

Tragic Pharmacy: The ‘Noble’ Lie and the Fall of Kallipolis

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I. Introduction

One of the special joys for an enthusiast of Plato is reading the receptions of and responses to the divine teacher (and his school(s)) that are strewn across the history of philosophy. One notes with fascination how Neoplatonists celebrated feast days to Socrates and Plato, while in the high Middle Ages, Platonism, in the Latin West, came to be associated, among a fair number of writers, with having some fundamental errors from which Aristotle delivers us. Somewhere in between we find figures like Augustine, who attacks the skepticism of the Platonists in *Contra academicos*, though he praises (up to a point) the Platonists in the *Confessions* and arguably baptizes Platonic recollection in *De magistro*. These varied appraisals continue into the 20th Century. E. O. Sisson, one time president of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, calls the *Republic*, “that original charter of Fascism”;¹ for Karl Popper, “Plato recognizes only one ultimate standard, the interest of the state. ... The criterion of morality is the interest of the state. ... This is the collectivist, the tribal, the totalitarian theory of morality”;² though Whitehead famously reflects, “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them.” For my part, I confess partiality to Charles Péguy’s judgement that “it cannot be imagined that any man ever, nor any humanity, in a certain sense—which is the right sense—can ever intelligently boast of having surpassed Plato. I will go further. I add that a cultured

¹ E. O. Sisson, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Society* (1939), 87.

² Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* I, 107.

man, a really cultured man, cannot even imagine the meaning of a claim to have surpassed Plato.”³

What occasions such a range of evaluations?

One reason is the distinction—or, for some, the failure to make the distinction—between prescriptive and forensic reading of Plato. Those who take Plato as merely or immediately prescriptive receive what is found in the text at face value. Socrates is taken, straightforwardly, to be Plato’s mouthpiece, with his words in any particular dialogue essentially reduced to a Platonic treatise on a theme: his conclusions present Plato’s beliefs, his arguments reflect Plato’s reasoning. On such readings, everything else in the dialogue is merely cosmetic or simply a foil. Any tensions, contradictions, or impasses in the mouth of Socrates would also get reduced to be, only, contradictions and confusions in the mind of the author; we would have to foreclose, presumptively, the possibility that Plato might be using the tensions and impasses to make a larger point. This is the kind of reading found in Sisson and Popper, of which Whitehead is critical. A forensic reading, by contrast, approaches a Platonic dialogue as a multi-layered puzzle that invites the reader not only to discuss but also to experience the question of seeming and being: what merely appears to be going on probably does not account for all that is happening. Thus, one cannot relegate the non-Socratic parts to being non-essential workers; to get at the whole one must search for easily overlooked clues, interrogate different speakers, attend to the ambient conditions, and so on. In short, reading a Platonic dialogue is not unlike crime scene investigation. And, in the *Republic* specifically, Plato, like many a mystery author, drops, so to speak, a body: the ‘corpse’ of Kallipolis. In attempting to solve the mystery of the fall of Kallipolis forensically, I wager, we better understand Plato’s political philosophy than if we read the *Republic* merely prescriptively.

³ Charles Péguy, “The Search for Truth,” in *Basic Verities*.

To solve a death, Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot would have us approach the cause through investigating the dead person's character; similarly, that other efficient and competent undoer of knots, Bertie Wooster's man Jeeves, untangles troubles by invoking what he calls the Psychology of the Individual. Taking my cue from these venerable predecessors, I suggest that the fall of Kallipolis is made intelligible through considering the psychology of the city.

II. The Usual Suspects, and a Tell in the Tale

One of the central issues concerning the deterioration of Kallipolis is inevitability. Socrates appears to construct the idea city, including in it multiple safeguards for stability, but the city is still doomed to fail. Standard explanations for this ineluctable fall focus on failure(s) related to application of the eugenic algorithm, the nuptial number—of geometric precision—that determines the right and just seasons for coupling in the city. First, there is the possibility that the algorithm cannot preserve the city because, Socrates notes, “Since everything that comes to be must decay, not even [a city] so constituted will last forever” (546a).⁴ Not even the nuptial number can hold back the entropic forces dragging the city towards political heat-death. Commenting in the *Politics*, Aristotle colors himself unimpressed by this reasoning, since it attributes decay to nothing inside the city but to forces external, and does not explain why *this* city should fail.⁵ Entropy ex machina makes for disappointing writing; when Socrates describes the decline of the other regimes, however, he appeals to internal reasons. Our second suspect concerns the limits of applying the nuptial number in history. Socrates says, “Even though they are wise, the people you have educated to be leaders in your city will, by using rational calculation combined with sense-perception, nonetheless fail to ascertain the periods of good fertility and of infertility for your

⁴ The translation used is C. D. C. Reeve's Hackett edition, with some minor adjustments.

