

Political Myths in Plato and Asimov

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Abstract

Works of science fiction tend to describe hypothetical futures, or counterfactual pasts or presents, to entertain their readers. Philosophical thought experiments tend to describe counterfactual situations to test their readers' philosophical intuitions. Indeed, works of science fiction can sometimes be read as containing thought experiments. I compare one especially famous thought experiment from Plato's *Republic* with what I read as two thought experiments from Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*. All three thought experiments concern myths used in political contexts, and comparing them permits me to analyze the morality of political mythologizing.

Works of science fiction tend to describe hypothetical futures, or counterfactual pasts or presents, in conceptually novel ways to entertain their readers. Philosophical thought experiments tend to describe counterfactual situations in conceptually novel ways to test their readers' philosophical intuitions (Gavaler and Goldberg 2019, 1–6).¹ Works of science fiction and philosophical thought experiments therefore share commonalities, and the former can sometimes be read as containing the latter. Indeed, though their purpose is entertainment, works of science fiction often are more cognitively immersive than ordinary or traditional philosophical thought experiments are. As Johan de Smedt and Helen de Cruz (2015) argue, while ordinary philosophical thought experiments and what they call “speculative fiction,” including works of science fiction, rely on their readers' imagination, speculative fiction typically “allows for a richer exploration of philosophical positions than is possible through ordinary philosophical thought experiments” (34). De Smedt and de Cruz continue: “Regardless of whether they are outlandish or realistic, [ordinary] philosophical thought experiments lack features that speculative fiction typically has, including vivid, seemingly irrelevant details that help to transport the reader and encourage low-level, concrete thinking” (64).²

Speculative fiction, and a fortiori science fiction, is therefore a fruitful source of philosophical thought experiments. Elsewhere (Gavaler and Goldberg 2019) I explore reading one particular subgenre of science fiction, superhero stories, as containing them. Here my goal is more circumscribed. I compare one especially famous philosophical thought experiment from Plato's *Republic* (which though "ordinary" in de Smedt and de Cruz's sense is nevertheless unusually well developed) with what I read as two philosophical thought experiments from Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*.³ All three experiments concern myths used in political contexts, and comparing them permits me to analyze the morality of political mythologizing.

The article proceeds as follows. In §1 I investigate similarities between the *Republic* and the *Foundation Trilogy* to establish that their comparison is warranted. In §2 I focus on the further similarity that the *Republic* describes one, and the *Foundation Trilogy* two thought experiments involving a tripartite political structure in which the ruling class uses myths to control others in order to determine political outcomes. In §3 I compare the kinds of control and determination involved in each myth's use. In §4 I employ those comparisons to analyze the morality of these examples of political mythologizing. In §5 I consider lessons that my analysis reveals for the morality of political mythologizing generally.

1. Similarities

The *Republic* is a dialogue between Socrates and his interlocutors concerning the nature of justice in the state and by analogy in the soul (369a).⁴ It is unclear whether the *Republic* is based on an actual dialogue or whether it is entirely fictional. The *Foundation Trilogy* is an entirely fictional account of the fall of the First Galactic Empire and the conditions accelerating the rise of the Second in a mere 1,000 years rather than what would otherwise be 30,000 years of "misery and anarchy" (Prologue to *Second Foundation*, 507). Those conditions are brought about by Hari Seldon as he sets into motion events to which he and his followers apply *psychohistory*, a mathematical science predicting "the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli" ("The Psychohistorians," 22). When necessary, Seldon's followers also alter those events directly.

Though the *Republic* and the *Foundation Trilogy* differ, each seeks to establish an ideal political state (i) with a tripartite structure, (ii) whose highest part rules because it has knowledge of an abstract reality, (iii) relatively resistant to "decay" (546a; Prologue to *Second Foundation*, 507), and (iv) whose greatest threat is an individual with a tripartite soul whose lowest part coopts the other two.

Plato's ideal state, his "Kallipolis," has three political parts or classes.⁵ Most of its citizens are Producers, who, governed by appetite, produce goods and are in turn their chief consumers. Fewer are Auxiliaries, who, governed by spirit, are the driving force defending the Kallipolis from internal and external threats. The fewest are Guardians, who, governed by intellect, rule. They do so because only they have knowledge of the Forms—

perfect, timeless, changeless abstract ideals. Plato represented the Forms with his Allegory of the Cave:

Imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling.... Light is provided by a fire burning far above and behind them..... [A] low wall has been built, like the screen in front of puppeteers above which they show their puppets..... Do you suppose ... that these prisoners see anything of themselves and one another besides the shadows that the fire casts on the wall ...? ... And if someone dragged him away from there by force, up the rough, steep path.... [H]e'd be able to see the sun ... and would infer and conclude that the sun ... governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see. (514a–516c)

Inside the cave is analogous to the visible world, outside the cave the intelligible (cf. 508c). Those inside see shadows on a wall cast by puppeteers in front of a fire. Those outside see things themselves by light of something radiant, i.e., the sun (cf. 507b–508e). Those things themselves are analogous to the other Forms. Because the Forms are intelligible, our minds would be attuned to them.⁶

