

THE MYTH OF GYGES



There is an ancient Greek myth about a man named Gyges. According to the myth, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the King of Lydia. One day there was an earthquake in the mountainous region where Gyges and his fellow shepherds tended the king's flocks. Shifting stones revealed a cave in the mountainside, and Gyges curiously investigated it. Entering the cave, Gyges discovered that it was in fact a tomb. He found a bronze horse statue that contained a strange corpse larger than that of a man wearing a golden ring. Gyges pocketed the ring and fled from the cave.

Soon after that the shepherds met together, according to their custom, so they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king. Gyges arrived for the meeting, having the ring on his finger. As he was sitting among them, he chanced to turn the setting of the ring to the inside. 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 setting outward and reappeared. He made several trials of the ring—always with the same result: When he turned the jewel inwards, he became invisible. When he turned it outwards, he reappeared. Gyges then volunteered to be chosen as one of the messengers who reported to the king as to the status of the flocks. Arriving at the palace, Gyges used his new power of invisibility to seduce the queen. Then with her help he murdered the king and became king of Lydia himself.

Greek philosophers used this story to talk about morality and ethics. Some believed that if a person did have the power to become invisible, the rules of morality and society would be out the window, and the person would act however he or she wished. One philosopher argued it this way: "[If given this power] 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 sleep with anyone at his pleasure or kill or release from prison whom he would and in all respects be like a god among men."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you found a magical ring like Gyges did, would you be corrupted by its power? Explain.
2. Do you agree with the idea that if the consequences for evil actions were removed, everyone would do whatever they wanted? Explain.
3. How does this myth have to say about giving people too much power?
4. "Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is looking." Do you agree? Explain.
5. When we are *extrinsically* motivated, something like a reward or a punishment from an external source causes us to make the right decision; for example, when you want to win a

character award or avoid a punishment at school. When we are *intrinsically* motivated, the desire to make the right decision comes from within ourselves. Which is better?

6. The majority of successful people are intrinsically motivated – meaning they do great things because they can motivate themselves. How could we be more intrinsically motivated?
7. **Connect:** The epic fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien features a magical ring, like the ring of Gyges, that gives its wearer incredible power. Whoever wears the ring, no matter how noble and true they are, ultimately becomes corrupted by its power. Do you agree—does absolute power corrupt absolutely? Explain.