⁵ *Politics* 1316 a 17 ff.

species” (546a-b). The number is perfect and intelligible in itself, but application is reliant on sense perception, which is fallible; mistakes will be made. And then there is the argument that geometry will be unable to control or conquer eros (see 458d), meaning it will not be possible to get the timings perfectly right all the time. After all, in geometry beings keep their shapes and boundaries, neatly and tidily; but with eros, as the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* reflect, beings change shape, shrink and expand, are shaken and stirred, are pierced, burned, and melted. Erotic dynamism is bound to frustrate geometric presumption. That said, none of these explanations pass the smell test, for the simple reason that they all assume that the marriage algorithm could ever apply. Rather than accept the standard accounts, I opt for a dramatic perspective, taking Kallipolis’ arc from founding to fall as a single, coherent action or plot.

The eugenic algorithm is concerned with controlling coupling with an eye to producing the best offspring. The algorithm, therefore, assumes the presence of gold, silver, and bronze souls to sort; that is, the algorithm runs on the myth of metals, also known as the noble lie. But, as Eva Brann points out, “The myth must not only somehow *be believed* at the outset if the city is to be founded, but *it ought in fact not to be a lie at all*, if the city is to breed true. For if men are *not* born from a common parent and with pure souls easily assayed, the guardians cannot control the new generation and ensure the stability of the city. Its first natural birth will refute its foundations.”⁶ Precisely because they are trying to apply the algorithm, it would appear that the lie is believed by the rulers of the city. The price of this belief is that they therefore cannot see that the algorithm does not work; indeed, it has never worked.

The nuptial algorithm that is meant to protect the city by preserving and consolidating the rule of the gold souled, generation after generation, needs to be applied to real persons. But, the

⁶ Eva Brann, *The Music of the Republic*, 126. Emphases in original.

real persons do not have souls whose character can be charted along a simple, clear, linear hierarchy that can be easily sorted into three classes. Every application of the eugenic algorithm ‘sorts’ sets of souls that do not correspond to its categories; the application of the algorithm is therefore hollow or empty. To the extent that the algorithm continues to be employed, the leaders of the city are not exercising much control over the progeny of the city. Thus, we glimpse Plato’s daimonic genius: the leaders who think themselves to be eugenic puppeteers are, in truth, themselves chasing shadows on a cave wall. Precisely because they have come to believe in Kallipolis’ founding lie, they are unable to recognize the chains by which they have bound themselves. The city’s protective device is revealed as ineffective on account of the very act that established it. In fact, I shall argue that the noble lie, from which flows the ironic situation of the nuptial algorithm, seeds instability, whose rotten fruit is the city’s decline and destruction.

III. Lies, Damned Lies, and ‘Noble’ Lies

The so-called noble lie is another sore spot in the *Republic*. For a significant number of interpreters, it is proof positive that Plato is a consequentialist, perhaps even a clumsy one. The reason for the discontent is Socrates’ apparent endorsement of the ‘right sort’ of lies. “It is appropriate, then,” he says, “for the rulers—if anyone—to lie because of enemies or citizens for the good of the city” (389b). In view of such passages, Julia Annas tells us, “We should notice Plato’s readiness to legitimize the telling of lies in the interests of some higher end. It is an early sign of ... his readiness to revise the content of morality in the interests of establishing morality.”⁷ For Malcolm Schofield, the lie is about “how to *persuade* the individual to do something required

⁷ That said, she also attributes some question-begging to Plato, claiming that for Plato the lies are good because the people lying—the guardians—are good. She also thinks the lie is essentially harmless. *Introduction to the Republic*, 108, 167.

by the good of the city.”⁸ And C. D. C. Reeve proposes, “Those who believe [the noble lie] do not come to believe a real lie. For the belief benefits them, and leads them towards the good itself, not away from it.”⁹ Given that I am implicating the noble lie in the fall of the city, I am less certain that Plato is as sanguine about the deception as he is painted to be.

