HISTORY AND PLATO’S MEDICINAL LIE

ROBERT K. RICHARDSON

In a collection of Mark Twain’s pieces entitled The Stolen White Elephant, copyrighted 1882, is an essay “On the Decay of the Art of Lying.” The subtitle indicates that it was read “at a meeting of the Historical and Antiquarian Club of Hartford, and offered for the Thirty-dollar Prize.” A footnote facetiously adds: “Did not take the prize.”

The essayist explained that he was not speaking about the “custom of lying,” for, said he, “the Lie, as a Virtue, a Principle, is eternal,” and drove home his point with the further words: “The Lie, as a recreation, a solace, a refuge in time of need, the fourth Grace, the tenth Muse, man’s best and surest friend, is immortal, and cannot perish from the earth while this Club remains.” He summarized his position early in the Address, in the remark: “Judicious lying is what the world needs. I sometimes think it were even better and safer not to lie at all than to lie injudiciously. An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffec-
tual as the truth.” The sermonette ended with the exordium: “Joking aside, I think there is much need of wise examination into what sorts of lies are best and wholesomest to be indulged, seeing we must all lie and do all lie, and what sorts it may be best to avoid,—and this is a thing which I feel I can confidently put into the hands of this experienced Club,—a ripe body, who may be termed, in this regard, and without undue flattery, Old Masters.”

Mark was, of course, jesting about what he called minor “deflections from the truth,” and particularly about those associated, and still associated, with the social amenities. And yet what the humorist said about the lie as an eternal principle, what he dropped about the need of the world for judicious lying, were notably close to the content of one of Plato’s most famous pages! Having, in the earlier part of the Republic, imagined a state, governed, doubtless, by the best for the good of all, but a state in which governors and soldiers alike are deprived of private property and are regimented in, or rather out of, family life like dogs in breeding kennels, while the masses take orders
from the managing classes as Russian peasants accept the rule of commissars and soviets, Plato must at length raise and answer the question: How get this thing started? How induce these graded classes to accept their assigned roles? His solution is the famous “medicinal lie,” a well-begotten fiction.

By what artifice then [says Socrates] may we devise one of those opportune falsehoods of which we were speaking a while back, something noble, whereby we may, above all, deceive the rulers and, in any case, the rest of the city?

Urged to explain himself he continues:

Well, then, I will speak: and yet I really do not know how to muster the recklessness to begin or what words to use. I will try first to persuade the rulers themselves, and the soldiers, and then the rest of the city, that the education and training already received from us were illusions; they were but fancying, as in dreams, that they actually experienced these things, whereas, in reality, they were all that time being fashioned and nourished in the Earth, where they themselves, their weapons, and the rest of their equipment, were manufactured. And when everything was done, their mother, the Earth, sent them up: and so they must take thought for the country in which they live as for their mother and nurse, and must defend her if attacked, and must look upon the rest of the citizens as earth-born brothers. . . . “no doubt, all of you who dwell in the state are brothers,” we shall say to them, keeping up the fiction, “but when the god formed you, he mingled gold in the composition of such of you as were suitable for ruling, wherefore they are most honored; and silver in those fit to be auxiliaries; and iron and brass in the farmers and the rest of the workers. As you are originally all of the same stock, you will commonly have children like yourselves.”

Socrates concludes his imagined propaganda—which, like the Athenian in The Laws, he relates to the ancient tale of Cadmus and the Dragon’s Teeth—by providing for a certain “circulation” from and into the élite in any instances where the gold and the brass are occasionally found misplaced, and by explaining that though an existing generation were beyond persuasion of these fictions, the belief might gradually lay hold of later generations.

Plato’s is, of course, a magnificent lie, a lie, however artfully simple in tecture, of eminently wider scope than any associated with the afternoon calls of Mark Twain’s Hartford ladies: but
it does have this in common with its Connecticut kinsmen—it belongs to the class designated by the humorist as "judicious lying." Does it share the other characteristics of Twain's lie, necessity and eternity? Is it like those "impossible falsities" which Sir Thomas Browne declared "include wholesome moralities, and such as expiate the trespass of their absurdities?"  

