

Force vs. Choice in the Gyges Narratives of Herodotus and Plato

The Gyges stories presented by Plato and Herodotus are strikingly similar. Plato's story (told by one of his interlocutors) has Gyges as a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia. After finding a magic ring that turns him invisible, Gyges uses this power to seduce the queen and, with her assistance, kill the king and take the throne (*Republic* 2.359c-2.360b). Herodotus' Gyges is a trusted spearman to the king, who forces him to spy on the queen while she is naked. The queen takes revenge on the king by demanding that Gyges kill the king, marry her, and become king himself, to which he reluctantly assents (*Histories* 1.8-12). Many scholars maintain that Plato either derives his story from Herodotus (Laird 2001), or else from the same source Herodotus used (Smith 1902). In addition to similarities in the plot (the usurpation of the throne, the queen's aid), there are also several parallel thematic elements (Laird 2001). One perplexing (apparent) incongruity, however, is that in Herodotus' narrative, Gyges chooses evil only under coercion, while in Plato's version, Gyges' choices seem to be made, if anything, too freely (Danzig 2008).

This paper argues instead that, as in Herodotus' tale, Plato's Gyges is also acting under coercion, though the force that is applied arises from an internal rather than an external source. The language of compulsion, which is prevalent in Herodotus' account, is also important in Plato's—it is only “by force of law” that people are just (*Republic* 2.359c). Without such an external check, as Plato's version maintains, an impossibly “adamantine temper” (*Republic* 2.360b) would be required to remain just. The implication is not simply that people's will would be unchecked if they had access to Gyges' invisibility, but that their internal drive to evil is overwhelming, forcing them to do that which they might otherwise choose not to do. Thus, this paper argues that the story of the Ring of Gyges can be read to lead into Plato's concept of a soul

divided in multiple parts, in which the conflict is not between the internal compulsion to evil and the external force of society, but instead between multiple forces within the soul acting on one another.

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