Socrates calls the lie the *gennaion pseudos* (414b), which is most often translated as noble lie. How long it has been so translated I do not know, but this rendering is not the only possibility. Popper labels it the “lordly lie”;¹⁰ Nietzsche, more poetically, “the actual lie, the genuine, resolute, ‘honest’ lie”;¹¹ and for Giovanni Ferrari, “The lie is grand or noble (*gennaios*) by virtue of its civic purpose, but the Greek word can also be used colloquially, giving the meaning ‘a true-blue lie,’ i.e., a massive, no-doubt-about-it lie.”¹² I prefer “Grand Lie,” both to emphasize the scale of the con and to preserve moral ambiguity—grand can be applied to criminal acts (gamers, think *Grand Theft Auto*) as well as to beautiful activities (partisans of Jeremy Clarkson, think *The Grand Tour*).

The grand lie is occasioned by the evolution into the feverish city. The prior, healthy city is proposed to be complete in its simplicity, as far as everyone has a role in it and it is stable. Glaucon complains, however, that it is a city of pigs, on account of the significant limitations on human desire, and advocates for expanding the scope of human ambition and pleasure. His is the Angelica Schuyler critique: we shall never be satisfied, *humanly*, in the healthy city, and thus need expansion. This expansion brings with it new acquisitiveness, which leads to conflict *ad extra*, war, and presumably *ad intra*, competition and strife. It is under these conditions that the grand lie is proposed to stabilize and control the energies in the city. In trying to work out what the just city

⁸ Malcolm Schofield, “The Noble Lie,” 158. Emphasis in original. It is, of course, unclear how lying counts as persuasion.

⁹ C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings*, 211.

¹⁰ *Open Society*, 140.

¹¹ *Genealogy of Morals*, III.19.

¹² Giovanni Ferrari, *Plato: The Republic*, trans. T. Griffith, 107 n. 63.

looks like, Socrates speculates, “The having and doing of one’s own, of what belongs to one, would be justice” (434a). The grand lie is an attempt to impose, on the citizens, the view that they are where they should be. The citizens’ hopes, ambitions, and desires are easier to manage if they believe that there is a place for everyone and that everyone is in his place; the grand lie is aimed at convincing the citizens that each ‘deserves’ his lot, his specific place in the order of things.

Lies are allowed in the city as a necessary, medicinal evil. At an important moment, Socrates explains, “What about when we are dealing with enemies, or with so-called friends who, because of insanity or ignorance, are attempting to do something bad? Isn’t [a lie in words] a useful drug (*pharmakon*) for preventing them?” (382c). The relevant background is Cephalus’ claim that part of justice is being honest and returning what is owed, a claim that Socrates challenged with the problem of whether one would return a borrowed weapon to the insane. Faced with the potential threat of an armed madman, the suggestion or assumption seems to be that fraud is a better means than force for managing the situation; as a drug, lying appears to be less violent and more civilised than physical restraint. Later, Socrates continues, “It follows that our rulers will then have to employ a great many drugs (*pharmakois*). ... It looks as though our rulers will have to employ a great many lies and deceptions for the benefit of those they rule. And you remember, I suppose, we said all such things were useful as a kind of drug (*pharmakou*)” (459c-d). This drug for managing interpersonal frictions is also useful politically.

As drugs or *pharmaka*, lies are a human invention. They are occasioned by human weakness, the limits of our wisdom and/or virtue to deal with threats to our peace. The gods are safe and secure; according to Socrates, they are good and can suffer no harm, their friends are good, and their enemies have no power over them. As such, they have no need for lies, nor do lies have any attraction for them. We lie because we are afraid and need a protective device or drug.

The grand lie is precisely such a device. Faced with the threat of civil strife and destruction of the city, the rulers opt to protect the peace by administering a potent drug whose aim is to reduce and restrain destabilizing forces in the city. To the extent that citizens come under the power of the grand lie, the less likely they are to challenge the city's ordained structure and procedures.

One must keep in mind that Plato's evaluation of *pharmaka* is often equivocal; he is sensitive to the ambiguities of the term. In the *Phaedrus*, for instance, the god Theuth famously invents the written word, proposing it as a *pharmakon* for memory, an invention that will make us better at remembering and therefore wiser. The Egyptian philosopher and king, Thamus, however, dares to demur. He judges that the written word will habituate us to having ideas on hand externally rather than internally, which will make us worse at remembering. And, because of our collecting and hoarding writings outside the soul, we would be more likely to amass things in a disordered manner, without a grasp of their relationships within an ordered whole. We might have more information at hand, but we would be likely to be more confused than to be wiser. Theuth's drug, while useful in some ways, would nevertheless have undesired effects, unforeseen by its uncritical inventor. That *pharmakon* is ambiguous, bringing both advantages and disadvantages.

