

Ring of Gyges: Justice When No One's Looking?"

A SOPHIA One-Sheet Based on “[Plato’s Ring of Gyges](#),” Center for Philosophy for Children, The University of Washington, Used with permission, thanks to Dr. Jana Mohr Lone, with questions on p.2 by Caroline A. Buchanan, Derek Daskalakes, Erik Jarvis, James William Lincoln, & Eric Thomas Weber.

Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. One day there was a violent thunderstorm, and an earthquake broke open the ground and created a crater at the place where Gyges was tending his sheep. Seeing the big hole, Gyges was filled with amazement and went down into it. And there, in addition to many other wonders of which we are not told, he saw a hollow bronze horse. There were window-like openings in it, and peeping in, he saw a corpse, which seemed to be of more than human size, wearing nothing but a gold ring on its finger. He took the ring and came out of the crater.

What’s the moral of the story?

- If we were shielded from the consequences of our actions, how would that change the way we would act?"



Gyges wore the ring at the usual monthly meeting that reported to the king on the state of the flocks of sheep. As he was sitting among the others, he happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself to the inside of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to those sitting near him, and they went on talking as if he had gone. He wondered at this, and, fingering the ring, he turned the setting outwards again and became visible. So, he experimented with the ring to test whether it indeed has this power – and it did. If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible; if he turned it outward, he became visible again. When he realized this, he at once arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he quickly became the queen’s lover. With her help he attacked the king, killed him, and took over the kingdom.

Plato has us imagine two magic rings, one given to a morally good person and one to a person who is not morally good. Plato contends that there would be no difference in the way the two would behave. People only behave morally, he claims, because they are afraid of the consequences of getting caught if they behave badly.

- a) What would you do if you had a ring that made you invisible?
- b) If we all had a ring of Gyges, what would happen?
- c) Do you think Plato is right, that we are good only because we are afraid of getting caught?
- d) Do people want to be good, or are they only good because they will get something out of it, like the approval of their parents or some other reward?
- e) What is the difference between someone who is morally good and someone who is not?

This prompt is online here: <https://depts.washington.edu/nwcenter/lessonplans/platos-ring-of-gyges-discussion-questions/>.

(SOPHIA Note: Some scholars debate in depth what were Plato’s thoughts versus Socrates’ or others’. That isn’t our aim here.)

Discussion Questions on The Ring of Gyges

By Caroline A. Buchanan, Derek Daskalakes, Erik Jarvis, James William Lincoln, and Eric Thomas Weber

- (1) How would the morally good person act with the ring?
- (2) Are we bad people when we think that it would be tempting to act unjustly with the ring? If so, why? If not, why not?
- (3) How do one's values affect us when we believe we can get away with what is considered wrongdoing?
- (4) What kind of character do you have to have in order to preserve your motivation to act morally with the ring?
- (5) Who in our society seems to have the ability to get away with things without getting caught, akin to having a ring? Possible examples: The National Security Agency? The President? Companies that can hold secret meetings and keep trade secrets? If there are such cases, is that a bad thing? If not, why not? If so, how so?
- (6) Does power always corrupt, as the saying goes? Why or why not?
- (7) Are there cases in which people seem to be able to get away with wrongdoing whether or not people know it's happening? If so, why do we let people get away with it in those cases? If not, does that mean the world is more just because of it?
- (8) When companies get caught prioritizing profit over safety, for example, they sometimes say that their chief obligation is to maximize shareholder value. Does that excuse their behaviors? If so, how so? If not, why not?
- (9) If maximizing shareholder value is a particular company's motivation for wrongdoing, what can the public do to make sure that companies look out for their customers' and the public's interests?
- (10) Are there situations in which secrecy and stealth are desirable for the public, despite the consequent diminishment of accountability they might cause?

For more prompts for discussion like the one on the first page of this document, visit the Center for Philosophy for Children at the University of Washington, with information online at: <https://depts.washington.edu/nwcenter/resources/lesson-plans/>.

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