Professor Fite, in his Platonic Legend, speaks ill of Socrates' device:

And Plato [he writes] was not the last, nor probably the first, to think of the creation of a myth of "brotherhood" when policies of state call for a general sacrifice on the part of the people. Behind the words of the dialogue we can hear both Socrates and Glaucon laughing heartily at the thought of fooling the people by a device so transparently audacious. The universal kinship may at first be viewed with suspicion, Socrates explains, but with the lapse of a generation it will pass as gospel.  

Fite's criticism is compounded of dislike for the regime instituted and of contempt for the method of the institution. In this paper it is Plato's method of initiating his state that is under examination, not the quality of the proposed commonwealth. Was Plato in the passage referred to baldly proposing and approving falsehood in any ordinary sense of that term today?

He may receive interpretation both from the context of his own works and from the course of recorded history. It seems entirely congruous with his habit of thought elsewhere—his comment on his own myth at the end of the Phaedo; his contempt for matter-of-factness in the inspiring passage at the close of the Ninth Book of the Republic; the place assigned "fiction" in implanting sound suggestion in the mind of childhood in the Second Book of the Laws; the Charioteer myth of the Phaedrus; and the vision of judgment, predestination, free will and the moral blamelessness of God in the tale of Er, son of Armenius, in the Tenth Book of the Republic—to view the "medicinal lie" of the Republic's Third Book as ancillary to the same high purpose with respect to the realization of a social and political ideal as was served with regard to problems such as reality, life,

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1 Apud Bergen Evans, The Natural History of Nonsense (1946), p. 29.
2 W. Fite, op. cit. (1934), p. 29.
death, freedom, predestination, values and immortality by his enchantments, accepted hazards and myths, in other passages.

But the "medicinal lie" may receive interpretation and justification from outside Plato's writings. Despite his apparent naïvité and simplicity—his shadows and reflections, for example, in pools of water in the story of the Den—he is but suggesting methods of the influencing of conduct, and modes of the rise and evolution of ideas, known to experience before and since his time. Four historical processes, at least, are comparable to the famous "lie"—and none involve deceit in any usual sense. After allowance for over-lapping of categories in specific cases, these processes may roughly be delimited as follows:

(I) The creation, or rise, of states of mind and opinion favorable to a given ethic or a desired social condition.

(II) The perpetuation or employment of a previously existent opinion.

(III) The rationalizing of opinion, old or new, a phase of (II).

(IV) The avoidance of the effect of some state of opinion for the time-being ineradicable—the legal fiction.

I. THE CREATION OR RISE OF STATES OF MIND AND OPINION FAVORABLE TO A GIVEN ETHIC OR A DESIRED SOCIAL CONDITION

In this category, and closely akin to Plato’s "lie," may be placed theories of government and society such as the "social contract"; self-evident "rights of man"; the "economic man"; the assumption that kings are, ipso facto, tyrants—or, contrariwise, doctrines of divine right and divine entail; in early cultures the identification of the virility and felicity of the chief or Pharoah with the welfare of the tribe or state; the psychology of the ordeal in times and places marked by a certain efficaciousness in that superstition. Vox populi, vox Dei may join the group, as also the mediaeval, and even surviving, doctrine that "law is found" and 17th and 18th century attempts, in England by parliamentarians and in France by judges, to give concrete meaning to the doctrine in the form of statements of "fundamental laws." Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Dante, Marsiglio, Hitler, all, however variant in purpose or morality, are associated in
this same genus. Montesquieu's teachings, on the other hand, fall without the type.

History and contemporary life abound in numerous minor illustrations. Polybius is quoted in a book of some years since on Scipio Africanus as maintaining that Lycurgus made his scheme of laws "more easily believed in" by the Spartans by asserting that he had been assisted in their compilation by the oracle; and as holding that "Scipio similarly made the men under his command more sanguine and more ready to face perilous enterprises by instilling into them the belief that his projects were divinely inspired." "But," adds Polybius, "that he invariably acted on calculation and foresight, and that the successful issue of his plans was always in accord with rational expectation, will be evident."

Cicero, in his second book On the Republic, half apologizes for stating that Romulus was the son of Mars by saying that "we may grant that much to the popular tradition, especially as it is not only very ancient, but has been widely handed down by our ancestors, who desired that those who have deserved well of the commonwealth should be deemed actual descendents of the gods, as well as endowed with godlike qualities." This is practically a case of Plato's "lie" become effective.