Though Plato acknowledged that all political regimes “decay” (546a), because in the Kallipolis each citizen plays the role best suited to her, the Kallipolis is most resistant to doing so. Conversely someone with spirit and intellect rivaling the Auxiliaries and Guardians, respectively, but whose appetite rules, would least likely be able to be ruled and most likely try to rule instead. Such an individual is exemplified by Thrasymachus, a sophist rejecting the existence of the Forms. “[C]oil[ing] himself up like a wild beast about to spring” (336b), Thrasymachus tries to coopt the intellectual Socrates’s spirited interlocutors Glaucon and Adeimantus to satisfy his own appetite for control.⁷

Asimov describes Seldon as hoping to bring about the Second Galactic Empire based “on an orientation entirely different from anything that ever before existed ... based on mental science” (“Search by the Foundation,” 613), an orientation leading to what he treats as an ideal state. Leading up to its establishment and presumably continuing afterward, most of the galaxy’s inhabitants provide raw materials and, their appetite fulfilled, are in turn the chief consumers of their finished goods. To accelerate the reemergence of empire, Seldon establishes two Foundations at “opposite ends” of the galaxy (Prologue to *Foundation and Empire*, 258; “Search by the Mule,” 507; “Search by the Second Foundation,” 593, 727, 745). The First Foundation, filled with spirited proselytizers (“The Mayors,” 89–145), traders (“The Traders” and “The Merchant Princes,” 147–250), and political allies (“The General,” 261–341), faces generational crises, whose solutions are forced on it by historical trends, making the First Foundation the driving force to bring about the Second Galactic Empire.⁸ The Second Foundation, comprised of intellectuals, rules the galaxy behind the scenes because its members have knowledge of the Seldon Plan.

The Plan consists of two parts. One is a set of initial conditions, including that the First Foundation be established on the remote, resource-poor planet Terminus. The other is the use of psychohistory to predict the statistical probability of subsequent political

outcomes in the galaxy. The Second Foundation also ensures the survival of the Plan when galactic events turn out other than predicted. Because Seldon “left the Second Foundation behind him to maintain, improve, and extend his work” and so were “Seldon’s group” (“Search by the Foundation,” 746), Seldon may be counted as the Second Foundation’s founding member.⁹ Asimov described Seldon as physically representing the Seldon Plan as the Prime Radiant, which the reader learns of when the First Speaker of the Second Foundation activates the Radiant in the presence of an acolyte:

[T]he room was in darkness. But only for a moment, since with a gradually livening flush, the two long walls of the room glowed to life. First, a pearly white, unrelieved, then a trace of faint darkness here and there, and finally, the fine neatly printed equations in black, with an occasional red hairline that wavered through the darker forest like a staggering rillet....

The First Speaker explains:

“Come, my boy, step here before the wall. You will not cast a shadow...”

They stood together in the light...

The First Speaker laughed softly, “You will find the Prime Radiant to be attuned to your mind.” (“Search by the Foundation,” 608–09)

The Seldon Plan is represented as something “radiant,” i.e., light. Those discerning it cast no shadow. It is “attuned to” their minds.

Because the Second Galactic Empire and the conditions cumulating in it are based “on an orientation entirely different from anything that ever before existed ... based on mental science,” Seldon (and presumably Asimov too) thought it more resistant than the First Galactic Empire or other political states to “decay” (Prologue to *Second Foundation*, 507). Conversely someone with spirit and intellect rivaling the First and Second Foundations, respectively, but whose own appetites rule, would least likely be able to be ruled and most likely try to rule instead. Such an individual is exemplified by the Mule, a mutant rejecting the Seldon Plan. The Mule tries to coopt the First Foundation and destroy the Second Foundation to satisfy his own appetite for control (“The Mule” and “Search by the Mule,” 345–585).¹⁰

2. Three Myths

There is no evidence that Asimov’s *Foundation Trilogy* was inspired by Plato’s *Republic*.¹¹ Regardless I take these similarities to establish that comparing them is merited. That is fortunate, for they share a further similarity. Each ruling class of the respective tripartite political structure uses myths to control others in order to determine political outcomes. While myths are used in both cases in conjunction with other tools, they are nevertheless essential to how in various thought experiments control is maintained.

In the *Republic*, the ruling class uses what Plato calls the “Myth of the Metals” to maintain the ideal state. All citizens are told that they are born of the same mother earth

and that at birth gold was added to the souls of those who would become Guardians, silver to Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze to Producers (414e–415a). The Guardians reinforce that teaching as needed by punishing anyone acting otherwise.¹²

In the *Foundation Trilogy*, the ruling class uses two myths to accelerate the creation of the Second Galactic Empire. First, Seldon (with the consent of other members of the Second Foundation) tells the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy what I call the “Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance.” The First Foundation has been established to compile an encyclopedia of all knowledge, the *Encyclopedia Galactica*. Consequently, citizens from the galaxy settle on Terminus, establishing the initial conditions required to accelerate the reemergence of empire. The First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy continue to be taught this Myth until fifty years after the establishment of the First Foundation, when the late-Seldon’s hologram, preprogrammed to convey new messages at specific dates, reveals the First Foundation’s true purpose to serve as the nucleus around which a new empire would emerge. Second, the Second Foundation leads the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy to believe what I call the “Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction.” When the Mule ceases his conquests, the First Foundation suspects that the Second Foundation, whose existence Seldon had only fleetingly mentioned, has been controlling galactic events. Because at the time the First Foundation’s awareness of the Second Foundation’s power jeopardizes the Seldon Plan, the Second Foundation deceives the First into thinking that the First Foundation has destroyed it (when in fact it has only apprehended a few members who sacrifice themselves for the success of the Seldon Plan).¹³

