Lying as a Leader

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This essay draws on Plato's Republic *as a model of leadership that is fundamentally situated on lying to subordinates. Socrates founded a hypothetical city that would be the epitome of virtuosity, but at its core would be a system of oppression of the masses, based on a lie that would segregate the citizens into a hierarchical caste system with no possibility of changing their circumstances. The works of Michel Foucault in* Discipline and Punish*, Friedrich Nietzsche in* Thus Spoke Zarathustra *and* The Gay Science*, and Simone de Beauvoir in* The Ethics of Ambiguity *to develop a critical analysis of the ethics of using a lie as a foundation for any leadership capacity.*

Lying is an interesting moral problem because it is not universally wrong or bad. It has been the source of debate amongst philosophers even since the time of Socrates, and there is no clear answer whether it is universally reprehensible or acceptable. This problem becomes nuanced when we take into account the specific social relations involved in the lie and its content. The goal of this essay is to evaluate the appropriateness of lying while one is holding a leadership role using the ethics of Friedrich Nietzsche and Simone de Beauvoir. I will begin this evaluation by using Plato's *Republic* as a model of leadership that lies to its subordinates. I will compare the motivations of Socrates to the philosophy of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, highlighting key similarities in the thoughts of both thinkers. Then I will use Friedrich Nietzsche's ethical teachings found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The*

Gay Science to evaluate Socrates's leadership model. Lastly, I will use Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, to assess Socrates's ideal leadership system. I argue that Socrates creates an unethical leadership model, not because it involves lying to others, but because it involves the unwarranted oppression of people.

Plato's Republic is an account of Socrates's attempt to identify and define the abstract virtue of justice. One method Socrates employs to uncover the meaning of justice is to create a hypothetical, perfect city and liken that city to a perfect soul. In doing so it will make justice easier to discover, much in the same way one would use a magnifying glass to make something appear bigger so that it is easier to find. The city Socrates hypothetically creates is to be used as the epitome of a virtuous city and it is carefully divided into a hierarchy of three different classes of people. Socrates sees a problem with segregating the population this way because there will be people that rebel against being put into a lower class than their peers and having to deal with a harsher life than the more privileged higher classes. To combat this potential problem, Socrates deems it necessary to construct what he calls a "noble falsehood"[1] that would serve to placate the masses into willfully accepting their place in their respective class. The falsehood would take the form of a story or a myth that the leaders would tell the people about how their city, and they themselves, were created.

Socrates tells the story that all the people are related to each other, but "the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen."[2] The different groups of people are separated because they are told that some are more valuable than others with each group experiencing less and less prestige and privilege the lower they are on the hierarchy. Furthermore, "the first and most important command from the god to the rulers is that there is nothing that they must guard better or watch more carefully than the mixture of metals in the souls of the next generation."[3] This means that there can be no interbreeding between groups

1 Plato, *Republic* (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, 1992), 91.
2 Ibid., 91.
3 Ibid., 91.

and that the distinction amongst the different classes will be strongly reinforced by both the rulers and by the religious tradition. Effectively, this opens the way for Socrates to institute a practice of eugenics in the highest social class and cement their rule over the lesser castes. On top of the social stigma that he will enact, Socrates threatens that "there is an oracle which says that the city will be ruined if it ever has an iron or bronze guardian."[4] In effect, Socrates will have the people believe that if there should ever be a person of a lower class that happens to infiltrate the highest class, then the city will fall into ruin. Through the indoctrination of people, Socrates will achieve his perfect city, but at what cost? All the effort of using a noble falsehood is directed at making the population easier to control. This idea has a modern correlate found in the philosophy of Michel Foucault.

Michel Foucault wrote *Discipline and Punish*, which is an extensive study of the development of the penal practices of western societies and its impact on social structure. This specifically relates to Socrates because Foucault provides the rationale for why a system like Socrates's would work. The majority of Foucault's work in *Discipline and Punish* revolves around how power, be it social or political, is gained from organizing individuals and careful discipline. Foucault says "the chief function of the disciplinary power is to 'train', rather than to select and to levy; or, no doubt, to train in order to levy and select all the more."[5] Discipline serves as a facilitator of training individuals in order to properly command and discriminate them, based on rigorous norms and observation. Through discipline, one can make a body of people useful, as seen in today's armed forces personnel. The military, namely the Army, is able to take young people and mold them into soldiers through intense physical and mental training in boot camp. Boot camp takes the malleable recruits and subjects them to severe discipline and organization. They are harshly punished for the slightest deviation from protocol and are given a rank as part of a hierarchical structure that incentivises them to perform well in order to be promoted and receive accolades. After finishing the training, some of the recruits move forward to more specialized training such as special forces and etc. This example highlights the point Foucault makes

4 Ibid., 92.

5 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1995), 170.

in that a group of people can be trained to fulfill a specific role and from the newly trained group you can select those to be pushed forward and trained even more intensely. The military training program is a machine that creates useful bodies that can be further augmented with higher levels of discipline. Discipline can be used to make people into groups of docile bodies. Foucault explains the meaning of a docile body saying, "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[6] Discipline turns people into the cogs of a well-oiled machine at the expense of their personal desires and wills. This modern observation fits wholly with Socrates's goal of creating groups of people that are willing to subject themselves to such rigorous class distinctions. Foucault offers a modern reference for the ancient program of Socrates and provides us with relevant examples of how it is done in our own society. The pervasive goal of discipline creates groups of people that can be used as tools in the hands of others, and the terrifying insight is that it causes humans to want to participate in the system of discipline against their best interests.

