

The Ring of Gyges

Retold by Jason Buckley

Once in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, there lived a shepherd called Gyges. The sheep he looked after were not his own. They belonged to the King.

One day, when Gyges was out grazing the flocks, there was a great storm. Lightning stabbed at the earth, and crashes of thunder swept the sky. Then an earthquake shook the hills, answering the thunderclaps with the crunching of stone on stone.

When the storm and the earthquake were over and all was quiet again Gyges was amazed to see that a hole had opened up in the earth. When he looked into it, he saw a long tunnel. At the end, he could just make out the faint glimmer of shining metal.

He took a torch and followed the tunnel, which opened into a cave. In the centre of the cave, surrounded by many other wonderful things, was an enormous horse made of bronze. Stranger still, the horse had doors, and inside them lay ... a huge body. Not just the body of a large man, but of a small giant. The body was wearing a gold ring, set with a single gem. Gyges took the ring and went back up.

The king's shepherds all met together. They talked about the storm and about whose turn it was to visit the king and report on how the flocks were doing. While Gyges was sitting with them, he happened to twist the ring so that the gem was on the inside of his hand. He was amazed to hear the other shepherds talking about him as if he was not there at all. Not all of it was nice. When he turned the ring back the other way, a few people looked very embarrassed and wondered how they hadn't noticed him.

Gyges soon realised that the ring could make him invisible whenever he wanted. All he had to do was to turn the ring so the gem was on the inside of his hand. He made a plan, and this is what he did.

He made sure he was the one sent to report to the king.

When he got to the palace, he twisted the ring to make himself invisible, and crept into the queen's bedroom.

With smooth words and promises of power, he persuaded the queen to fall in love with him.

And together, they killed the king.

Gyges married the queen and became king himself.

And they lived happily ever after.

The Ring of Gyges

This retelling of a Greek myth raises interesting questions about human nature, and has some echoes of 'Lord of the Rings'.

Warm-up

Perhaps 'the philosopher's fruit salad'. Swap places if you believe:

It's good to be happy.

A bad person can be happy.

A good person can be happy being bad.

The Stimulus

The origin of this story is Book II of Plato's Republic, where it features in a dialogue on whether people only act rightly in response to social pressure. With Gyges's ring providing the power of invisibility to satisfy desires and without fear of punishment, wouldn't the 'just' person act in the same way as the unjust?

Themes and likely questions

What would you do if you could be invisible? What would someone do if they could be invisible?

An interesting writing task before students make up their own question is to ask half the class to write down the answer to one question and half to the other. They are likely to yield different answers as, on average, people seem to think they would do good things, whereas they expect the average person to do bad things. Is that because we really think other people are worse than us, or are there things we do not like admitting to others, or to ourselves?

This can stimulate deeper questions about why we do the right thing when no one is watching – and can it ever be the case that no one is watching if you believe in God?

Could you live happily ever after if you had killed someone?

Leads on to questions of whether you can have a good life if you are a bad person.

Can it be right to talk about people behind their backs?

Invisible Voting

As the story is about invisibility, an invisible vote seems appropriate. A good way to do this is to have the group face out of the circle with one hand behind their back, and to give a thumbs up to vote for a question. It is more comfortable than to ask pupils to eyes shut their eyes and keep their heads down.

Invisible Evaluation

After given group members the opportunity to share 'last words' at the end of your session, you could do a quick evaluation of some aspect of the inquiry, such as whether they felt they gave better reasons in a previous one. Again, face out of the circle, this time with both hands behind backs. No thumbs up = worse, one thumb up = same, both thumbs up = better.