

St. Thomas More's Noble Lie

Nathan Schlueter

In the first paragraph of his letter to Peter Giles which introduces *Utopia*, St. Thomas More claims that “Truth in fact is the only thing at which I should aim and do aim in writing this book”(3).¹ Several paragraphs later he declares that he would “rather say something untrue than tell a lie,” and shortly thereafter he again expresses his hope that his work “contains nothing false and omits nothing true”(5). The playful irony of More's remarks is evident throughout this letter, from his choice of names (e.g. a commonwealth named “no place,” a river named “waterless,” etc.) and his scrupulous care for trifling details, to his humorous caricature of the ambitious theology professor who aspires to be made Bishop of Utopia.² But perhaps his most transparent, non-ironic profession of truth is his last one of the letter: “To tell the truth, I'm still of two minds as to whether I should publish the book at all”(6). More's account of his “two minds” here foreshadows his later exchange with Raphael over whether philosophy can be made useful in public affairs.

More's persistent consideration of truth in his introductory letter points to the nature of truth as a thematic subject of the work as a whole, with the characters More and Raphael Raphael playing the protagonists to the drama. The great question

behind their agon is this: What is the proper relationship between philosophic truth and politics? More contends that philosophy can and should be made useful to public affairs, while Raphael insists that due to the nature of men, and especially kings, public affairs are largely if not wholly impervious to philosophical truths. As a resolution, More proposes to Raphael an “alternative philosophy,” the “indirect approach” according to which:

you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully-and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible. For it is impossible to make everything good unless all men are good, and that I don't expect to see for quite a few years yet (35).

Raphael, however, responds to the “indirect approach” with contempt: “If I wish to speak the truth, I will have to talk in the way I've described. Whether it's the business of a philosopher to tell lies, I don't know, but it certainly isn't mine”(35). (Raphael's association of the “indirect approach” with lying is revealing, and I shall comment on it shortly). But when More expresses doubt about Raphael's proposition that private property be abolished, Raphael then makes a surprising reversal in his argument, introducing Utopia as proof of his point that the “direct approach” to philosophy, that is, undiluted philosophical truth, *can* indeed be applied directly to public affairs. His remarks here are revealing:

I'm not surprised that you think of it this way, he said, ‘since you have no image, or only a false one, of such a commonwealth. But you should have been with me in Utopia and seen with your own eyes their manners and customs, as I did—for I lived there more than five years, and would never have left, if it had not been to make that new world known to others. If you had seen them, you would frankly confess that you had never seen a well-governed people anywhere but there’(39).

It turns out that far from being unconcerned with practical political affairs, Raphael is in fact on a mission to transform them, by providing a true image of the “new world” of Utopia.

What are we to make of this exchange over lying, truth telling, and politics, especially in the context of Raphael's strange reversal? What light do these subjects shed on understanding the action of the dialogue as a whole? In what follows I will give some thoughts to these questions.

More offers an important clue of his intentions in the multiple references to Plato's *Republic* which are scattered throughout the discussion. Peter Giles compares the “sailing” of Raphael above all to Plato (10), and Raphael himself compares Utopia to Plato's republic. Later, More attempts to refute Raphael's arguments with a revealing reference to Plato's *Republic*: “Your friend Plato thinks that commonwealths will be happy only when philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. No wonder we are so far from happiness when philosophers do not condescend even to assist kings with their counsels”(28). Raphael responds to More's proof text in a way that shows a superior understanding of Plato. He first points out that many philosophers have “published books, if the rulers were only willing to take their good advice” (does the publication of More's book show an implicit agreement with Raphael?), and second, that in any case Plato's passage is not

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all citations are to Thomas More, *Utopia*, revised edition, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² In another letter to Peter Giles that was appended to the 1517 edition of *Utopia*, More again has fun with an anonymous individual who is confused by the fictitious nature of the work. In doing so, he further illuminates his purpose in *Utopia*: “But when he questions whether the book is fact or fiction, I find his usual good judgment wanting. I do not deny that if I had decided to write of a commonwealth, and a tale of this sort had come to my mind, I might not have shrunk from a fiction through which the truth, like medicine smeared with honey, might enter the mind a little more pleasantly. But I would certainly have softened the fiction a little, so that, while imposing on vulgar ignorance, I gave hints to the more learned which would enable them to see what I was about. Thus, if I had merely given such names to the governor, the river, the city and the island as would indicate to the knowing reader that the island was nowhere, the city a phantom, the river waterless and the governor without people, it wouldn't have been hard to do, and would have been far more clever than what I actually did. If the veracity of a historian had not actually required me to do so, I am not so stupid as to have preferred those barbarous and meaningless names of Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot and Ademus” (*Utopia*, 109).

an exhortation of philosophers to advise kings, but rather an observation that philosophers must *become* kings (or vice versa) if political troubles are to cease (28).

