

Propaganda and the Philosopher

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Abstract

Propaganda and philosophy go hand-in-hand, and this essay seeks to explore the relationship of knowledge, the philosopher, and propaganda. In the age of AI, clarification and the exploration of what propaganda's possible meanings are and what its implications could be, are pertinent.

Propaganda and the Philosopher

Given that we are now in the age of AI and AI warfare, I feel a few remarks on propaganda are needed. I've tackled the idea elsewhere some years ago, and while I believe that the nature of propaganda has not greatly changed in recent times, it was given a great tool in AI. Furthermore, this short essay will not be the place for the consideration required for the exploration of AI and propaganda; there is simply too much ground to cover regarding AI photos, videos, and censorship by AI moderation. Instead, a few generalities and words of caution on propaganda as a whole would be useful.

To begin with, and what may at first seem unhelpful, there is no central meaning or essence of what propaganda is. The philosopher, as Robin McKenna (2025) so boldly puts it, wants a definition to pinpoint what propaganda is, often a definition that would fit in with the idea's negative connotation. According to McKenna, it is the social theorist who "treats propaganda as a sociological phenomenon, a feature of modern societies which has certain functions and serves certain purposes" (para. 3). The distinction he sets forth between a philosopher and a social theorist is one I can't see, and paints a portrait of a philosopher concerned with definitions rather than thinking in a 'sense' and in a general, wider context. Certainly, some Anglo-American philosophers make that practice their alpha and omega, but philosophers of 20th century continental philosophy, for instance, purposely didn't because much is lost when an idea is shaved down to a few neat lines and a one-dimensional sense. In my view, the social theorist and the philosopher are no different. A philosopher works in the realm of cultural politics, as does the social theorist, but at times the philosopher believes that their metaphysics must be something that bypasses cultural politics and gets to the 'Truth', and this is perhaps part of the tension called out by McKenna in the first part of his wonderful essay. One is

a pinpointer of essences, and the other investigates propaganda as a sociological phenomenon, but both work in the same realm of cultural politics and interpretation regardless of their objectives. No watertight distinctions need to be made as the philosopher does not operate within a vacuum or closed system: they deal with ideas of the ancients as well as the moderns, and are often critics of society who show where it can be improved, or point out something that has been overlooked. If put that way, the philosopher's role looks oddly similar to that of the social theorist's, and the only real difference may be in their preference for literature, which, of course, sees the philosopher's preference being in the literature of philosophy.

Back to the topic of hand, the dreams of being able to pinpoint propaganda into a definition may as well be dreams. The real importance is in being able to explicate some of the attributes and the "how's" of the concept that seems to operate, and if propaganda is unavoidable, being able to spot and pick and choose which kinds serve our purposes better. As said before, despite the numerous definitions and studies, there is no agreed upon central meaning to what propaganda is. What there seems to be agreement on, however, is its negative connotation for most people. If propaganda is seen as a thing that diffuses worldviews, then it would seem that the concept of information and knowledge are, indeed, a form of it. Education then would be a form of propaganda, and that not only includes encountering an idea between the pages of a book, but also of experimentation, failing and learning, and of course, an encounter with various institutions of learning and the people affiliated with them. Yet there is an important difference between the propaganda of Plato and the propaganda of a government and its media. But the difference is not that one is in service of the Truth and the other falsity, both are narratives pointed in different directions and for different reasons. The idea of education is that it expands our horizons (injections of perspectives and worldviews) in order to better us as persons, and

while such a view is an artifact of propaganda in favor of itself, I would hesitate to call it bad, as education allows one to squeeze more out of life, to think sharper thoughts, and to perhaps learn to spot other kinds of propaganda. On the other hand, the nefarious kinds of propaganda attempts to grasp at the positives of the former kind. It tries to sell a particular view that would be beneficial to another entity (often the peddler), and not necessarily for the person who it deceives. This is the view taken by many who not only believe propaganda is wholly evil and misleading, but that to be propaganda, it must do this. They believe it to be an intentional lie peddled by individuals and abstract entities, and while it can be said their suspicions are correct and those circumstances do exist, it is not the whole picture.

If the safe assumption is taken that propaganda is unavoidable, the quest then falls on everyone to decide which kinds are worth believing and chasing, and which kinds are harmful. However, it must not be viewed as a narrative which is true or false or based on appearance or reality. Part of the issue is that propaganda feeds off what one believes the 'Truth' may be—If it is not one thing, the Truth lies elsewhere. This thinking is as dangerous as it is effective, because it enables others to believe that propaganda is for everyone else to believe in, but surely not for themselves. The problem is that propaganda is a cultural disease that no one is immune to. Intellectuals, including philosophers, are not excluded. No matter how sharp and thorough one is, thinking must rely on presuppositions and premises which have to come from somewhere. Without being overly reductionist, the game of knowledge and information diffusion is synonymous with that of propaganda, not because they are brothers from the same neighborhood, but the same entity seen from two different angles.

The trickiest part is that the philosopher must navigate the landscape of knowledge while understanding that whatever they may learn is not pure and raw knowledge, but rather an

ideological mess of biases and viewpoints that, while helpful for different reasons, are not untapped veins of pure epistemic gold. Knowledge is that beautiful mess of an invention, and the philosopher must recognize what it can and can't do, while also spreading a propaganda of their own: the loving of that heaping mess, the love of education, the kind of propaganda that agrees with Socrates' dictum in the Apology: the unexamined life is not worth living (Plato, 1999).

References

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