One might object that while the Myth of the Metals is a legitimate myth, the other two seem more like lies. Because individuals in the state have different natures and are suited to different roles, the Myth of the Metals contains a core of truth. It is not so much a lie then as a truth in the form of a fantastical story. Conversely the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance and the Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction are each deliberate misstatements of fact. Rather than having a core truth, they are straightforward lies.¹⁴

The difference between a myth and a lie is likely however unsustainable. Plato calls the Myth of the Metals a “noble falsehood” (414b), which in other translations is rendered as a “noble lie.”¹⁵ So on Plato’s view the Myth of the Metals itself may count as a lie. Moreover, the Myth of Er, concluding the *Republic*, concerns Er’s journey in the afterlife, replete with portals to other worlds, meetings with the dead, audiences with the Fates, and choices of reincarnation (614b–621d). The Myth of Er may have little core truth yet by Plato’s lights it is a myth.¹⁶ Conversely the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance and the Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction, which might seem more like lies, each has some core truth. The Encyclopedia is actually important, since its writing motivated the settlement of Terminus by an intellectual elite, establishing a stronghold of scientific knowledge when the First Galactic Empire begins to fall. The “myth” of its importance is arguably more grounded in truth than is the Myth of the Metals. The Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction is closer to a straightforward lie, though even there a core truth

remains. Fifty members of the Second Foundation are killed. The First Foundation wrongly concludes that there were only fifty members overall. Nonetheless fifty are not insignificant, as the First Speaker laments: "Fifty martyrs!" ("Search by the Second Foundation," 742). Further, even if the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction is understood as a lie, James Mahon (2016) in his work on lying maintains: "The most widely accepted definition of lying is the following: 'A lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it' (Isenberg 1973, 248)." While the most widely accepted is not necessarily the most accurate, this definition captures what most mean by 'lie.'¹⁷ Yet, according to it, all three myths count as lies.¹⁸

3. Kinds of Control and Determination

Regardless of whether they are ultimately understood as myths, lies, or some combination, I have considered these:

- (a) The Guardians use the Myth of the Metals to control other citizens of the Kallipolis in order to determine political outcomes in the Kallipolis.
- (b) Seldon (and others from the Second Foundation) uses (and use)¹⁹ the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy in order to determine political outcomes in the galaxy.
- (c) The Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy in order to determine political outcomes in the galaxy.

(a), (b), and (c) can all be read as elements of thought experiments. Presently I treat each as a thought experiment in its own right, though acknowledging their place in the *Republic's* and the *Foundation Trilogy's* larger contexts. How do these kinds of control mentioned in (a), (b), and (c), on the one hand, and kinds of determination mentioned in (a), (b), and (c), on the other, compare?

The kinds of *control* in (a) and (c) are more similar to each other than either is to the kind in (b). In (a) and (c) the control is long term, persisting forever and for centuries, respectively. Citizens of the Kallipolis are taught perpetually that they are born from mother earth with metals in their souls, which the Guardians reinforce by punishing anyone acting otherwise. The First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy are taught until closer to the emergence of the second empire that the Second Foundation has been destroyed, which the Second Foundation reinforces by controlling the minds of anyone thinking otherwise.

Contrast (b). After fifty years the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy learn that the true purpose of the First Foundation's establishment is not to compile the *Encyclopedia Galactica* but instead to serve as the nucleus of a second empire. Nor does the Second Foundation before or after control anyone's mind to think otherwise. So (b)'s control is short term. Admittedly, by setting into motion the settlement of Terminus, the

Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance sets into motion a long chain of events accelerating the reemergence of empire. So the effects of (b)'s control are felt after the lie is exposed. Those however are its effects rather than the control per se. Though I return to this below, the point here is that the control in (a) and (c) is long term, while the control (per se) in (b) is short term.

The kinds of *determination* in (a) and (c) are more similar to each other than either is to the kind in (b) too. Three contrasts emerge.

The first two contrasts are simple. First, (a) and (c) involve determination about individuals as well as groups. Outcomes about one Auxiliary as well as all of them, and one member from the First Foundation as well as all of them, are relevant. (b) involves determination only about groups or "human conglomerates" ("The Psychohistorians," 22). The Second Foundation relies on the Seldon Plan, whose psychohistorical equations apply only to masses. Second, (a) and (c) involve determination that is likely as well as certain. Outcomes about Auxiliaries may be determined probabilistically as well as definitely. (b) involves determination that is only likely. The Seldon Plan's equations yield only statistical probabilities.

