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Plato in a Post-Truth Society:

How Plato's Noble Lie Fosters Perception as Reality

When former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was asked about the size of Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Inaugural crowd, he inflated the numbers and lied. Then former US Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway spun his false statements into yet another falsehood by saying he was instead giving "alternative facts" about the crowd size. This example marks the beginning of our current post-truth society. Post-truth is not the absence of truth; rather, it's the notion that objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and belief (O'Callaghan 1). But what is truth and what is reality? Is lying sometimes necessary to obtain a greater truth and bring about the greater good? Plato's account of truth, belief, and reality in *The Republic* lays the epistemological groundwork for what has come to be called, in Kellyanne Conway's phrase, "alternative facts," the defining symptom of our current post-truth condition.

Plato maintains that philosophical truths relate to the Forms and are always good to possess. Non-philosophical truths are valued for their practical outcomes rather than their truth as such, which means some may be harmful or undesirable to possess despite being true (Woolf 10). Raphael Woolf, in *Truth as a Value in Plato's Republic*, contends that, according to Plato,

in certain instances falsehoods are more desirable, and it is better to avoid telling the truth to individuals who cannot handle it, saying, “Often enough it will be better (more conducive to good behaviour), about the non-philosophical realm to possess falsehoods rather than truths” (20). Woolf asserts that Plato was not overzealous in his commitment to the truth over practicability. Rather, he inferred that truth was relational to theory and practice and that, at times, the truth must be subverted to avoid harm and bring about the greater good. The overarching goal was to create a society where promoting good behavior took precedence over strict adherence to truth (Woolf 10).

According to Christina Tarnopolsky, in her article *Noble Lying and Democratic Rhetoric in Sophocles’ Philoctetes and Plato’s Republic*, Plato’s noble lie is not merely a tool for deception but invites critical reflection on authority and truth. For Plato, politics is about improving the souls of its citizens. Therefore, telling citizens a lie that could improve their souls is the right, just, and noble thing to do (Tarnopolsky 478). In Book III of *The Republic*, Socrates, discussing lying, says to Adeimantus:

Again, truth should be highly valued; if, as we were saying, a lie is useless to the gods, and useful only as a medicine to men, then the use of such medicines should be restricted to physicians; private individuals have no business with them.

Clearly not, he said.

Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the persons; and they, in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good (Book III lines 382-389).

Tarnopolsky notes that Socrates (Plato) outlines the outrageousness of the lie, saying, “Plato is counseling because it tells the person right on the surface that it is a lie and thus should be questioned and not accepted as the truth” (481). This logic is similar to what Kellyanne Conway did by dubbing Sean Spicer’s lie “alternative facts.” She prompted us to acknowledge the “lie” by using the word ‘alternative,’ yet also accept it as truth for what she believed was a larger, more noble purpose.

Jean O’Grady et al in *The Critical Path and Other Writings*, discuss the role utopias play in literature saying, “The Utopian writer looks at his own society first and tries to see what, for his purposes, its significant elements are. The Utopia itself shows what society would be like if those elements were fully developed” (192). If Conway views her comments through the lens of utopia-building, and her goal is to tell noble lies that, in her opinion, could bring about this utopia, then her falsehoods would be justified in this context. However, if Conway believes her alternative facts are true, her lies are not justified. Is her belief then also her reality?

For Plato, *the truth* is rooted in reality. But reality can only be understood through the Forms. Paolo Euron, in his book, *Aesthetic, Theory, and Interpretation of the Literary Work*, says that according to Plato, everything in the material world is an imperfect imitation of the real world, which is the immaterial world containing the Forms (2). Euron states, “Things we meet in our everyday experience are nothing but an imitation of the reality of forms. The real world is the world of the perfect, eternal, and immaterial forms, not the one of everyday experience. Truth is only known by means of intellectual knowledge” (2).

Conway asserts that alternative facts are reality. In a post-truth society, what one *feels* as facts *is* one’s truth, one’s reality. If we assume that alternative facts are reality, then, according to

Plato, they would be of the immaterial world and contain *the* truth. The "non-alternative facts" — those most people know, understand, and experience — belong to the material world and, for Plato, therefore fall short of truth in the strict, philosophical sense. If these premises were true, then Conway's perception of reality, her belief in alternative facts as noble lies, would be considered *the* truth.

Plato distinguishes knowledge (episteme) from belief (doxa) as separate, distinct categories. Knowledge is infallible and factive, whereas belief is fallible and can be true or false. Knowledge involves a clear and accurate grasp of reality, allowing the knower to discern the ontological status and nature of objects. Belief lacks full or stable contact with reality, and its objects are often mixed with falsehoods or contradictions. However, under the right circumstances, belief can be refined into knowledge. Thus, knowledge is inherently tied to truth and provides a clear understanding of reality, while belief may involve truth but is fallible and lacks the certainty of knowledge (Scaltsas 147).

The alternative facts Conway espouses are rooted in belief and are therefore fallible, capable of being either true or false. In this case, however, Conway's alternative facts — built on Sean Spicer's demonstrably false claim — are known independently to be false, and so they can never become knowledge. Because they are false beliefs rather than knowledge, Conway's alternative facts remain tied to *appearances* rather than to reality as Plato defines it, and her lies therefore cannot meet the standard of a Platonic noble lie. But in a post-truth society, this standard is inverted: beliefs in service of the truth come to function as if they were true.

Sean Kelsey, in *Truth and Value in Plato's Republic*, argues that individual truths are less important to Plato than *the* truth, the larger truth with a capital 'T,' to the health of the body politic (2012). *The truth* is greater as a fundamental value. Kelsey posits:

However, the approach does encourage us in thinking that it is in the very nature of truth to come in units, individual, self-contained, complete little 'atoms,' the particular truths, so that the very idea of '*the* truth' comes out posterior to and derivative from the idea of '*a* truth'; *it is all of them*. (198)

Conway's alternative facts are particular truths that are *parts* of post-truth. The *sum* of post-truth is concerned with *the* truth.

Post-truth is the *interpretation* of truths. It compels subjective notions of truth. These truths form the basis of a post-truth reality. This new reality creates an epistemic fracture—a breakdown of society's shared understanding of truth, reality, and facts—and thus becomes the norm. Post-truth, like Conway's alternative facts, is willing to sacrifice objective facts for what it considers *the* truth. Plato uses a similar logic to justify the noble lie as serving *the* truth. As Kelsey contends:

But now contrast the situation in *the Republic*. There our question is properly framed as about the value of processing, not *a* truth (any truth, no matter which), but *the* truth -- what we might call 'the truth about reality'. In the *Republic*, so framing the question does *not* focus our attention on truth-plus-some-addition, e.g. comprehensiveness or connectedness or generality or completeness; on the contrary, so framing the question *just is* focusing our attention on truth as such (210).

Post-truth logic is contorted, dyspeptic, and messy. It relies on suspending belief and dismissing knowledge. It is both epistemically fractured and ontologically homeless. It operates, crucially, within an ecology of pluralistic ignorance sustained through the body politic. Plato's notions of truth, belief, and reality unwittingly lend their grammatical structure to post-truth thinking in surprising, albeit twisted, ways. The Platonic use of "noble lying" in alternative facts is not noble; it's nefarious. The lack of reality in a post-truth society belies its lack of wisdom and, as such, its lack of virtue. As Sean Kelsey notes, "Suppose it turned out that truth was in the eye of the beholder, that 'man were the measure of all things,' so that everyone was equal in possessing 'the truth,' i.e., in 'wisdom'; in such a case the possession of 'truth,' i.e., wisdom, would be no virtue at all" (218).

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