

## Prometheus the Philosopher: Plato's Theft of Fire

In this paper I argue that Plato adapts the themes of visibility in Hesiod's representation of Prometheus, and the idea of foreseeing one's death in *Prometheus Bound*, and reorients the myth into his philosophical program. By focusing on the interplay between the concepts of visibility and hidden knowledge inherent in the Prometheus myth, I show how Plato transforms the vocabulary associated with the myth into the eschatological setting of *Gorgias*. The lexical categories of sight and knowledge are closely connected in the Greek language, and from the perspective of historical linguistics, verbs of mental perception developed from verbs of physical perception (Rose 2013). Hesiod focuses his depiction of Prometheus on the relationship between the theft of fire and the concealment of hidden knowledge, and he emphasizes Zeus' visual perception of the fire: ὡς ἴδ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισι πυρὸς τηλέσκοπον ἀγίην, "As he saw the far-seeing flame of fire among humanity" (*Theogony* 566). The 5<sup>th</sup> century play *Prometheus Bound* builds on Hesiod's theme of visibility and concealed knowledge, but the play adds a fundamental innovation by linking a verb of "seeing" with the idea of foreseeing one's death: θνητούς γ' ἔπαυσα μὴ προδέρκεσθαι μόνον, "I (Prometheus) stopped mortals from foreseeing their death" (*Prometheus Bound* 248). Subsequently, Plato picks up the Prometheus myth in *Gorgias* and reworks the vocabulary within the context of achieving philosophical knowledge. Plato echoes *Prometheus Bound* when Zeus commands Prometheus to stop mortals from foreknowing their death: παυστέον ἐστὶν προειδότας αὐτοὺς τὸν θάνατον, (*Gorgias* 523d). Plato draws upon the same mythic strand and uses similar vocabulary, but I show how Plato combines the semantic fields of visual and mental perceptions, expressed by the verb, οἶδα "to know," which encapsulates that which one has *seen*, *learned*, and therefore *knows*. I claim that Plato incorporates into the eschatological setting of *Gorgias* both Hesiod's theme and vocabulary of

visibility and concealment, as well as the idea of foreseeing death from *Prometheus Bound* in order to elevate philosophy as the true means of achieving hidden knowledge.

Meinwald (1998), Calame (2012) and Manuwald (2013) have argued that Plato incorporated the Prometheus myth in *Philebus* and *Protagoras* in order to add mythological authority to his philosophical arguments. But less study has been dedicated to the function of the Prometheus myth in Plato's *Gorgias*. Commentators of Plato's *Gorgias* have given various explanations for the reference to mortals foreseeing their death: Olympiodorus (Jackson 1998) and Strauss (1957) emphasize the ethical implications of foreknowledge of death in terms of Plato's philosophy, whereas Dodds (1959) and Griffith (1983) focus on the ancient sources for the story in suggesting that Plato and the author of *Prometheus Bound* are working from the same myth. Recently, Edmonds (2012) has shown how Plato uses mythology in *Gorgias* to amplify the impact of his philosophical ideas. In turn, I show how Plato specifically amplifies his philosophical program through his representation of the Prometheus myth and its associated vocabulary. I trace the Prometheus myth through its depiction of the relationship between sight and knowledge, beginning from Hesiod's visuality of fire and the first sacrifice. I then proceed to the dramatic adaptation *Prometheus Bound* and the issue of human knowledge about death, and finally to the intellectualized reworking of the myth in Plato's *Gorgias*. I utilize a philological investigation of *verba sentiendi* in the Prometheus narrative with a focus on Plato's redeployment of the vocabulary and his philosophical manipulation of the myth. Hesiod's Prometheus brings humanity the fire of knowledge, and Plato's Prometheus gives us knowledge of when we will die. Plato imbues the Prometheus myth with the philosophical rigor that empowers humanity to understand what death is, and thus the philosophical search to understand our own mortality becomes an inherent aspect of the human experience.

## Bibliography

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