The third contrast is complex. It requires distinguishing metaphysical and epistemological senses of determination. Because the distinction is arguably unintuitive, I pause to explain it. The *metaphysical* sense of determination is *causation*. An atom's electronic shell determines the chemical interactions in which it participates, because its shell *causes* those interactions. The *epistemological* sense of determination is *ascertainment* in the present and prediction in the *future*. The theory of chemical bonding is used to determine the chemical interactions in which an atom participates, because the theory allows one to *ascertain* present and to *predict* future interactions. The theory does not cause them. In what follows future prediction is key.

One might object that "determine" and "determination" are standardly connected to cause and causation, respectively, so the epistemological sense of determination is non-standard. The phrase "epistemological sense of determination" is therefore misleading. There are two replies. First, the objection seems to fail straightaway given ordinary language. Besides the above examples, consider these. "Geiger counters can be used to determine, or to make a determination concerning, whether radiation levels are safe." Geiger counters do not *cause* radiation levels to be safe. Such determining or determination involves *ascertaining* or *ascertainment* concerning whether they are. "Statistical sampling can be used to determine, or to make a determination concerning, political support for incumbents." Statistical sampling does not *cause* political support. Such determining or determination involves *predicting* or *prediction* concerning it. Because ascertaining, ascertainment, predicting, and prediction all involve belief, these uses of "determine" and "determination" are epistemological. So "epistemological sense of determination" is not misleading. The second reply to the objection is straightforward. If one insists that such epistemological uses are non-standard and therefore the phrase misleading, then for

purposes of this paper “determine” and “determination” are stipulated to be usable non-standardly and the phrase stipulated to name that use.²⁰

Either way, I employ the distinction between metaphysical and epistemological senses as follows. On the one hand, (a) and (c) involve determination in the metaphysical sense of causation. The Guardians use the Myth of the Metals to cause political outcomes in the Kallipolis, and the Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction to cause political outcomes in the galaxy, by ensuring and perpetuating each one’s tripartite political structure. On the other hand, (a) and (c) also involve determination in the epistemological sense of prediction. By causing political outcomes in the Kallipolis and the galaxy, the Guardians and the Second Foundation can use their Myths to predict those outcomes. Because whatever outcomes do occur had been caused to occur, the Guardians and Second Foundation can predict that they will occur. Such epistemological determination however is limited. (a) and (c) enable prediction only of what (a) and (c) directly cause. Predicting further outcomes is beyond (a)’s and (c)’s power.

Again contrast (b). It involves both metaphysical and epistemological determination. On the one hand, (b) involves metaphysical determination because Seldon uses the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance to cause initial conditions accelerating the reemergence of empire. The control in (b) sets into motion the settlement of Terminus, in turn setting into motion a long chain of events culminating in the Second Galactic Empire. While the control per se does not persist, its causal consequences, or effects, do. Later effects however follow only indirectly from the Myth. A long chain of intermediary causes intercedes. On the other hand, (b) also involves epistemological determination because Seldon uses those initial conditions together with psychohistory to predict political outcomes in the galaxy. Rather than predicting only that its tripartite political structure will perpetuate, as (a) and (c) permit, (b) permits Seldon also to predict the statistical likelihood of specific events up to and including the reemergence of empire. That is what appealing to the power of psychohistory adds to (b). (a)’s and (c)’s predictive power is limited while, relatively speaking, (b)’s—because it is combined with psychohistory—is not. Admittedly, (c)’s predictive power can also be combined with psychohistory’s. Doing so however serves only to restore the original trajectory of the galaxy to what Seldon had previously used the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance to predict, which is (b). The Myth of the Second Foundation’s Destruction does nothing more than reset conditions, which psychohistory can then use to predict political outcomes. Whatever long-term predictions that (c) allows, therefore, require that it recur to predictions that (b) allows.

Hence the determination in (a) and (c) is metaphysical and epistemological, the latter only in a limited way. The determination in (b) is epistemological and metaphysical, the latter only in an indirect way. Asimov might have recognized the indirect nature of the latter, metaphysical determination when emphasizing the epistemological. After exposing the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance to the First Foundation, the late-Seldon’s hologram explains: “You will be faced with a series of crises,” and the First Foundation’s history will proceed along “the path which our psychology has worked out” (“The Psychohistorians,” 86). “Our psychology” (Seldon’s and the Second Foundation’s

“psychohistory”) does not bring the crises and their path about. It instead works them out. So, as per (b), the Myth of the Encyclopedia’s Importance causes initial conditions accelerating the reemergence of empire directly and causes subsequent outcomes only indirectly.

The distinction between kinds of determination—metaphysical (or causal) and epistemological (or predictive)—is easy to miss. Plato does not pause on it, and Asimov’s recognition, if any, remains implicit. A thought experiment from the history of physics makes the distinction sharp. According to Pierre-Simon Laplace:

An intelligence knowing all the forces acting in nature at a given instant, as well as the momentary positions of all things in the universe, would be able to comprehend in one single formula the motions of the largest bodies as well as the lightest atoms in the world. (1820/1951, 4)

Such an intelligence, Laplace’s “demon,” would not cause any such motions. Nonetheless, were the intelligence to know all the laws governing a system and all the initial conditions of that system, then it could use those laws and conditions to determine, and so to predict, the motions of objects. Similarly, were Seldon to know all the laws governing a system—which his psychohistorical equations are—and all the initial conditions of that system—in which the settlement of Terminus is included—then Seldon could use those laws and conditions to determine, and so to predict—as he did—the motions of politics, including the accelerated reemergence of empire.²¹ Something else about Laplace’s views helps here. Laplace’s demon exists outside the causal order. That is why its determination within that order is only epistemological. Seldon does not exist outside the causal order. That is why his determination within that order, in (b) and (c), are epistemological and metaphysical, respectively.