We witness a similar duality in the *Phaedo*. The first line of the dialogue invokes the day when Socrates drank the *pharmakon*, the potion that was the instrument of his execution. Plato plays on the two meanings of *pharmakon*, leaving open the question of whether the potion is a medicine or a poison. In the *Phaedo*, this question is explored under the theme of purification. Socrates' friends are certain that death is an evil, and have arrived to console Socrates as they lament his passing. But, they find the philosopher remarkably hopeful that his death will be a purification and transition to a better condition. The poisonous *pharmakon* turns out to be purifying—at least for Socrates. Also, we note, Athens is trying to purify itself by turning Socrates

into a sacrifice or scapegoat, a *pharmakos*, whom it is violently expelling from the city. But, given Phaedo's observation that the public execution was delayed lest the city be polluted, we might assume that Plato is less than bullish about the purifying effects of human sacrifice, legally sanctioned or not. So, there are reasons to be sceptical that the grand lie, Kallipolis' *pharmakon*, is politically purifying and stabilizing. To grasp this *pharmakon* better, it is worthwhile to recall its details, so that we can work out its consequences.

IV. The Grand Lie

In its content, the grand lie has two basic aspects, one descriptive and the other proscriptive. The citizens of the city are to come to believe that they are all the children of a single mother, and that they differ primarily according to which metal—gold, silver, iron or bronze—determines the subspecies of their souls. They are sorted into three political classes according to the value or preciousness of the metal in their souls. As we have already discussed, this lie is aimed at protecting the stability of the city, which it does in two ways: first, in view of their common mother, the citizens are connected to the same land and are bound together under a common fraternity. Second, on account of their intrinsic differences, the citizens are sorted according to a natural hierarchy derived from the maternal soil. The myth of metals thus provides 'scientific' reasons for both political unity and class diversity in the city, and The Science, of course, is to be believed, as it brings, from the earth, peace to men of good will.

So much for a description of what is to be accepted. There is also a task: with great lie, comes great responsibility. Socrates elaborates, "The first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of their offspring" (415c). This first command, the prime directive

tied to the founding of the city, is that constant vigilance must be exercised over the sorting of offspring. To protect the city, the rulers must protect the continuation of the (false, merely seeming) hierarchy. It is in view of this mission that, on my reading, that the city is compelled to live out certain consequences of the grand lie, namely the three waves Socrates proposes. Keeping in mind the ambiguous character of *pharmaka*, I propose that each wave is double edged.

The first wave is the co-education of and shared leadership by men and women. This appears to be a straightforward good: a liberating education for both sexes, and leadership based not on one's biology but on one's merits—advancement for ladies and gentlemen of achievement, *Lost in Thought* and *Rescuing Socrates* for everyone capable. And yet, the justification for this wave is curious. The co-education of men and women is a way of underlining that what matters most is psychic metallurgy. Education is ordered to refining the ore of one's soul. To drill this point home, more or less every other difference between individuals gets relegated to something, let us say, immaterial. Thus, for example, Socrates insists that men and women will exercise naked together. By stripping both sexes and treating them as almost undifferentiated, the city boldly commits to ordering itself and understanding its elites, especially, according to the categories of the grand lie. In this stripping away of all other differences, there is a sense in which the city does away with the private/public distinction. One's soul determines one's education, and one's education defines one's role in the city. To get the fullest education means becoming more and more a servant of the city; one is not educated for one's personal freedom, but for the freedom of the city.

Still, Socrates immediately has to grant something to what he calls erotic necessity. Reflecting on the young guardians as they exercise naked, work on Euclidian proofs, sing in choir, make fun of midshipmen, and perform Baconian dissections together, he concedes that they might

not be sensitized simply to each other's souls. It is likely that as a particular pair becomes aware of each other's strength, courage, intelligence, and wit, they might start talking and not be interested in just talking. It is probable that one fateful hour, as they translate the saucier bits of *Antigone* together, they, like Paolo and Francesca, will read no more.

