

Plato's tale of Gyges

According to an old story, Gyges was a shepherd working for 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 saw a hollow metal horse with doors in it. Inside, he saw a dead body wearing a gold ring; this he took and went back above ground to his flock.

Later, at a meeting of all the shepherds, Gyges was fiddling with the ring on his finger. As he turned it, instantly he became invisible to everyone, and they all began to speak of him as if he were no longer there. He was astonished at this, tried turning the ring again, and reappeared. He volunteered to be one of the messengers who were sent to report back to the king. When he got to the palace, he used his power of invisibility, killed the king and took the kingdom.

Even if a good person got his hands on this ring, would you imagine he could he stick to being good? He could take whatever he wanted from the shops, go into anyone's house, do whatever he liked: he would be a god among men.

From this story, we can conclude that a person is good, not because they want to or because they think that being good is any use to him individually, but because he has to; if anyone thinks they'll be able to get away with something, they'll do it.

Plato, philosopher
Athens, Greece
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