Socrates uses methods that would cause upheaval in western society. What is it about his system that is so offensive? The main ethical concerns regarding this perfect city are, first, the people are being lied to, and second, the people are arbitrarily forced into unequal castes with no hope of being delivered from their social status. Friedrich Nietzsche provides compelling accounts to the ethical quandary of lying in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in *The Gay Science*.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche attempts to allegorize his philosophy through the teachings of a prophet named Zarathustra. Zarathustra works to teach people of the *übermensch* (overperson), who is the pinnacle of human achievement and evolution. While Zarathustra admits that no one alive in his time can become an *übermensch*, it is still important to strive to become like one. Everything that leads people closer to attaining that goal is considered ethical or moral. In the section titled *On the Three Metamorphoses*, Zarathustra describes the three stages of life a person can potentially encounter, depending on their own personal development. The first stage is that of the camel, who is a person that takes upon themselves the values of others. The camel stage is a condemnation of all those who ascribe to the values given to them by tradition or

6 Ibid., 136.

religion and they do not question those values for themselves. They never attempt to evaluate the things they believe and so are led like beasts of burden throughout their lives. This stage is the lowest stage of the three metamorphoses and its transition to a higher stage is marked by the person recognizing they are burdened by the values and desires of others, not ones they themselves have created. This realization prompts upheaval by the person in what Zarathustra calls the lion stage. The lion stage is important because it allows a person to create the "freedom for oneself for new creation."[7] A person can revolt against the values others have given them and can begin to see that it is possible for themselves to create their own values. The downfall of the lion stage is that it only has the power to destroy old values, it cannot create new ones for itself. To do this, one must pass on to the child stage, which is characterized by "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes.'"[8] The child, in all innocence and without any rancor, is able to create for themselves new values. The importance in this is that they are their own masters and have decided for themselves how they will to live. This relates to Socrates's perfect city because he demands that people accept the values given to them by the city and to never question them, exactly as described by the camel stage. In essence, Socrates would prevent all of the citizens from progressing through the three metamorphoses for the benefit of the state and only allow a small few to attempt progressing through these stages. Such a damning policy would incite the anger of Nietzsche, who advocates that all people make an effort to move through the different metamorphoses, and be strongly condemned by him. For Nietzsche, nothing can take the place over the importance of the individual and that is why he vehemently opposes the state, or the masses.

Nietzsche also has qualms with doing anything for the benefit of the state. In *On the New Idol*, he calls the state "the death of peoples" and "the coldest of all cold monsters."[9] It lies to the people saying, "I, the state, am the people."[10] In this sense, the state is an abstract, third-person entity not representative of the actual population from which it arises.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1982), 139.
8 Ibid., 139.
9 Ibid., 160.
10 Ibid., 160.

It is a generalization that lacks the specific traits of those it represents and so becomes a distinct identity and unity separate from the population. It is a phantom of the people it is supposed to represent and it is a tool for those in power to coerce the population into docility by appeals to popularity. Through this deception, the state is able to control the masses and people willingly give themselves over for the benefit of the state or for the public. They lose sight of the fact that "it was creators who created peoples and hung a faith and a love over them;"[11] people are the ones responsible for the creation of states, yet the state can subvert that truth in order to create a system of oppression. The state is a lie that wins over the hearts of everyone because, "it will give you everything if you adore it, this new idol: thus, it buys the splendor of your virtues and the look of your proud eyes."[12] The state actively suppresses individuals and turns them into lesser beings, much in the same way the rulers of Socrates's city force people into castes and tell them they are less valuable than their superiors. If they deny this lie they are made into enemies of the city, or the state, and are cast out of the city. Nietzsche would denounce Socrates's city on the grounds that it devalues the individual in order to deify an abstract entity like the state. Nietzsche says "where the state ends—look there, my brothers! Do you not see it, the rainbow and the bridges of the overman?"[13] The state stands in direct opposition to the coming of the *übermensch* and it hinders peoples' ability to improve themselves to become more like the *übermensch*. This is unethical and therefore must be discredited for the sake of the individual.