In response to the erotic necessity driving this state of affairs—or rather, this taste of love affairs—Socrates authors the second wave of Kallipolis, the sharing of spouses and children. It is easy to see how this wave flows from the prime directive of the grand lie as well as the interactions brought about by the first wave. The business of this wave is, predictably, to protect the stability of the city, primarily by fostering unity among the elite class. The wave centers the metals of the soul and, by further relegating the significance of corporeal ties, entirely does away with the natural family for the sake of strengthening the political family. Unity is fostered horizontally, with each generation viewing its members as siblings, and intergenerationally, as the older generations look to the younger ones as all their children (or younger siblings) and the younger ones look to their elders as their parents (or older siblings). By making the unity and cohesion of the elites stronger, the city and its peace are further protected from faction. Civil strife, not infrequently, comes from warring families and vendettas or cycles of violence and vengeance between them. By eliminating natural families, one significant source of civil strife is neutralized. Furthermore, agents in the younger generations are less likely to rise up in revolution against their elders, since the ruling class will have many allies across generations and many among the heirs apparent will know that they are being groomed to take over rule. There is an intelligible succession plan.

The costs of this wave are easy to discern. As we have seen, there is the effective obliteration of natural or blood ties for the sake of a pseudo-nature. Then there is the eugenic, false lottery that manipulates coupling according to the nuptial algorithm. The victims of this new lie

wrongly believe pairings to be ordained by providence. And, finally, there is the disappearing of the unfit children, for whom, one assumes, a powerful city like Kallipolis would be able to care. More on that later.

At this point the city needs to run a significant education system that is meant both to underline the idea that one's soul metal is the critical factor in one's relationships with other people in the city and, I believe, to sort out souls like a centrifuge so as to make sure that the right ones inherit executive power. On top of this, there is a rather penetrating and expansive surveillance apparatus that tracks the elites, with an eye both to protecting the idea that souls have a metallic core and to manipulating the eugenic lottery for the sake of producing useful progeny for the city. These needs make for a sophisticated system, which cannot preserve itself and therefore requires custodians. Given the system's complexity, it needs to be in the care of persons both subtle and intelligent. Given the system's goals (i.e., the stability of the city), it needs to be operated by people who will prefer the good of the city before their individual interests or the interests of any subordinate society within the city. The city needs leaders who marry insight, practical ability, and love for the common good. Hence, Socrates' third wave.

Rule by the philosopher-kings is rule by the wise and the just, i.e., those in whom wisdom and virtue, in view of the city's good, are well developed. The education of the guardians who will become philosopher-kings is comprehensive: physical training makes them hardy and capable of perseverance through difficulty; musical training makes them lovers of order and harmony; the quadrivium makes them intimate with the nature of number in itself (arithmetic), in space (geometry), in time (music), and in space and time (astronomy); and philosophy advances them as lovers of the true and the good. These would seem to be the ideal sorts of people to receive the reigns of the city; one can intuit that their numerical training would allegedly prepare them well to

apply the nuptial algorithm. The plan sounds reasonable. Does this wave also have a second edge? The principal problem, from my perspective, is that those who have been raised to be the most devoted truth-lovers are the ones who have to become most intimately joined to the lies of the city. This combination will have psychological costs.

V. Saving the City

To make the situation of the philosopher-kings more palatable, Socrates renders it in heroic terms. He says, at one moment, “In a suitable [constitution], [the philosopher’s] own growth will be fuller and he will save the commonweal (*ta koina sosei*), as well as himself” (497a), and at another, “We must take good care in all these matters, since, if we bring people who are sound of limb and mind to so important a subject [sc. philosophy], and train and educate them in it, justice itself will not find fault with us, and we will save both the city (*ten polin sosomen*) and its constitution” (536a-b). Kallipolis is, presumably, a suitable constitution and a regime in which training and education are well attended to. In this city, the philosopher-kings are portrayed as saviors of the city, the protectors of its peace, its deliverers.