The kind of determination with which I have been concerned is political. It is separable from (even if, as explained, sometimes overlapping with) the kind of determinism contrasted with free will. Someone with this contrasting free will possesses “metaphysical freedom” in the sense that she can sometimes step outside the causal order altogether (van Inwagen [2002a, 2002b]). She can set into motion events without herself being set into motion to do so.²²

This kind of free will and its contrasting (metaphysical) determinism are tangential to my analysis of (political) determination. The metaphysical kind of determination, which is causal, is consistent with determinism. Individuals can cause events without being able to step outside the causal order altogether. They can set into motion events even if their doing so was itself set into motion. Determination therefore differs from determinism, and only the former—in both metaphysical and epistemological kinds—is my concern.²³

Tangents do however touch, and questions about metaphysical freedom may arise in the *Foundation Trilogy*. Arguably, Salvor Hardin (“The Encyclopedists” and “The Mayors,” 47–146) and Hober Mallow (“The Traders,” 147–172) freely choose to do *nothing* to help the First Foundation, while Latham Devers and Ducem Barr freely choose to do *something* to help and Bel Riose freely chooses to do *something* to hinder it (“The General,” 261–341).

Regardless in each case the First Foundation's position improves. So, if there is free will, then it is practically meaningless. Arguably, Asimov's position changed when the Second Foundation is revealed to be actively intervening in history ("Search by the Second Foundation," 587–747), where the fate of the Seldon Plan may depend on its metaphysically free choices. So perhaps Asimov's decided view was that while for most free will, if there is any, is practically meaningless, for the ruling class it is not.²⁴ Regardless, similar considerations seem absent from the *Republic*. While the Forms as abstract are not in the causal order, Plato is uninterested in the metaphysical question of whether the Kallipolis's citizens could step outside the causal order in their political rule. There are also passages in which he suggests that they cannot at all, as even those prisoners in the Cave who become Guardians are "compelled to stand up" (515c) and "dragged ... away from there by force ... and dragged ... into the sunlight" (515e).

4. Evaluation of the Uses of the Myths

I have been treating each of these as philosophical thought experiments:

- (a) The Guardians use the Myth of the Metals to control other citizens of the Kallipolis in order to determine political outcomes in the Kallipolis.
- (b) Seldon uses the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy in order to determine political outcomes in the galaxy.
- (c) The Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy in order to determine political outcomes in the galaxy.

So far I have shown that the control in (a) and (c) is long term, while the control in (b) is short term. The determination in (a) and (c) is causal and only predictive in a limited way, while the determination in (b) is predictive and only causal in an indirect way. Here I employ these comparisons to analyze the morality of these examples of political mythologizing. I do so by using them to test philosophical intuitions.

There are different ways in which philosophers use thought experiments to test intuitions. Traditionally many have imagined themselves as subjects in their experiments, argued from their own intuitions, and reported back the results. Recently some have followed Joshua Knobe and others (e.g., Knobe 2003, and Knobe and Nichols 2008) in employing empirical techniques—surveys, functional magnetic-resonance imaging, and other cognitive or behavioral measures—to test multiple subjects' responses. Such "experimental philosophy" aims to elicit less idiosyncratic results than traditionally elicited from thought experiments. While each method has its merits, I propose something of a middle ground. Instead of merely arguing from my own intuitions, I investigate how two established ethical theories, capturing competing intuitions, would evaluate (a), (b), and (c). Instead of experimentally eliciting broader results, I test (a), (b), and (c) against these theories myself.

Ethical theories are various and varied. Though Plato belongs to the virtue-ethics tradition and his student Aristotle is its most famous proponent, I instead appeal to the tradition's two main competitors, consequentialism and deontology. Though the terms are contested, let "consequentialism" name the view that acts are right insofar as they lead to a relative surplus of good consequences and wrong otherwise. Let "utilitarianism" name the species of consequentialism according to which good consequences are those maximizing happiness and minimizing unhappiness.²⁵ Conversely let "deontology" name the view that acts are right or wrong independently of their consequences. Let "Kantianism" name the species of deontology according to which acts are right insofar as they do not use persons as mere means to some other end and wrong otherwise.²⁶ Consequentialism and deontology are competitors as are their species. Utilitarianism and Kantianism specifically capture competing intuitions about morality. That is why how they evaluate (a), (b), and (c) is interesting.

How would utilitarianism evaluate each? Though in answering this some interpretation is unavoidable, the results remain suggestive. I consider the one kind of control, and two kinds of determination, in turn.