But in winning the battle Raphael loses the war. Like Raphael, Plato's Socrates also intends to offer an "image" that will have practical effect, but whereas Raphael's image seems primarily intended to transform political life, Socrates' image is directed to the transformation and ordering of the individual soul.³ More importantly, Plato's image, unlike that of Raphael, is based upon a kind of lying, a practice that at least on the surface Raphael categorically rejects, as we have seen above. In practice, however, it is precisely on this point that Raphael's project collapses. To see why this is so it is necessary to consider briefly Socrates' treatment of lying in the *Republic*.⁴

At the end of Book II of Plato's *Republic* Socrates engages in a discussion of lying in which he distinguishes between the "true" (*alethos*) or "real lie" (*onti pseudos*)—which is always rightfully shunned and avoided by gods and men - and the "useful" (*chresimon*) lie (what he will later famously call the *gennaion pseudos*, the "noble" "or excellent lie"⁵)—which can serve certain important purposes.⁶ He seems to drop the point, but midway through the dialogue he frankly acknowledges that rulers of his "city in speech" "will have to use a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled" (459c), even as the rulers themselves have "no taste for falsehood; that is, they are completely unwilling to admit what is false but hate it, while cherishing the truth" (485b-c; see also 490b-c).

In his discussion of lying, Socrates argues that the "noble lie" is useful on two occasions. The first occasion for telling lies is when "we don't know where the truth about ancient things lies—likening the lie to truth as best we can." Notably, the root of the verb Socrates uses here, "*muthologiais*," translated as "telling tales," is *muthos*, or "myth," a richly layered word that designates a narrative which on the surface may be literally false, but which at the same time conveys a deeper or more profound truth. Hence I will call this lie the "mythological lie." Although the *Republic* is often remembered for deciding "the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (607b) in favor of philosophy, Socrates declares himself to be "greedy for images [*eikones*]."⁷ Indeed, his professed iconophilia results in the most fecund and enduring images in

the history of Western thought.⁸ The paradox can be explained by the fact that for Socrates the way to the highest truths is through deliberately manufactured images which are not "the truth in itself," but which provide a limited access to it. The degree of our insight into "what is" is directly related to the relative richness of our poetic experience. In the words of Pablo Picasso, "Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth."

The second occasion for telling lies is when the lie benefits friends "when from madness or some folly they attempt to do something bad." This "therapeutic lie" is necessitated by a soul that is sick, that is, a soul whose proper use of the rational capacity is inhibited either because it is not fully developed—as in children, or because it is materially defective—as in the mentally ill, or because it is clouded by disordered passions and emotions—as in most of the human race. It is justified by its essential connection with the truth, and guided by its concern for the health of the soul. In this it is related to rhetoric and differs from propaganda (the "true lie" above), both as to its form and its object.

Plato's account of lying prepares his interlocutors for the most famous lie of all, the noble lie of Book III. The two parts of this lie serve both mythological and therapeutic purposes insofar as they reveal and respond to aspects of the human condition. What they essentially reveal are the following: First, that although the political community will occasionally require "the last measure of devotion" from its citizens, most citizens do not always adopt such devotion as their individual good without the assistance of convention.⁹ Second, although individual human beings naturally possess different and unequal aptitudes, they often possess desires and expectations that do not match those differences. In each case the noble lie can be understood as responding to disordered (e.g. sick) souls by providing them what is proper and fitting to them. The assumption behind all of it, of course, is that no political community can be perfectly true, according to Raphael's "direct approach," and also perfectly just. The human condition requires that every political community make use of the "indirect approach" advocated by More.¹⁰ The "indirect approach" is the essence of political life.

Given this account, what can be said about the relationship between Raphael and his "friend Plato"? It is important to recall here that Raphael himself compares Utopia to Plato's republic, and, strangely given what has been said, that the context in

³ See the important exchange in Plato's *Republic* at 592a and following.

⁴ I explore the role of lying in Plato's *Republic* more thoroughly elsewhere. See "The Virtue of 'Lying': Recovering the Saving Beauty of Plato's Poetic Vision," *Logos*, Winter, 2006 (forthcoming).

⁵ In a thoughtful essay on the subject, Kateri Carmola emphasizes that the word Socrates uses here, *gennaion*, refers to birth and familial background, and so is not "noble" in the sense of *kalos*. See "Noble Lying: Justice and Intergenerational Tension in Plato's *Republic*," *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (February 2003) 39-62.

