

(Mis)quoting Euripides: Playing the Language Game with Proverbs in
Plato's *Republic* and *Gorgias*

The philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) famously described how a community is formed by a series of competing “vocabularies” within a larger “language game.” As examples, Rorty offered “the vocabulary of ancient Athenian politics versus Jefferson’s, the moral vocabulary of Saint Paul versus Freud’s, the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle” The vocabulary that ultimately prevails in a language game becomes the discursive foundation of any particular community – be it political, artistic, or scientific.

In this paper, I demonstrate how the concept of the language game helps explain the two puzzling instances in the dialogues where Plato conspicuously juxtaposes *sophoi* (“wise men”) and *kompsoi* (“clever men”): in Book 8 of the *Republic*, as Socrates depicts a society devolving into tyranny, and during the allegory of the water carriers in Hades, in the *Gorgias*. I argue that the *kompsoi* – as Plato expressly uses that term vis-à-vis the *sophoi* – are those who understand and further, exploit the dynamic of the language game. This becomes apparent, I argue, in Socrates’ (and his interlocutors’) quotation of certain proverbs from Euripides.

In the *Republic*, Socrates condemns a proverb from an unknown play by Euripides, “Wise are tyrants by converse with the wise” (σοφοὶ τύραννοι” εἰσι “τῶν σοφῶν συνουσία, 568a11-b1). Scholars have long been perplexed by Socrates’ seemingly naïve hermeneutics (Adam 1980; Halliwell 2011). Socrates appears to cite a verse entirely out of context as evidence that Euripides in fact lauds tyrants and thus, he and other poets like him ought not be “admitted” (παραδεχθῆναι) into the ideal polity, despite the fact that they are *sophoi*. However, Adeimantus

(Socrates' interlocutor) hypothesizes that such *sophoi* will come to understand (συγγιγνώσκουσιν) why they are excluded, *if* such men also happen to be *kompsoi*.

I explain why such wordsmiths who are *kompsoi* ultimately come to “agree with” (συγγιγνώσκειν) the reason that they and their writings – specifically, those writings that are at odds with the customs and social institutions that Socrates and his companions seek to inculcate in the ideal *polis* – are not going to be admitted into such a society: they recognize the contingency of competing vocabularies, operating within the culture's larger language game. Such games necessarily entail winners and losers. *Sophoi* like Euripides, writers who by their mastery of language succeed in authoring numerous “sayings” that come to influence how people think and behave (such as the proverb cited by Socrates), will surely understand how the intended meanings of their *legomena* may alter and metamorphose as circumstances and contexts change, *if* such men are also *kompsoi*. They understand the contingency of language and are themselves superbly skilled in formulating their own competing vocabularies so as to participate fully in their culture's larger language game. I explain how proverbs are a key component in “winning” any language game.

Similarly, I show how in the *Gorgias*, Socrates parries proverbs from Euripides' *Antiope*, wielded by his antagonist, Calicles, to discredit Socrates' philosophic way of life, by quoting in response yet another proverb from Euripides' *Polydius* which launches the allegory of the water carriers in Hades. Expanding upon prior scholarship by Linforth (1944) and Blank (1991), I show how Socrates displays a keen understanding of how proverbs operate in the language game by depicting an unnamed *kompsoi* cleverly exploiting the ambiguity of a key term, *pithanos*, which can mean both “persuasive” and “persuadable,” to create the water carrier myth. I argue

that this move not only serves to highlight the enormous gulf between Socrates' and Callicles' respective visions of oratory, but also amounts to a meta-commentary on the language game.

The *kompsoi* understands how words can be manipulated because of their ambiguity and reconfigured in different contexts, thereby creating new "vocabularies," replete with their own proverbs, that can underpin new ways of thinking and behavior. I conclude by arguing that Plato's own understanding of this dynamic is crucial to Plato's creation of the new discursive practice of philosophy, with its transformative potential for both the community and its individual members.

Bibliography

Adam, J. 1980. *The Republic of Plato*. 2 vols. Cambridge: CUP.

Blank, D.L. 1991. "The Fate of the Ignorant in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Hermes* 119: 22-36.

Halliwell, S. 2011. *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus*. Oxford: OUP.

Linforth, I.M. 1944. "Soul and Sieve in Plato's *Gorgias*." *Univ. of Calif. Pub. in Class. Phil.* 12: 492-313.

Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: CUP.