens in Callipolis? Or was it intended for all generations? (3) What should we make of the exchange between Socrates and Glaucon at 415c7-d4, where Glaucon implies that it is more difficult to persuade the first generation of the Noble Lie than to persuade later generations? As will become apparent, my answers to questions (1) and (2) coincide with Rowett's. It is with respect to question (3) that I disagree with her.

Focusing first on question (1), Wardy substantially responds^{*4} that the citizens are “brainwashed” in such a way that they cannot be consciously aware of how they are being educated. According to this “literal” reading, the citizens are subject to an ongoing delusion, regardless of whether the issue is the rulers or all the citizens in Callipolis.

Rowett correctly rejects this reading by arguing that it is unconceivable for citizens to *literally* believe that they were underground. This is because, as she observes^{*5}, Mother Earth supposedly releases them above ground when their education has been completed at the ephebic age of about 18 or 20 years old (cf. VII, 537b1-c3). How could such adult citizens possibly forget what happened to them and instead (literally) believe that they were under the earth? Even if there were some devices available that could force them to believe this, it would be extremely uncharitable to ascribe to Plato the idea of a society based upon such an apparently awful manipulative means. Rowett understands the content of what the citizens are led to believe as *a general idea* embedded in the story, to the effect that they should treat other members of society as family members. This is on the grounds that their entire upbringing is due to this common society, regardless of which social class they end up belonging to.^{*6}

According to Rowett, the main reason why Socrates exhibits some hesitation in telling the Noble Lie (cf. 414c4-10, d1-2) is because he (and, for that matter, Plato) anticipates that the thought he plans to deliver through the Noble Lie will astonish the interlocutor Glaucon (as well as readers on Plato's part), who is from an aristocratic family,^{*7} for it abolishes any privilege due to parentage and establishes that a person's social role is determined solely by their aptitude, which is tested and revealed when their education has been completed (i.e., metaphorically, when Mother Earth releases them).

Regarding question (2), Schofield presupposes*8 that the Noble Lie is only concerned with the first generation of citizens. He seems to believe this primarily because other ancient myths of autochthony are only concerned with the first generation. Socrates calls the Noble Lie a story with a Phoenician flavor.*9 Contemporary readers of the *Republic* must therefore immediately recall the Cadmean myth, according to which Cadmus, having killed the dragon, sowed its tooth on the earth; from this tooth came soldiers (*spartoi*) who began to fight one another. In the end, only five survived and became the ancestors of the citizens in Thebe.*10 Because this episode is a type of foundation myth, Schofield seems to assume that it is natural to regard Socrates' version as such.

Regarding this line of reading, Rowett correctly objects that what is at issue, especially in the second half of the story, is not so much how social mobility is maintained *within the first generation*. Rather, what matters to the survival of the city is whether the current generation is properly classified by the metals (i.e., aptitudes) of *their* souls. Therefore, Rowett contends that, because the metals have to be checked for all citizens, the Noble Lie must be about every generation, and hence it is designed to be delivered to everyone, which, of course, includes the producers.*11 Therefore, although Socrates mainly speaks to the rulers in the Noble Lie passage, Rowett contends that this does not mean that the story is intended only for them.

So far, so good. Rowett is correct in thinking that the Noble Lie is far from being a means to plant a false belief in the citizens' souls to manipulate them on behalf of the rulers. Rather, the point of introducing the Noble Lie rests in the fact that Socrates finds it necessary to invent a rhetorical device with which to communicate a philosophically difficult but significant idea: that it is not parentage (or, for that matter, sex) but one's aptitude (metaphorically, what type of metal a person reveals in their soul when entering into society after education) that determines what kind of job they should pursue.

Such a device seems necessary for two reasons. First, in Book III, Socrates has not yet revealed that the guardians he has described thus far are actually the fully-fledged philosophers. (This point is important and will be returned to in the next section). In fact, the entire educational program Socrates has illustrated consists solely of musical poetry and gymnastics. Therefore, for now, he cannot appeal to a philosophical

argument to persuade even the rulers in his imaginary city. Second, although Socrates has primarily described education for the future-rulers, in the Noble Lie passage, he appears to broaden the scope of education to all citizens, assuming that our interpretation of this passage is correct.*12 This indicates that the medium with which he transmits his philosophical message must be easily accessible to and understandable by the producers. There is nothing more suitable than a fictional story or a "lie" for communicating the message and thereby encouraging people to endorse the regime of Callipolis.*13

However, as I noted earlier concerning question (3), I hesitate to accept Rowett's view. Instead, I am inclined to understand the apparently awkward exchange between Socrates and Glaucon at 415c7-d4 somewhat differently. After briefly reviewing what is said in this passage, I will explain Rowett's interpretation.

At 415c9-10, Glaucon, responding to Socrates' question, "Can you think of any way of contriving that they believe this story?", states that later generations of the city, rather than the first generation, might be more inclined to believe it. What does this exchange imply? Rowett enumerates three possible alternatives to make sense of this conversation, which otherwise might appear to speak for the first-generation-only interpretation that she rejects.