In addition to the wrongfulness of hindering the potential of others, Nietzsche speaks out against deceit of any kind. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche makes an account of how people should live their lives according to a new morality that affirms life in the present instead of any afterlife, which demeans our present experience. He succinctly states the basic tenets of his new morality in these words: "'I will not deceive, not even myself'; *and with that we stand on moral ground*."[14] Deception of any kind is not tolerated in Nietzsche's morality because it ultimately leads to people lying to themselves. The deception in question is that of science

11 Ibid., 160.
12 Ibid., 161-162.
13 Ibid., 163.
14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Vintage Books: New York, 1974), 282.

and religion, deceiving people into believing that there is a world apart from our world and that distant world holds all value, not the one we live in. This deception leads people to eventually hate their life and waste it in the hopes of a better life or existence that is yet to be found. It is with this stroke that the Socratic ideal city falls. It is based on a deception and upholds that deception throughout its existence, driving people to sacrifice themselves in the service of a falsehood and wasting their lives in a potentially demeaning position that was artificially placed on them.

This twofold refutation by Nietzsche is thorough and founded in critical philosophy, rather than appealing to any form of deity or tradition. One of the problematic refutations is his stance against lying. Nietzsche holds that deception is immoral in all cases and people must not deceive others nor themselves, but there must be some instances where lying is the right course of action. There is an ambiguity of existence that Nietzsche embraces throughout most of his work until he comes to the topic of deception, then that ambiguity is thrown out in favor of absolute values. Simone de Beauvoir compensates for Nietzsche's oversight in her work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where she embraces the ambiguity of life and uses it to create a controversial, yet consistent ethics loosely based on the idea of the ends justifying the means.

Beauvoir's ethics is focused entirely on maximizing the freedom of all people. Her emphasis is on using existing people and situations in ethical systems rather than postulating any hypothetical group. She says, "whereas for existentialism, it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men."[15] Beauvoir does not want to deal with hypothetical situations, but rather, with real people and real problems. Instead of talking about racism in general, she will advocate talking about racism specifically at work in South Africa or other colonial areas. This 'real world' emphasis enables Beauvoir to confront difficult issues that plague modern society. The underlying rule that Beauvoir's ethics follows is that freedom of all people must be respected. She says, "to will oneself free is also to will others free."[16] Freedom has a very specific definition for Beauvoir. She describes it as "not to have the

15 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Open Road Integrated Media: New York, 2015) 17.

16 Ibid., 78.

power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future."[17] Freedom must be able to be expressed as possibility for future endeavors, unlimited by present circumstances. We must enable others to pursue their own projects and goals without any constraints.

This is the ultimate ethical good in Beauvoir's system and it seems to be simple, but unfortunately the world is not as neat as we would have it, and so ethics must take on many more nuances than any simplified idealized version philosophers can provide. Beauvoir escapes this issue by carefully giving her system a qualifier that is ambiguous: "We have to respect freedom only when it is intended for freedom…a freedom which is interested only in denying freedom must be denied."[18] All freedom is not safeguarded in Beauvoir's ethics, which provides people a way to assess real life scenarios, such as racism. The racist is free to express their feelings up until it infringes on the honest intentions of the freedom of others. In this case, the racist loses all claim to their freedom being respected and they are summarily denied. Their freedom is no longer respected so long as it focuses on restricting others. Beauvoir justifies this clause by saying that, in such difficult situations, "it is necessary to choose to sacrifice the one who is an enemy of man."[19] This approach is similar to utilitarian ethics, allowing for minor evils to be committed in the service of the greater good. Each circumstance demands a specific response, so violence is not always the answer, and those who commit such violence must evaluate whether their actions were warranted or not. The guiding rule for such an evaluation is "the evil that one inflicts be lesser than that which is being forestalled."[20] This allows a flexibility in Beauvoir's ethics where one can commit a minor evil, such as lying, in order to accomplish a greater good; the greater good being the maximization of freedom for all. Beauvoir would condemn Socrates's noble falsehood on the grounds that it limits the freedom of the lower classes. The lie itself is not reprehensible, but the act of restricting freedom is. Socrates is completely justified in using a noble lie as long as it does not intentionally limit the freedom of others.

17 Ibid., 97.
18 Ibid., 97.
19 Ibid., 104-105.
20 Ibid., 162.

This ethical study has shown that leadership must confront difficult decisions and sometimes a minor evil is necessary in order to accomplish a greater good. Using the example of Socrates's perfect city in Plato's *Republic*, it has been shown that lying in itself is not wrong, only limiting the freedom and potential of others is. What is required is that the leader continually evaluate whether they are enhancing the freedom of others or restricting it. The leader is ethically justified in their actions, which is supported, in small part, by Friedrich Nietzsche and wholly by Simone de Beauvoir. This does not give the leader free reign to do as they please. They possess a great ethical burden to enable the potential of others and ensure that all people are improved through their interactions with the leader, directly or indirectly.

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