⁶ Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books: New York, 1991), 382a-383a. All citations of *The Republic* will use Stephanus numbers. Note that the "noble lie" of Book 3 refers specifically back to the earlier discussion of lying in Book 2. Plato dedicates an entire dialogue, the *Lesser Hippias* or *Hippias Minor*, to the subject of lying. See Paul J. Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 113-122. Plato's treatment in the *Hippias Minor*, however, lacks the fuller political and philosophical context of *The Republic*.

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 488a. Although this iconic greed of Socrates may be contrary to the usual image one might have of a philosophic Socrates, judging by Glaucon's sarcastic remark at 487e those who knew Socrates were accustomed to it.

⁸ These would include the City in Speech itself (369a ff.), the ship of state (488a-489e), the Myth of the Cave (514a-521c) and the concluding Myth of Er (614b-621d). Notably Socrates uses a quote from Homer to initiate the dialogue about Justice which will be the subject of the conversation. Plato, 328e.

⁹ It is important to point out that the noble lie does not necessarily mean that the political community is purely conventional. One can understand the political community as natural (e.g. proper for human beings and perfective of their nature) while still affirming the necessity of the noble lie. Notice that even a community based upon "self-evident truths" cultivates a shared history and identity with national flags, anthems, prayers and other such conventions.

¹⁰ See the words of Publius in Federalist 49: "A reverence for the laws would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason. But a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation, the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side."

which he introduces Utopia is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the “direct approach”: “Perhaps my advice may be repugnant and irksome to them, but I don’t see why it should be considered outlandish to the point of folly. What if I told them the kind of thing Plato imagines in his republic, or that the Utopians practice in theirs?”(35-6). In fact, what stands out in Utopia more than its treatment of common property is that there is no equivalent in it to Plato’s noble lie. For those who are familiar with both works, then, the pressing question is: How has Raphael managed to achieve what Plato’s Socrates could not? Or has he?

We might approach this problem by simply asking two questions, following the suggested purposes of the noble lie above: How does Utopia see to it that each individual does the work which is most suited to him? And how does Utopia ensure that its members will accept “the last measure of devotion” to the good of the city?

As to the first question, the answer must be that Utopia does *not* in fact see to it that each individual will find the work appropriate to his nature. Utopia requires that everyone participate in farming, “men and women alike, with no exception”(48ff.) Such a requirement, however, assumes that all human beings are suited to the work of farming. But if all are not so suited—a fact that seems evident from experience—then this requirement falls short of justice. To be sure, Raphael later says that certain persons are “permanently exempted from work so that they may devote themselves to study,” but this only occurs on the recommendation of the priests, and “through a secret vote of the syphogrants”(52). And whence do the syphogrants come? They are elected by the households (47), and this compounds the problem, for what qualifies the households to judge who is best suited to be a syphogrant? Although Raphael later specifies the objective qualities of a scholar,¹¹ what qualifies the syphogrant to judge who is qualified to be a scholar, if he is not himself a scholar? The electoral process has much to recommend it, but ensuring that occupations are filled by those suited to them is not one of them. The significance of this point can be made most pressing by asking: Does Utopia have a place for Glaucon? One especially wonders this given the rather bourgeois character of the “foolish pleasures” that Raphael catalogues in his discussion of illicit desires; no mention is made of the highest pleasures associated with tyranny (69-74).

It is notable that although the Utopians enjoy playing music (50), and that “every child gets an introduction to good literature” (63), they appear to have no poetry of their own, no epic narrative of their founding and identity, and no stirring tales of its gods and heroes. Their education seems to correspond roughly to the liberal education outlined in Book VII of the *Republic* (64), but without the antecedent formation of passion and imagination which is the necessary prerequisite to such an education (Books II-IV of the *Republic*). Moreover, the Utopians’ obliviousness to the dangers of dialectic that Socrates warns against suggests further that this city has forgotten important aspects of human nature. A closer examination of the moral and religious principles bears this out.

Raphael’s articulation of the moral and religious principles of the Utopians is a confusing and even contradictory combination of Epicureanism, Stoicism and revealed religion. For example, the Utopians seem to recognize the contradiction in an ethic that both celebrates pleasure as its highest end and also teaches a moral duty

to relieve the suffering of others, which will occasionally require the denial of pleasure. And so what begins as the high principle that “Nothing is more humane...than to relieve the misery of others, remove all sadness from their lives, and restore them to enjoyment, that is, pleasure,” finally ends up—in a tone slightly reminiscent of John Locke - as the lower exhortation “not to seek your own advantage in ways that cause misfortune to others.” (67-68).