- (A) Glaucon simply misunderstands what Socrates has in mind, mistaking the Noble Lie for a myth like the existing ones.
- (B) Glaucon understands Socrates' proposal, and correctly notes the quite general truth that stories learned at the knee of one's mother are more readily assimilated. Thus, later generations are easier to persuade because they are assumed to have heard the story from infancy onwards.
- (C) Socrates has actually presented Glaucon with a false problem because he knows that the rulers to whom he has mainly been speaking are actually philosophers. Eventually they will no longer need the Noble Lie as a rhetorical device because they will fully understand its message by listening to philosophical arguments. Therefore, although Glaucon feels there may be a problem to solve with regard to whether rulers in the first generation are fully persuaded by the philosophical message contained in the Noble Lie, in reality, there is no problem at all.*14

Rowett rejects interpretation (A) because it is the least charitable to Glaucon. She seems to regard (B) and (C) as equally charitable to Glaucon. However, she eventually accepts (C), deeming it as (presumably, philosophically and/or hermeneutically) more interesting than (B).^{*15}

4. CHARITY FOR GLAUCON?

I now explain why I am reluctant to accept Rowett's interpretation of the conversation at 415c9-10. The main reason is that she seems unnecessarily charitable to *Glaucon*. It is true to say that when interpreting Plato, the principle of charity demands that we read a given text in such a way as to ascribe the least absurd idea to the author. In the same vein, at least in contexts where the character of Socrates is most naturally taken to be expressing the same sorts of ideas Plato himself endorses, we should understand *Socrates* most charitably by accepting an interpretation that ascribes to him (and via him to Plato) the least absurd idea.

But what about Socrates' interlocutors? Amongst other factors, it depends on how Plato describes each of the characters and what kind of role he attributes to them in the dramatic scenario. Generally speaking, in the *Republic*, Glaucon is described as a person who is, to a degree, familiar with Socrates' philosophical discussion (cf. 475e-476a, 596a) but who, nonetheless, does not possess any professional knowledge about complicated philosophical matters.

Thus, although Glaucon may be an enthusiast of philosophy and sometimes reveals a reasonably strong understanding of the discipline (cf. II, 357b-361d), he is neither an expert nor a skillful discussant in philosophical matters. Rowett assumes that there is a need to ascribe the most charitable interpretation to Glaucon; hence, she rejects (A), which is the least charitable.^{*16} However, in actuality, there is no such need, as Glaucon frequently fails to understand Socrates' point, especially when he confuses Socrates' real meaning with that with which he is already familiar.

There are several places where this tendency can be found. At VII, 523b, although Socrates has in mind the opposite appearance of a sensible thing, such as a beautiful thing also appearing ugly, Glaucon mistakenly assumes that he is speaking about *skiagraphia*, a sort of painting

exploiting an optical illusion that was popular in contemporary Athens. At 526d, Glaucon fails to understand why Socrates deems geometry to be useful; he mistakenly regards the usefulness of geometry as relating to military applications, such as setting up camps and concentrating or spreading out one's forces. At 527d, he makes the same type of mistake in treating astronomy as being appropriate for the rulers because it enables them to have a better sense of seasons. Furthermore, at 528e-529c, although Socrates intends to claim that astronomy enables us to "look upwards" in the sense that this discipline enables the soul to see the intelligible, Glaucon sanguinely assumes that astronomy enables us to "look upwards" in the sense that we literally look up to visible stars with our physical eyes.

It is important to note that in all the passages in Book VII, Socrates also considers a stage of education performed in Callipolis, although the discipline at issue, mathematics, is confined to the selected future rulers. It therefore seems plausible to assume that Glaucon makes a similar kind of mistake and misunderstands Socrates' point in the Noble Lie passage, where what is at issue is also a stage of education in Callipolis.

I now present my own view as to what Glaucon may think when he has listened to Socrates' story. Glaucon, like most contemporary readers of the *Republic*, immediately recalls the Cadmean myth and is misled into supposing that the Noble Lie is a type of foundation myth. He therefore fails to understand what Socrates has in mind, namely that this story is to be delivered to *all generations* and that Socrates intends citizens to believe *the message* it contains. Hence, to Glaucon, it *does* appear difficult for the first generation to believe this story because they should be consciously aware that they do not spend time during their education in the earth. I take this to be the reason why Glaucon implies that it may be difficult to persuade the first generation of the Noble Lie. Therefore, as far as Glaucon's understanding is concerned, I adopt interpretation (A), which is most *uncharitable* to Glaucon.

Therefore, in my view, there is a gap in the conversation between the two characters, in that Glaucon fails to understand Socrates' intention. This gap is indicated by Socrates' remark at 415d3-4, "I kind of (*schedon ti*) understand what you are getting at." Here, "*schedon ti*" signifies that Socrates is not entirely sure whether Glaucon is following him. This can also be understood as

a sign from Plato, one designed to warn careful readers that something strange is going on in their conversation.