But, the theme of saving the city is a complicated one; indeed, it is a popular theme in Greek tragedy. Consider the *Oresteia*. Agamemnon slew his daughter, Iphigenia, for the sake of saving the city; Orestes kills his mother partly for the sake of the city; and Athena presides over the suit of the Eumenides again for the sake the city, powers who threaten to destroy the city unless Orestes is executed. Things are similar with the Oedipus Cycle. Oedipus promises to discover and destroy the polluting presence so as to save the city; in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the body of the stricken king has power to save cities; and in *Antigone* Creon opposes his niece for the sake of preserving and thus saving the city. Plato, we saw, composes the death of Socrates as an attempt to save the

city by eliminating a corrupting influence. And we see this trope even beyond the Greeks: in the Gospel of John, Caiaphas explains, “You do not understand that it is expedient for you, that one man should die for the people, lest the whole nation perish,”¹³ i.e., the death of Jesus of Nazareth is ‘necessary’ to save the city; and, similarly, the deaths of Joan of Arc and Thomas More are ‘necessary’ to preserve the peace of the city. The theme of saving the city is central to many tragic plots.

And as the above examples show, saving the city is not infrequently connected to the need for a *pharmakos*, a saving sacrifice to be destroyed precisely to achieve the desired salvation or rescue. My interest, in bringing out the double-edged aspect of Socrates’ three waves, was to prepare the way for an articulation of the various forms of human sacrifice that are needed to preserve the grand lie, the lie that saves the city from destabilization and destruction.

In the first wave, the sacrifice required is that of our individuality and corporeality. One’s place in the city is determined essentially by one’s soul-ore; there is not much room for pursuing personal ambitions and projects, especially the more precious one’s soul is. Also, the city obliterates all psychological differences between men and women and it would have its citizens believe that physiological differences are relevant merely to reproduction and nothing else, insisting on men and women exercising naked together. With this immolation of the corporeal dimension of interpersonal relationships, we anticipate the sacrifices demanded by the second wave. The natural bonds between parents and children are repudiated as dangerous, a consequence of sacrificing corporeality in the first wave. The sacrifice of personal freedom evolves into the eugenic lottery; guardians are not allowed to pair off according to their own lights, but, rather, are manipulated into thinking that couplings are following some providential order. And, there is the

¹³ John 11:50.

disappearance—likely exposure—of the unfit children. I suspect that these children are killed not because they are useless nor because they are a drain on resources, but because their presence proves, in a vivid and visceral manner, the falseness of the grand lie. Unfit children, who come from all classes and resemble none, demonstrate that human beings do not geometrically reproduce according to the city's sub-kinds. Each unfit child refutes and repudiates the grand lie; as material proof of the emptiness of the grand lie, these children need to be eliminated.

But perhaps what is most directly distorting is the sacrifice of reason or rationality that is required of the philosopher-kings themselves. Socrates judges that the grand lie would be most efficacious if the rulers themselves fell under its sway: “How, then, could we devise one of those useful lies we were talking about a while ago, a single grand lie that would, preferably, persuade even the rulers themselves; but, failing that, the rest of the city?” (414b-c). Glaucon is sceptical that they will be able to deceive the founders, but suggests he has a device for bringing the later rulers under the power of the lie (415c-d). But, later in the dialogue, Socrates poignantly reflects, “Won't we say that a soul is maimed if it hates a voluntary lie, cannot endure to have one in itself, and is greatly angered when others lie; but is nonetheless content to accept an involuntary lie, does not get irritated when it is caught being ignorant, and bears its ignorance easily, wallowing in it like a pig?” (535d-e). Yet, surely the grand lie is such a necessary, involuntary lie. Socrates' words suggest that the philosopher-kings would have to betray themselves, pervert what is most divine about them, their reason, for the sake of serving and protecting the city. They make a sacrifice of their rationality that dooms them to wallow in the squalor of falsehood. The *Republic* constantly reminds us that lies are hateful to the gods, utterly alien to divine nature. But, the vocation of the philosopher is to be as godlike as possible. The philosopher-kings, then, are tragically bound, on account of the grand lie, to frustrate their pursuit of their proper end as lovers of wisdom.

The grand lie and its consequences thus require human sacrifices, of different sorts, from the citizens of the city. Even those who rule the city are not spared; in a way, of all the citizens, the grand lie requires the leaders to be most unfaithful to their human nature. Those who were portrayed as controllers and custodians are in reality controlled and prisoners; the rulers of Kallipolis are enslaved by the lie, for the lie. The grand lie generates its own perverse offspring—namely, more lies, more manipulation, and even physical violence—all for the sake of preserving itself. Those who employ the useful lies and violence see these as necessary sacrifices for the city, not unlike the people of Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” and Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” In the words of Wilfred Owen, the guardians of the city have internalized “the old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori*”; it is sweet and meet these sacrifices be made, in this case, for the sake of the motherland.