Indeed, the Utopians have a very difficult time justifying their other-regarding moral principles, either on natural or religious grounds. On the one hand they hold that “religious principles” are necessary to supplement reason because “reason by itself is weak and defective in its efforts to investigate the true happiness”(66), and on the other hand they maintain that reason leads them to accept their religious principles. But isn’t reason being asked to carry too much water here? How can a religion based on reason correct the weak and fallible reason?¹²

Moreover, the religion is based upon a number of beliefs that philosophy might reasonably question, such as a provident God, the immortality of the soul, and rewards and punishments after death (66). Without such beliefs, the Utopians acknowledge, “no one would be so stupid as not to feel that he should seek pleasure, regardless of right or wrong”(66). Further, Utopia purports to be based upon religious toleration and pluralism. Without getting into the thorny question of whether such a concept is itself self-contradictory (must such regimes tolerate “intolerant” religions?), it is clearly not practiced in Utopia. We later discover that those who advocate the contrary of the religious beliefs above are believed to have sunk “far below the dignity of human nature;” although they “do not punish” such persons, they are “offered no honors, entrusted with no offices, and given no public responsibility.”(95) Moreover, they are prohibited from advocating their opinions “among the common people”(68). So much for Raphael’s “direct method.”

In fact, as it turns out, within its apparent religious pluralism Utopia does indeed possess a “civil religion,” replete with priests (98), churches (101), fasting (101), feast days (101), and sacred vestments with “symbolic mysteries” woven into them (102). Amazingly, this civil religion is based upon basic principles that all religions share, “So nothing is seen or heard in the churches that does not square with all the creeds”(100). During their religious services the Utopian thanks God “for the divine favour which placed him in the happiest of commonwealths and inspired him with religious ideas which he hopes are truest” (103). Yet Raphael never provides a satisfactory ground for these religious beliefs, or for the popular reverence that

¹¹ See *Utopia*, 63: “These are persons who from childhood have given evidence of excellent character, unusual intelligence and devotion to learning.”

¹² Raphael later remarks that some Utopians practice celibacy, which, if it had been chosen on the grounds of “reason alone, would be laughed at; but as these people profess to be motivated by religion, the Utopians respect and revere them” (98). But he fails to establish any ground for the intersection between reason and revelation among the Utopians. These remarks about celibacy also raise another point: Given what Raphael says about the Utopians’ adverse beliefs regarding pain and suffering (74, though this later seems to be contradicted at 97ff.), it seems very unlikely that Utopians would have discovered that “Christianity seemed very like the sect that most prevails around them” (93). Given their Epicurean and Stoic leanings, one would rather expect the response of the Greeks to Paul’s preaching in Athens recounted in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (RSV version): “Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him...And they took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus...Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ So Paul went out from among them.”

maintains them.

In short, Raphael's account of Utopia simply fails to offer a persuasive demonstration of a regime based upon the "direct method." While on the surface avoiding the "throng of lies and deceptions" that were an integral part of Plato's *Republic*, Utopia fails to account for the incoherent amalgam of moral and religious beliefs and practices that underlay the stability of its regime. The alleged rationality and philosophic openness of the Utopians does not comport with their beliefs and practices, and yet no account of revelation is given that would explain the distance. Nor does the Utopian scheme for work and education appear likely to accommodate the natural differences between human beings. It achieves its apparent harmony by simply leaving out of its equation erotic souls like Glaucon, or like Thomas More himself. Which brings me to my final point.

After hearing Raphael's account of Utopia, More expresses to the reader a number of reservations:

When Raphael had finished his story, I was left thinking that not a few of the laws and customs he had described as existing among the Utopians were really absurd. These included their methods for waging war, their religious practices, as well as other customs of theirs; but my chief objection was to the basis of their whole system, that is, their communal living and their moneyless economy (106).

But whereas More's earlier objection to communal property was based upon practical considerations of scarcity and the absence of work incentives (see 38-39), his new objection is based upon something higher: "This one thing alone utterly subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty which (in the popular view) are the true ornaments and glory of any commonwealth"(106-107). One finds here a strong echo of Glaucon's contemptuous objections to the first city of Plato's *Republic*: "You seem to make these men have their feast without relishes," and then a little later, "If you were providing for a city of sows, Socrates, on what else would you fatten them than this?" (372c-d). Like Glaucon, More is an erotic man who demands a compensatory justification for the good things he is being asked to forgo. Without the philosophical purgation that that Glaucon receives, Utopia can only look to such men like the city of sows.

In the end, More chooses to keep his reservations to himself: "I was not sure he could take contradiction in these matters... So with praise for their way of life and his account of it, I took him by the hand and led him to supper"(109). Thus with irony of indirection More exposes the hypocrisy of Raphael's anti-philosophical "direct method." Even more, he reminds us through his own "image" of the enduring and insoluble tension between philosophy and political life.