The rousing effects upon the knights of the First Crusade of finding the "holy lance" beneath a church pavement at Antioch—an obvious case of "planting"—is familiar. Well known, too, is the Conqueror's stretching out of his arms on stumbling at his landing in England and saving important appearances before his followers by declaring himself thus invested by God with the kingdom he had come to seize. Havelock Ellis, in his Dance of Life, relates how Foch, quoting De Maistre, lays down in his

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1 Current "functional" propaganda in secondary schools, and creeping up into the collegiate level—in the latter case with more questionable justification—in the interest of democracy, seems to the writer to belong in the same list. Ideas planted so early that the mind can form no opposing judgments are dogmas, and dogmas, unsupported, play the part of Plato's myths and fictions. The point is that so far as these programs go behind the demonstrable, and especially beyond verifiability by those instructed, they are akin to Plato's enchantments and myths and fictions, and are, at the appropriate levels, neither to be more nor less condemned.

2 On the negative side, the veiling of unwanted attitudes, examples are to be found in any censureship, the best known being the Index of the Roman Church; and, in contrast and protest, the Areopagitica. On the other hand, how should be classified the practice of those who leave their children without religious instruction until, as the saying goes, "they can grow up and decide for themselves"?


Principes de guerre the doctrine that "a lost battle is a battle one thinks one has lost." "The battle," comments Ellis, "is won by the fiction that it is won."⁶ Virgil had been ahead of De Maistre and Foch by nineteen centuries: Possunt, quia posse videntur.⁷

All these incidents and sayings, like many more that might be cited, have this in common with the "medicinal lie" that, like Plato’s audacious fiction, they tend to the creation of a state of mind or of opinion favorable to a given ethic and morale or a desired social and political condition.

II. THE PERPETUATION OR EMPLOYMENT OF A PREVIOUSLY EXISTENT OPINION

Medicinal fiction has also been at work in the perpetuation of previously existent opinions or institutions. One form is the "catchy" slogan—such, for example, as "Rally round the Flag, boys, rally round the Flag!" The eagle-standard played a similar part for the legionary. "For King and Country" is an instance where the second half of the slogan appeals more to the reason while the first instills emotional punch. Thornton Wilder’s Our Town furnishes a fine case in point.

Over there [recites the Stage Director] are some Civil War veterans. Iron flags on their graves—New Hampshire boys—had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they’d never seen fifty miles of it themselves. All they knew was the name, friends—the United States of America. The United States of America. And they went and died about it.

Other examples of the use of ancient states of opinion to buttress existing institutions have been the dogmas of the divine origin of the Japanese dynasty; of the deity of the Pharoahs and, later, of the Roman Emperors; of the springing of the Brahmins from the head of Brahma; of the mandate of Heaven granted to, or withdrawn from, the Emperors of China. Parson Weem’s tales of the young Washington perhaps fall into an humble corner of the same ideology.

Far more important, as things appear to the writer, was the taking over by early Christianity of the Jewish apocalyptic eschatology whence it so largely sprang and the subsequent

⁷ Aeneid, V, 231.
adoption by this same Christianity, now become Gentile, of those Hellenistic viewpoints and attitudes that gave birth to the veneration of saints, the rise of a doctrine of Purgatory (quite Greek and Orphic) and, indeed, to not a little of that schema salvationis common to most Protestants and Catholics alike. The enlarging body of converts, attracted to the spiritual beauty of Jesus, took Him to themselves as certain of the Gnostics, even before Jesus’ day, had taken Jewish Messianism to themselves; but they adopted Him because they could wrap Him in layers of fictional lore as old as, and older than, history itself. If this view of Christian history be sound, the perpetuation of the ancient as the price of the introduction and maintenance of the new, illustrates another angle of Plato’s fiction: it is a mode of exhibiting the eternal tension of the stable and the flux, of inheritance and mutation.

III. THE RATIONALIZING OF OPINION, OLD OR NEW, A PHASE OF II

There have been occasions when men have deemed it desirable to defend old ways against new, or, on the other hand, to defend the new as not differing from the old or as developing out of the old.

