

The Ring of Gyges

from Plato, *Republic* 359d-360c

Glaucon disagrees with Socrates and insists that justice and virtue are not in fact desirable in and of themselves. In support of his claim, Glaucon offers the following story which suggests that the only reason people act morally is that they lack the power to behave otherwise. Take away the fear of punishment, and the "just" and the "unjust" person will both behave in the same way: unjustly, immorally.

Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended.

Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result-when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; where as soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom. Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right.

If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice.

Directions: After reading this excerpt from Plato's *Republic* please respond to the prompts on the other side of this sheet. You may attach another sheet if you need more space to write.

Rationale: A key focus of our study this year is the concept of power. We will look at types of power and the ways in which power is consolidated and diffused throughout history.

Name _____

Imagine for a moment that you were in possession of such a ring. How would you use it? If you had a perfect guarantee that you would never be caught or punished, what would you do?

In the story Plato asserts “this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice...” Do you think that this is true of people in general? Why or why not?

In 1887, Lord Acton wrote “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” One can view “The Ring of Gyges” as a statement about absolute power. Would total power eventually lead anybody to be corrupt?