Regarding *control*, the Myth of the Metals helps ensure that each member of the Kallipolis is in that class best suited to her, maximizing her happiness and minimizing her unhappiness, and the same would be so for the Kallipolis overall. The Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction helps ensure that the First Foundation continues to serve as the nucleus around which the Second Galactic Empire forms, and that the Second Foundation continues to be able to guard the Seldon Plan, maximizing their individual happiness and minimizing their individual unhappiness, and because 30,000 years of "misery and anarchy" are reduced to 1,000, the same would be true for the galaxy overall. Further, because, in each case, the control is long term, the individuals and the whole would not soon be shaken out of the Myth. Concerning the *Republic*, those involved would be in relatively happy ignorance indefinitely, while, concerning the *Foundation Trilogy*, the myth is revealed as such only when those involved are ready to accept the Second Foundation as explicit rulers. Hence, though some interpretation remains unavoidable, there is reason to think that a utilitarian evaluation of (a) and (c) would be a net positive. Because Seldon's using the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance to control the First Foundation, (b), sets into motion reducing galactic "misery and suffering" thirtyfold, this suggests that its utilitarian evaluation would be positive overall. Because the control is short term, however, many of those deceived by the myth would learn about it during their lifetimes, unlike (a), and would not have been prepared to accept it, unlike (c). Though it is still a net positive—and given the amount of unhappiness ultimately avoided it is still an inordinately sizable one—in the short term this suggests that the utilitarian evaluation of (b) would be negative relative to the others.

Regarding *determination*, first, epistemologically, the Guardians use the Myth of the Metals in order to predict political outcomes, (a), and the Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction, (c), only in a limited way. Because Seldon's using the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance, (b), allows him to use psychohistory to predict

political outcomes in a relatively unlimited way, its utilitarian evaluation is positive relative to (a)'s and (c)'s, which are relatively negative. Second, metaphysically, the utilitarian evaluation would not distinguish between direct and indirect causation. All that matters is the relative degree of happiness resulting as consequences. Because (a), (b), and (c) all ultimately lead to a net increase of happiness, there is no meaningful distinction among their utilitarian evaluations.

Kantian evaluations return different results. Because the Guardians use the Myth of the Metals to *control* other citizens, (a), they are using their fellow citizens as mere means to some other end. Even though that end is determining political outcomes in the Kallipolis, that net positive consequence is irrelevant. Likewise, because the Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy, (c), they are also using others in the galaxy as mere means to some other end. Even though that end is determining political outcomes in the galaxy, again maximizing happiness and minimizing unhappiness of the citizens and the state, the net positive consequence is again irrelevant. Contrast this with Seldon's using the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance to control the same persons, (b). While this too involves using persons as means, they are not all used as *mere* means, as the myth is eventually revealed. While on a Kantian evaluation this would still be negative, because the truth is explained to many of them they are ultimately treated as ends in themselves. Because (a), (b), and (c) all involve deception, which necessarily involves using persons to some extent as mere means, Kantian evaluations of them are all negative. The evaluation of (b) however is positive relative to that of (a) and (c).

Regarding *determination*, first, epistemological and metaphysical results are switched from those above. Epistemologically, because predictiveness concerns future consequences, the Kantian evaluation would not distinguish limited and unlimited kinds of predictions. Second, metaphysically, it would draw a distinction. The Guardians use the Myth of the Metals directly in order to cause political outcomes, (a), and the Second Foundation uses the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction directly in order to cause political outcomes, (c). In each case the ruling class is using others as a mere means to these causal ends. Conversely Seldon uses the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance only indirectly in order to cause political outcomes, (b). Besides directly causing the settlement of Terminus—reflected in the short-term control that Seldon uses the Myth to exert—his use of the Myth merely sets into motion other events. Other members of the Galaxy respond to those events as they would to any other event. Seldon's use of the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance uses only one generation as a mere means. Again, Kantian evaluations of (a), (b), and (c) are all negative, with the evaluation of (b) positive relative to that of (a) and (c).

Hence, regarding control, utilitarianism evaluates (a) and (c) positively relative to (b), while Kantianism evaluates (b) positively relative to (a) and (c). So they return opposite relative scores. Regarding determination, epistemologically, utilitarianism evaluates (a) and (c) negatively relative to (b). Metaphysically, Kantianism evaluates (a)

and (c) negatively relative to (b). So utilitarianism and Kantianism return the same scores for (a) and (c), albeit for different senses of it, regarding determination.

5. Lessons

We can now appreciate that reading Plato's *Republic* and Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* together suggests five lessons concerning the morality of political mythologizing generally. I enumerate them from most specific to most general.

First, read as philosophical thought experiments, (a), (b), and (c) suggest that none is ethically superior regarding control. As just explained, utilitarianism and Kantianism evaluate (a) and (c), on the one hand, and (b), on the other, oppositely. So those evaluations cancel. Nonetheless, (b) is ethically superior to (a) and (c) regarding both epistemological and metaphysical determination. As also just explained, utilitarianism evaluates (a) and (c) relatively negatively to (b) regarding epistemological determination, and Kantianism evaluates (a) and (c) relatively negatively to (b) regarding metaphysical determination. So (b) is ethically superior overall. Hence the most ethical of the three thought experiments is Seldon's using the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance to control the First Foundation and the rest of the galaxy in order to determine political outcomes in the galaxy.