Edmund Burke, a “traditionalist,” “a Whig of the Revolution,” was one who wanted to keep the old and who vented his fear and detestation of the French Revolution in his famous Reflections. In these he not only gives a quite fictional picture of the past, but goes further and defends fiction in itself. He loved the past and wrote of “all the pleasing illusions” whereby it had “made power gentle, and obedience liberal,”—“illusions,” which, he feared, were “to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason” wherein “the decent drapery of life” itself was rudely to be torn off. The “drapery” is, of course, fiction.8 “You see, Sir,” he wrote the young Frenchman in the letter of which his book assumed the form,

You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we [the English] are generally men of untaught feelings: that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them

because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent reason which prevails in them. If they find what they seek (and they seldom fail), they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason: because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason and an affection which will give it permanence. . . . Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.⁹

And here Plato and Burke are alike: each wishes men’s duties to become parts of their natures, their habits! The difference is merely that in this instance Burke defends the “illusions,” the “prejudices,” of the past because he is nostalgic for the old, whereas Plato, with a playfulness quite superficial, creates fresh illusions, based on an ancient tale, because he is nostalgic for the new. Rousseau, in his paradoxical fashion, though really, in a way, on Plato’s side, was doing much the same with his noble, never existent, naturally compassionate savage.

An instance, on the other hand, of what amounts to a medicinal lie to save the new from imputation of hostility to the old, a rationalizing method, is the allegory, a manner not of writing but of reading and interpretation. Popular among the Greeks, though meeting the disfavor of Plato (as in the Phaedrus), it enabled them to reconcile an improving moral sense with their Hesiod and Homer. From the Greeks this method of interpreting sacred writings passed to the Jews and the Christians, enabling men like Philo and Augustine to square their classical metaphysics with their Judaism or Christianity, and furnishing the Church a method of evading Jewish copyright on the Old Testament. What the “historical approach” to Scripture is today in the matter of resolving difficulties incident to higher criticism and a more advanced ethical sense, the “allegorical approach” was yesterday.

⁹Burke, op. cit., p. 359.
IV. THE AVOIDANCE OF THE EFFECT OF SOME STATE OF OPINION FOR THE TIME-BEING, AT LEAST, INERADICABLE—
THE LEGAL FICTION

A fourth type of historical medicinal lie is first cousin to Plato’s, the conscious legal fiction, the pretense by the courts that something is objectively true which all parties concerned, surely all legalists concerned, know to be false. It differs from Plato’s fiction only in its naked and avowed contempt for fact. Legal fiction has, in historic times, been a chief means of equating the administration of law with developing equitable standards while at the same time conserving wholesome reverence for stability. Examples are liberalization of the jus civile under the influence of jus gentium through the channel of the praetorian edict; the allegation of breach of the king’s peace in private accusations or grand jury presentments, and the partial avoidance of restraints on free trade in land by the procedure known as “suffering a recovery.” A renowned and most happy illustration is the open contempt for logic and legal fact in the obvious subterfuge which enabled the Whigs and Tories to combine (each remaining true to their differentiating principles) in ousting the Stuarts from the throne of England—the agreement of both parties to the formula: “the said late King James the Second having abdicated the government, and the throne being thereby vacant.” And a still more famous instance is that judicial, fictional interpretation of Magna Carta which makes its 39th article guarantee jury trial at a date before the petty criminal jury had even come into existence.19

It may be just worth while, in bringing this paper to a close, and as a friendly gesture in Plato’s direction, to point out that more than once the lack of some mediating device has put a check on sound reforms. Three instances come to mind off-hand: the frailty of the parliamentary achievements of the 14th and 15th centuries incident to their slight grip on contemporary mindedness and their failure to have developed a parliamentary “habit” or “prejudice”; the premature radicalism of the ecclesiastical policies of Edward VI; and the failure of the too unsympathetically pressed reforms of the Emperor Joseph II. In our own time the non-enforcement and fate of the Eighteenth

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19 In Wisconsin history the judicial interpretation of the State Constitution in the Edgerton School Case falls within the type.
Amendment may perhaps point a moral. A favorable state of opinion, however arrived at, is requisite to the successful launching of reforms and of institutions. Gestation must precede birth.

So, putting two and two together, Mark Twain may really have “said something” when he spoke of the lie as an “eternal principle,” and of “judicious lying being what the world needs”! And we may perhaps credit Plato as dealing, after his whimsical fashion, not with demagogic and Fascistic deceit of the unsuspecting masses, but with those enchantments, those fictions, those unverifiable presuppositions and intuitions, those ultimate mental foundations on which the life of man, individually and in society, has so largely rested. Plato was not concocting a lie: he was taking account of an ever-living fact.