Nonetheless, unlike the aforementioned passages in Book VII, Socrates does not even attempt to highlight Glaucon's misunderstanding. Why is this? Here, Rowett appears, at least in part, to be right. It is true that Plato, who is planning to describe the rulers as philosophers, must notice that eventually, the rulers will not have any difficulty believing the Noble Lie.*17 Therefore, *for Plato*, there is no problem with persuading the rulers. Aware that this is a pseudo-problem, Plato may prefer to have Socrates immediately move on to another issue rather than dwell upon Glaucon's response.*18

We have now seen Rowett ascribing that view to *the character Socrates*. However, I am not sure this ascription is legitimate because, as Ferrari correctly points out,*19 in general, Socrates, as a character, seems to have motivations different from those of Plato, and hence, his mindset also differs. Not until he is repeatedly asked by Glaucon that Socrates, in Book V, decides to reveal that he has philosophers in mind as the rulers in Callipolis. Moreover, it is only after showing much hesitation that he finally begins to expound the simile of the Sun, the Divided Line, and the analogy of the Cave in Books VI-VII. To me, it is unclear how concretely Socrates, in Book III, envisages the epistemic state the philosopher-rulers are supposed to possess as a result of undertaking higher education consisting of mathematics and the philosophical dialectic. Socrates may already envisage their epistemic state as vividly as Plato does. In this case, interpretation (C) (Rowett's view) may be true, regarding Socrates' thinking. However, it seems equally possible to suppose that he leaves out exactly what happens to the rulers' souls concerning their appreciation of the Noble Lie, even if he is clearly aware that they must be philosophers (i.e., people who contemplate the Forms). In this case, interpretation (B) appears to offer the best explanation with regard to what Socrates thinks. Thus, Socrates regards persuading the first generation as more difficult because they may not be as thoroughly assimilated to the Noble Lie as their successors, who are supposed to have heard the story repeatedly from infancy.

5. CONCLUSION

I now summarize my discussion. Rowett is correct in thinking that Plato considers the Noble Lie to be delivered to all citizens in all generations in Callipolis, and that this is meant to enhance harmony among the three classes. As such, the Noble Lie is not a device with which to deceive or manipulate the citizens; rather, it is a device with which to communicate a difficult philosophical truth in the form of a fictional story (*pseudos*). However, Rowett is incorrect to posit that we should ascribe the most charitable interpretation to Glaucon at 415c9-10. It is more plausible to suggest, as I have done, that he simply misunderstands Socrates' point. Nonetheless, I have shown that, regarding *Plato's* intention, one of Rowett's points still holds in that there is actually no need to worry about the way in which rulers in the first generation are persuaded of the Noble Lie. This is because they, as fully-fledged philosophers, will perfectly understand its philosophical message in a non-allegorical way.

Here, a further question arises. Given that the fully-fledged philosophers, in my view, abandon the Noble Lie and comprehend its message with philosophical arguments, do they also eschew analogies or other literary devices in understanding the Form of the Good? Rowett, elsewhere, answers negatively.*20 Further consideration of this issue will be left for future inquiry.

NOTES

- *1. Cf. Popper, 138-42; Annas, 167.
- *2. Such an effort can be seen in passages where Socrates attempts to convince the multitude of the notion that the philosophers should rule the city (VI, 484a-502a).
- *3. Rowe's translation ignores the presence of "*schedon ti*." Bloom, Crube and Griffith correctly capture the nuance of reservation indicated in this phrase.
- *4. Wardy, 133-34.
- *5. Rowett (2016), 68.
- *6. Rowett (2016), 85-87.
- *7. Cf. Hahm, 224-25.
- *8. Schofield (2006), 287-88. He might have changed his view on this issue in Schofield (2007), 159.
- *9. Page, 21, 25, suggests that "a Phoenician flavor" indicates an attitude that underlies and motivates the love of money (see IV, 436a).

Thus, Plato may hint that the development of civic virtues among guardians happens to be frustrated by materialistic self-interest.

- *10. For the Cadmean myth, see also *Laws* II, 663e-664a.
- *11. Rowett, 90-91. See also Adam, 196.
- *12. Pace Reeve, 186-91 and Hourani, 58-60; I assume that the producers also take part in the early education depicted in Books II-III.
- *13. Note that Socrates frequently makes use of analogies in his attempt to persuade the multitude of the notion of rule by philosophers in VI, 484a-502a.
- *14. Rowett (2016), 82-83.
- *15. Rowett (2016), 82-83.
- *16. Rowett (2016), 82.
- *17. Although Cross and Woosley, 103, believe that rulers themselves are persuaded of the myth as a result of being deceived, they correctly suspect that the treatment of the rulers in Book III will substantially change in the analogy of the Cave in VII. With regard to what may happen to the prisoner's soul after returning to the cave, see Nightingale, 131-37; for a unique view, see esp. Krumnow's analysis of Irigaray.
- *18. Cf. Charalabopoulos, 323-24, who takes Socrates' sudden reference to "*hē phēmē*" (translated as "the popular voice" or "the omen") at 414d8, immediately after the passage we have considered, as a message from Plato.
- *19. Ferrari, 139-40.
- *20. Rowett (2018), 148-50.

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