But the grand lie is empty, we recall, and so these sacrifices cannot be efficacious; they cannot preserve and maintain an order that does not exist. As Brann notes, with every crop of natural births the hollowness of the grand lie is made more and more manifest. Indeed, the dramatic framing of the *Republic* offers clues that are meant to inoculate us from the grand lie. We are given, for example, the family of Cephalus. The patriarch hosting the evening’s discussion offers a summary of his family’s history in the city, noting how his grandfather was a very hard worker, how his father was prodigal, and how he himself is something of a mean between the two. From these details alone we see that fathers do not easily produce sons with souls like their own. Saliently, when Polemarchus inherits Cephalus argument about the nature of justice, the son develops the father’s definition in a more aggressive and combative direction, again showing that the souls of father and son are different. And then we have the sons of Ariston, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who are Plato’s brothers. Given that their apparent susceptibility to some aspects of

tyrannical living, Plato may be suggesting that his brothers are not like him. With Cephalus' line we get the problem of variable descent, and the sons of Ariston give us horizontal variety between brothers, which once again stresses that a father has not produced sons who share the same basic soul-form. And towards the end of the main account of the just life, Socrates opts to characterize the declension of declining regimes along the lines of fathers who produce sons who are unlike them. This framing, at the beginning and at the end of the dialogue, reminds us that the grand lie is empty, which makes the sacrifices made for its sake only more absurd.

In the mostly misleading explanation that Kallipolis fails because of the failed application of the nuptial algorithm, Socrates works out how mixture will find its way into the offspring and corrupt the generations and therefore the city: "The intermixing of iron with silver and bronze with gold will engender lack of likeness and unharmonious inequality, and these always breed war and hostility wherever they arise. We must declare faction to be 'of this lineage,' wherever and whenever it arises" (547a). If my reading is correct enough, there will necessarily be intermixing with every new crop of births. With every new season of offspring, more and more unlikeness and unharmonious inequality will enter into the city with a multiplier effect. Two main consequences follow from these conditions. First, those who inherit rule cannot be assumed to possess the neat and tidy stability of golden guardians. The courage, temperance, and love for truth and the common good in them will inevitably contain impurities. Not only are the leaders not perfectly golden, their offspring will not be such either. Thus, it is inevitable that eventually rulers will not be as interested either in the truth or in the common good of the city. These leaders will not be as attentive to protecting the pedagogical and eugenic priorities of the city. They will not be reliable. Second, with time more and more souls will 'wrongly' be assigned to classes lower than they 'deserve'. These souls will likely notice some of the fraud and violence that maintains the stability of the city,

and take issue with being ruled by governors whose souls are not better—and are in fact even worse—than theirs. If it is explained to them that their rulers inherited gold souls from a previous generation, some will become resentful on account of being ruled by those who would be essentially Nepo babies. The more natural births occur in the city, the more the grand lie will likely be uncovered and the more keener intelligences will suspect that each one is not in his place, that each deserves his lot. If they attend to the sacrifices that the city demands, it seems inevitable that someone will question the efficacy of these sacrifices and come to resent Kallipolis for requiring them. To the extent that people become aware of the unlikeness of souls and the inharmonious inequality of the city, they are primed to revolt against the established order and to return strife and faction into the city. Natural births are threats to a city whose stability has been founded on the grand lie. Because human beings are naturally jealous of their interests, the fraud and force of Kallipolis mean that the city is ripe for rebellion. The grand lie makes Kallipolis vulnerable.

VI. Tragic Fall

The grand lie was introduced to stabilize the city. In the attempt to order and control the city, it introduces more disorder and servility into the city. The maintenance of the lie demands violence, in the form of more lies and killing. If these disorders are discovered, the city would be delegitimized and made unstable. And with every crop of new births, the more likely it is that the lie and the violence that sustains it will be discovered and rebelled against. On my reading, then, the lie is unsustainable. Kallipolis thus has a dramatic arc that moves from ‘noble’ founding to destined fall. This doomed arc is a tragic arc.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy, among other things, as “a representation of an action of a superior kind, great and complete in itself ... effecting, through pity and fear, the

