

Puppeteering Philosophers:

Reexamining the Cave Allegory in Plato's *Republic* through Modern Advertising

In this paper, I examine the second level of the Cave Allegory in Plato's *Republic*, where puppets or statues are used to cast shadows for viewing by the chained prisoners down below (514a-c). I argue that an analysis of Edward Bernays' conception of propagandists and their role in modern advertising not only illuminates how the puppeteers function in cave, but also reveals them to be the returning philosopher-kings, a view rarely entertained by scholars. Scholarship on the puppeteers is lacking, and what there is has been fundamentally based on the assumption that the puppeteers are the poets, sophists, and politicians of whom Plato disapproves (602c). Herman Sinaiko notably extends this list to include scientists and philosophers; however, he omits any lengthy explanation as to why. Catherine Rowett compares the philosopher-kings to advertisers in passing, but she exonerates Plato's rulers because of their "interest in what really is good" (2016).

Edward Bernays, Freud's nephew and the father of advertising, constructed an image of the "propagandist" playing an intermediary role between true knowledge of what is best for society, known only to a small elite, and the understanding of the masses (*Propaganda* 1928). In the 1920s he published the book *Propaganda*, espousing the necessity of manipulating the masses in order to achieve overall social stability for the common good; he placed great importance on maintaining social peace by satisfying the Id of the masses through creating desire for commodities. However, he also emphasized the need for the masses to agree voluntarily to the system, whether consciously or not, and to this end he advocated the use of propaganda. He endorsed any marketing strategy, including lying, to persuade the consumer to purchase the

correct product, vote for the correct politician, and more (*Crystallizing Public Opinion* 1929), on the grounds that scientific research in consumer psychology discovered truths about human desire of which the common person is mostly unaware.

Bernays' view bears a clear resemblance to Plato's conception of philosopher-kings, who form the elite class of his ideal city-state. After the completion of their rigorous education and achieving communion with the Forms, they return to their city as rulers who *know* the truth; Plato stipulates that as a result they are permitted to deceive the rest of the non-philosophical population (389b-c). In other words, philosopher-kings can lie to the auxiliaries and the producers as long as the lie serves what they know to be the truth. Instead of promoting the best cereal, which appeases latent aggression through a pleasing box colour and design, details which, Bernays held, is discovered by social science research facilities, Plato's rulers promote a strict breeding program through fake marital religious rites and a rigged lottery system (459a-b). Plato also resorts to spinning a Noble Lie for the citizens of his ideal state to believe (414b-c). As in Bernays, this is all for the good of the state and with the implicit consent of the citizenry, indicated simply by their participation.

Examining the ruling function of the philosopher-kings through Bernays' conception of propagandists highlights a question scholars have been wrestling with in Plato's *Republic*: does one trust the philosopher-kings to make the best decisions for everyone? Why should the citizens of Plato's ideal state trust them? In present day, we certainly do not fully trust propaganda or advertisements. Scholars such as Karl Popper, Daniel Dombrowski, and Julia Annas, who see the negative potential of Plato's philosopher-kings and their absolute authority, translate their distrust into explanations of why such deception is unjustifiable or go as far as to categorize Plato as a totalitarian. Scholars such as Catherine Rowett, David Hahm, and Robin Barrow, who

conversely see the positive potential in Plato's system, argue in favour of the philosopher-kings role because they believe in their superior knowledge and inherent good intentions. Plato needs the citizens to trust the philosopher-kings and the shadows they cast in the cave, just as Bernays needs us to trust the propagandist and his advertisements.

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