Second, while my method of appealing to utilitarianism and Kantianism to evaluate (a), (b), and (c) occupied middle ground, sometimes philosophers do imagine themselves as subjects in their thought experiments, argue from their intuitions, and report back the results. Other times they do employ empirical techniques to derive less idiosyncratic results. One could still reason from one's own intuitions for or against the morality of (a), (b), or (c). Likewise one could still employ cognitive or behavioral measures to test these views, perhaps administering a survey describing (a), (b), and (c), and their contexts, to a randomized population. In each case it would be interesting to compare my above findings with these.

Third, reflecting on (a), (b), and (c) suggests that though many questions are relevant to ask about the use of any tool, a myth or otherwise, in political contexts, these would likely be among them. What is the duration (if any) of the tool's control? What is the limit (if any) of its predictiveness? And what is the directness (if any) of its causation? The Myth of the Metals, the Myth of the Encyclopedia's Importance, and the Myth of the Second Foundation's Destruction are not actual political tools. Nonetheless actual ruling classes (appointed, elected, inherited, or self-proclaimed) use messaging and sometimes even propaganda to control other citizens in order to determine political outcomes. These could be questions to ask about them.

Fourth, as demonstrated with (a), (b), and (c), utilitarianism and Kantianism sometimes return the same and other times different evaluations. This is unsurprising. They may but need not evaluate such things as duration of control differently. Limitedness of predictiveness however is more relevant for utilitarianism, since it is concerned with consequences. Directness of causation conversely is more relevant for Kantianism, since it is not concerned with consequences.

And fifth, reading science fiction as containing philosophical thought experiments can be worthwhile generally. This is so whether read in isolation from or in conjunction with generally recognized philosophical works. Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* read in isolation prompted us to question the ethical difference between (b) and (c), while in conjunction with Plato's *Republic* it prompted adding (a). Nor are Plato's *Republic* and Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy* the only such pairings worth exploring. Science fiction and philosophy both expand our intellectual horizons. One way in which they do so is describing counterfactual situations in which we might test our intuitions.

Plato's and Asimov's thought did not stay static, as their relation to these thought experiments changed. In the *Laws*, a later dialogue also concerned with an ideal state, Socrates's absence suggests that Plato distanced himself from earlier views voiced by Socrates in (a). In *Foundation's Edge* (1982) and *Foundation and Earth* (1986), the *Foundation Trilogy's* sequels, (b) and (c), and the Second Galactic Empire itself, are mere intermediaries until the true ideal state, Galaxia—in which the whole galaxy becomes a single organism—is established. Even so the *Republic* and *Foundation Trilogy* can function together as founts of philosophical insight.



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Notes

¹ I distinguish philosophical from scientific thought experiments. See James Robert Brown (2010) for discussion of the latter. In §4 I consider different ways in which philosophers use thought experiments to test intuitions.

² Reserving “thought experiment” for counterfactuals used to test philosophical intuitions, one might employ “narrative modeling” for the phenomenon that De Smedt and de Cruz are highlighting. (I thank the editor for the terminology.)

³ The *Foundation Trilogy* consists of *Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, and *Second Foundation*, initially published separately in 1951, 1952, and 1953, respectively, and as a trilogy in 1955. Decades later Asimov would write both sequels and prequels to the trilogy.

⁴ All quotations from the *Republic* are taken from John M. Cooper (1997) as translated by G.M.A. Grube and revised by C.D.C. Reeve. All references to Plato’s works are to their Stephanus numbers.

⁵ ‘Kallipolis’ is Plato’s word for “beautiful state,” and I follow Grube and Reeve in naming it as such. I also follow them in using ‘guardians’ and ‘auxiliaries’ to name the two higher classes (414b), though I capitalize them as proper names of those classes. Later they translate: “Those who are to be made guardians in the most precise sense of the term must be philosophers” (503b) and as such would be the previously identified “philosopher kings” (see 473c–d). Grube and Reeve use ‘farmers’ and ‘craftsmen’ (415a) to name the lowest political class, which I subsume under ‘producers.’

⁶ See Goldberg (2015, 18–25, 175–77; 2017, 125–26) for how this relates to Plato’s being a realist about the nature of properties, content of concepts, and meaning of terms.

⁷ After attacking Socrates, Thrasymachus recedes from the dialogue. Glaucon and Adeimantus assume his side of the argument (357a) until Socrates wins them over near the dialogue’s close (608c).

⁸ One might object that the First Foundation’s commitment to expansionism makes comparisons with the Kallipolis, and its organic limits on growth, problematic. Put differently, while the First Foundation is the driving force *creating* the Second Galactic Empire, the Auxiliaries are the driving force *defending* the Kallipolis from internal and external threat. (I thank an anonymous referee for this objection.) While the First Foundation may be committed to expansionism of its particular sphere of influence, however, the Seldon Plan—described above—is not expansionist. That Plan operates on all and only the galaxy generally. The Second Galactic Empire will itself ultimately be coextensive with the First, which covers the galaxy. The Plan is meant to *defend* the galaxy from the internal threat of 30,000 years of “misery and anarchy” rather than to expand it. Ultimately the First Foundation therefore expands the galaxy, the geographic boundary of both empires, no more than the Auxiliaries expand the Kallipolis’s geographic boundary.