purification of such emotions.”¹⁴ And when sketching the tragic figure, he proposes, “We are left, then, with the person in between: a man not outstanding in virtue or justice, who falls into ruin not through vice or depravity but because he errs in some way.”¹⁵ The arc of Kallipolis is a superior action, the complete plot of a great city. And the city is also a tragic figure. As human—and not divine—it suffers from human weaknesses that make it vulnerable to instability and needs to employ saving devices to protect itself from dissolution. But, by grounding these saving devices in falsehood, the city’s stability is grounded on something empty and therefore ultimately inefficacious and unsustainable. In many Greek tragedies, mere suffering is not automatically tragic; the tragedy comes from an inadequate or deficient response to suffering. Sophocles’ Oedipus and Creon, for example, respond to evils in the city; Euripides’ Medea and Hecuba respond to evil suffered personally; and likewise with Aeschylus’ Orestes. The grand lie of Kallipolis is also a response to danger or suffering, viz., instability, but it is a response that brings with it its own evils and disorders. This response is hindered by the kind of tragic error or fault Aristotle describes.

The treatment of tragedy in the *Philebus* is presented as the coupling of greatness with overestimation of self. The tragic figure has power, but overestimates his excellences, whether those are his means, his strength, or his wisdom and virtue (48b-50e). By acting without an accurate estimation of himself, he ends up being destructive both to others and to himself. This outline is an apt description of Kallipolis, which is a grand city that, nevertheless, overestimates its wisdom and virtue by thinking it can tame or control falsehood, but in the end is the one mastered and controlled.

¹⁴ *Poetics* 1449b.

¹⁵ *Poetics* 1453a.

Kallipolis is revealed as what we might call an Oedipal city. It is a great city with great rulers, while at the same time blind. The grand lie, the great device that was designed as a cunning and effective way to address one of the principal sources of strife and instability in the city, viz., the desires of different and unequal people, is the same device that reduces the capacity of the city (and the rulers) to see what might be going wrong in the city, weakening the ability of the city to respond adequately. Like Oedipus, Kallipolis is doomed from its birth; the very act that establishes the city is an action that eventually undermines its founding.

For Aristotle, a well-executed tragic plot will have the tragic figure's reversal of fortune coincide with the revelation and recognition of the figure's actual situation. Kallipolis' arc might even produce such an effect: on my reading, the grand lie will continually introduce disorder into the city until such a time as when the violence born of the lie will be challenged, exposing the emptiness of the lie. By the time this revelation occurs, it will be too late to save the regime, as the rulers and the constitution would be discredited. Still, while the recognition arrives too late for the protagonist, it is meant to be purifying for the audience. In the terms of the *Poetics*, this purification is achieved through fear and pity, and in the *Philebus* witnessing tragic self-overestimation should occasion self-examination. Along these lines, I suggest that the trajectory of Kallipolis is meant to invite the reader to consider his own city. The story of Kallipolis' rise and fall raises the question of what grand lies might be operative in our cities, and cautions us both against the violence that is done in the name of maintaining the city and against a naïve belief in the stability of a city that is supported and protected by violence.

VII. Conclusion

Here at the end, let us reconsider our beginning. Those who read Plato as a consequentialist are limited by their immediately prescriptive approach, the assumption that what is found in Socrates' mouth corresponds to what Plato wants us to believe. I have attempted what I called a forensic approach vector, attending to details beyond Socrates' statements, and reading the doom or fate of Kallipolis as the consequence of a coherent, compelling logic that is initiated at the city's founding. Having done this, is there anything so say about what Plato might be telling us? In my view, the *Republic* articulates, quite effectively, the pressure of compelling necessities that lead us to invent or devise political lies. Furthermore, by presenting founding lies as necessary even in the best possible regime, I believe Plato is rousing us to consider the place and price of political lies in every regime.

In the *Apology*, Socrates warns Athens by contrasting death and vice as predators. He observes that some people are so fixated on escaping death that they are caught by vice, on account of the unscrupulous means by which they avoid death. Something similar might be operative here. Plato appears to be exploring how political lies, devices by which we attempt to outpace instability and disorder, probably end up being the shackles that doom us to be overtaken by violence, to be forced into sacrificing ourselves and others. These sacrifices, allegedly necessary and apparently redemptive, are actually destructive of justice and right order. We cannot, therefore, afford to be naïve about the justice of the regimes in which we find ourselves—nor, perhaps more importantly, about ourselves as complicit in these regimes. Plato is less a consequentialist, then, but more a tragedian.