

October 2005 UDWPA Exam

Author: Craig W. McCallum, Junior, Print Journalism

The fundamental problem of the noble lie resides in an assumption that in the hands of a good man, an admittedly faulty tool can serve a just end. In most states, the government focuses on a particular just end—the common good. While modern politicians may defend the use of overt deception in public matters, they should recognize that those who have defended the noble lie in the past have also suggested its contribution to the eventual decline of the state. When Sissela Bok posits that the noble lie has a rightful place in public discourse, I must agree for the simple reason that the noble lie, once institutionalized, has the capacity to bring the state to ruin. When the state ceases to exist, so do the parameters which allow for the pursuit of the common good.

For many political philosophers, especially Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a government best serves the interest of the common good by ensuring the longevity of the state in its constitutional form. While these philosophers both found the noble lie useful in some ways, they also recognized that its failure may lead directly to the decline of the state. Plato, however, did not find that reason enough to create understanding rather than ignorance in his citizenry.

Plato suggests in *The Republic* that the enforcement of a covert eugenics plan, vis-à-vis noble lies, will lead to better rulers. However, he later notes that the plan will eventually produce a ruler with faulty genetics, who will serve his own interests at the expense of the people. This leads to a decline of the state, ending in anarchy or tyranny. I would argue with Plato that a public well-versed in the norms of governance would serve to halt such a decline since they have the ability to distinguish between an avaricious and a just government when they see it. Furthermore, as Rousseau offers, a state where the people create policy has the advantage of never entirely receding into anarchy, since the goals of civil society are inseparable from those of the government.

While the goals of a good government remain synonymous with those of the people, subsequent governments may use institutions developed in good faith for less altruistic ends. Rousseau posits that “a good king is always followed by a bad king.” Bok uses this same analogy when he says, “We know how deception, even for the most unselfish motive, corrupts and spreads.” When a good government uses a noble lie with

the public good in mind, they inadvertently begin a process that drives a wedge between the citizenry and its government. By matter of this precedent, they also create a rift between the government and the principle of a representative state.

A representative state necessarily tries to prolong itself as long as possible. This is because the people form the government in order to preserve themselves. The idea of self-preservation of the people extends to the state. If something threatens the one, the other must also consider itself at risk. Any action that leads to the dissolution of the state, however subtle, must be perceived as an act against the people by the government. While many governments use this argument to defend the use of noble lies, they fail to recognize that the noble lie is caustic to the longevity of the state, and therefore, also to the common good.

A narrow conception of security often fails to weigh the cost of implementing deception for a short-term gain. The real matter of security in any decision of government policy resides in state preservation. While a state, as well as the public good, may suffer from a short-term period of anxiety from a transparent government, this is always to be preferred over promoting a culture of somnambulists. Transparency promotes awareness, responsibility, and accountability.

Obfuscation can only trend toward complacency. The good citizen, like Plato and Glaucon seeking justice, will be like a hunter: alert, and using all the senses to pierce the reality of the surrounding world. A dialectic of public deception is necessary to the virulence of the state because it forces the individual to consider that he or she forms an essential part of an aggregate that has immensely more power than temporal governments, and immensely greater interest in the longevity of the state. Without this realization, the individual will eventually awake into a life that is brutish, nasty and short, a life to which no representative government would consent for its constituents.