⁹ As explained below, Seldon speaks not of “his” but of “our psychology” (“The Psycho-historians,” 86), the psychohistory of the Second Foundation. Later a member of the Second Foundation explains: “[T]he First Foundation supplies the physical framework of a single political unit, and the Second Foundation supplies the mental framework of a ready-made ruling class” (“Search by the Foundation,” 613).

¹⁰ The only other source that I have found which notices similarities between the *Republic* and the *Foundation Trilogy* is Paul Krugman, the Nobel-prize winning economist, who observes: “We never get to see the promised Second Empire, which may be just as well, because it probably

wouldn't be very likeable. Clearly, it's not going to be a democracy—it's going to be a mathematized version of Plato's Republic, in which the Guardians derive their virtue from the axioms of psychohistory" (1955/2012, xii).

¹¹ There is evidence that he was inspired elsewhere. "Why shouldn't I write of the fall of the Galactic Empire and of the return of feudalism, written from the viewpoint of someone in the secure days of the Second Galactic Empire? After all, I had read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* not once, but twice" (Asimov 1979, 311). In writing the *Foundation Trilogy*, Asimov explained, he did "a little bit of cribbin' from the works of Edward Gibbon" (1954). Though I could find no evidence that the *Decline and Fall* was inspired by the *Republic*, the former mentions the latter four times: as motivating Alexander the Great [vol. 1, 150], as describing a regime denying religious freedom [vol. 1, 382, fn. 4], as motivating Emperor Gallienus to be "on the point of giving Plotinus a ruined city of Campania to try the experiment realizing Plato's Republic" [vol. 2, 48, fn. 170], and as motivating Emperor Servius Sulpicius to follow "the example of Plato [by having] (...) composed a republic" as his vision of the Roman Empire [vol. 7, 321].

¹² Other examples of control in the *Republic* include that poetry is censored (376d–398b), citizens are fed falsehoods like drugs (389b), and Guardians might be understood as the most desirable puppeteers casting shadows on the wall (i.e., ruling the state).

¹³ Other examples of control in the *Foundation Trilogy* include that of Salvor Hardin, the first mayor of Terminus, who famously says: "Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right" ("The Traders," 149) and "Only a lie that wasn't ashamed of itself could possibly succeed" ("Search by the Second Foundation," 602); Hardin fabricates and promulgates a religion for the barbarian kingdoms surrounding Terminus ("The Mayors," 89–145), whose priests are told that they are conducting rituals to channel the Galactic Spirit when they are instead using scientific material and equipment ("The Mayors," 98); and the Second Foundation might be understood as the most desirable puppeteers ruling the galaxy (i.e., casting shadows on the wall).

¹⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for inspiring this objection.

¹⁵ See Malcolm Schofield (2007, 138).

¹⁶ See Stephen Halliwell (2007) for difficulties in interpreting the myth.

¹⁷ James Mahon (2016) also suggests comparing this definition to the near equivalent: "[lying is] making a statement believed to be false, with the intention of getting another to accept it as true" (Primoratz 1984, 54n2).

¹⁸ Another similarity between the *Republic* and the *Foundation* is that Socrates explains that souls go on a "thousand-year journey" (292d) between reincarnations, while Seldon explains that without the Seldon Plan there will be "one thousand generations of suffering," while with it there will be a thousand-year period between the First and Second Galactic Empires ("The Psychohistorians," 37). A similarity between Asimov's Seldon and Plato's Socrates particularly occurs not in the *Republic* but in the *Apology* and *Crito*. Seldon and Socrates are each tried for destabilizing the state. Seldon is given the choice of death or exile and chooses the latter (41). Socrates is sentenced to death (38c) and though declining, is later given the chance by his friends to choose exile (44e–46a).

¹⁹ I leave such subsequent parentheticals implicit.

²⁰ I thank an anonymous referee and the editor for this objection.

²¹ A contemporary argument similar to this is Peter Van Inwagen's "consequence argument" (1986, 56).

²² Though libertarians such as Robert Kane [(1996) think that we do, and "hard" determinists such as David Pereboom (2001) think that we do not, have metaphysical freedom, they agree that only such freedom is relevant. "Soft" determinists, or "compatibilists," such as Harry Frankfurt (1988) and Daniel Dennett (1984) think that as long as an individual can cause an action, even if she can never step outside the causal order, she has free will. Compatibilist free will is not metaphysical freedom but instead compatible with determinism.

²³ The kind of determination with which I am concerned is therefore consistent with soft determinism. See note 22.

²⁴ I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

²⁵ Prominent consequentialists include Jeremy Bentham (1789/1961) and John Stuart Mill (1861/2002), and more recently Derek Parfit (1984) and Peter Singer (1993).

²⁶ Prominent deontologists include Immanuel Kant (1785/1999, 1788/1999) and W.D. Ross (1930, 1939), and more recently David McNaughton (1988) and Christine Korsgaard (1996).

