

Now you see me, now you don't. The predicament of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*^a

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Abstract

In questo saggio esaminiamo il caso di un oggetto trasparente, inteso nella sua accezione fisica di base, cioè tale che la luce lo attraversa in modo da renderlo invisibile. Il caso centrale che consideriamo è quello di Gige, raccontato all'inizio del Libro II della *Repubblica* di Platone. Trattiamo questa narrazione come se rendesse evidente un caso estremo di impunità e le sue conseguenze, e cerchiamo di tenere conto di alcuni aspetti del *topos* degli agenti invisibili che ha visto una rinascita nell'ultimo secolo e mezzo. Dopo un breve sguardo a come gli esperimenti di pensiero figurano nell'argomentazione filosofica, notiamo alcune varianti nelle storie associate al nome di Gige. I due punti principali che ci proponiamo di evidenziare sono, in primo luogo, che l'opportunità di non essere visibile a piacimento che l'anello di Gige conferisce è in contrasto con la sua capacità di essere un agente efficace, perché sarà cieco, e, in secondo luogo, che gli svantaggi di tale opportunità possono, nel complesso, superare i vantaggi, perché perde il rispetto per se stesso e per coloro che lo circondano.

Parole chiave: Invisibilità, Impunità, Platone, Gige, Esperimento di pensiero.

In this essay, we look at a case of a transparent object taken in its basic, physical sense of being such that light passes through it so as to make it invisible. The central case we consider is that of Gyges, as recounted at the outset of Book II of Plato's *Republic*. We treat this narrative as making vivid an extreme case of impunity and its consequences, and we try to take account of some aspects of the *topos* of invisible agents that has seen a revival in the last century and a half. After a brief look at how thought experiments figure in philosophical argumentation, we note some of the variants in the stories associated with the name of Gyges. The two main points we aim to bring out are, first, that the opportunity not to be visible at will that Gyges'

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ring confers is at odds with his being an effective agent because he will be blind, and, second, that the disadvantages of such an opportunity may, overall, outweigh the advantages because he loses respect for himself and those around him.

Keywords: Invisibility, Impunity, Plato, Gyges, Thought Experiment.

1. *Thought experiments*

In recent decades, considerable attention has been paid to what are often called thought experiments in philosophy and related disciplines, so much so that some of the tags adopted for them, from the Ship of Theseus to Twin Earth or the Ailing Violinist and its Trolley relatives, have generated identifiable literatures. Likewise, the uses that have been made of such imaginary cases have become an object of sustained reflection¹. So it is hardly surprising that Tim Williamson dedicates the whole of the fourth chapter of his *Doing Philosophy*² to the use of thought experiments to bring into focus – and even to decide – some knotty questions in the subject. Williamson fairly explicitly endorses some thought experiments as at least close to decisive, even when they involve physical impossibilities, such as Einstein's supposition about what it would be like to ride a light ray. On the other hand, he is highly critical of others, especially David Chalmers' zombie story, because they seem to depend on some conceptual or logical muddle. In between, he allows that some thought experiments may be stimulating and innocuous even if the scenario they envisage is, in one way or another, impossible. In this last class, Williamson cites the case of Gyges, though he does not specify what sort of impossibility is in the offing in such a case. Yet, Martin Hollis entitles the seventh chapter of his *Invitation to Philosophy*, dedicated to what it is to know right from wrong, "The Ring of Gyges", and goes so far as to say that "we nowadays find nothing odd in the story, as it stands"³.

At the risk of oversimplifying, the basic use of a thought experiment is to show that, if a certain scenario is at least possible, then a certain thesis is untenable. The simplifications here are, of course, in what is meant by a scenario, by possibility and by a thesis. The scenario we shall be considering comes in a variety of versions, of which those found in Plato and Cicero are philosophically the most interesting, though they do not coincide exactly⁴. The possibility that they depend on is the compatibility of invisibility with sightedness, which too can be declined in various

¹ With a certain emphasis on scientific uses, a leading text would be T. Szabò-Gendler's *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases*, Routledge, London 1999; see, also, more recently, the thematic collection on "New Perspectives on Philosophical Thought Experiments", in *Topoi*, 38, 2019.

² T. Williamson, *Doing Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

³ M. Hollis, *Invitation to Philosophy*, Blackwell, Oxford 1985, p. 128.

⁴ E.g. M. Shell, "The Ring of Gyges", *Mississippi Review*, 17, 1989, pp. 21-84; A. Laird, "Ring the Changes on Gyges: Philosophy and the Formation of Fiction in Plato's *Republic*", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 121, 2001, pp. 12-29; R. Woolf, "Cicero and Gyges" *The Classical Quarterly*, 63, 2013, pp. 801-12.

degrees. The thesis they put to the test comes out at the very beginning of book II of Plato's *Republic*, where Glaucon wants Socrates to show that, in every case, it is better to be just than unjust (357b1-2), and to show the untenability of the common opinion that injustice pays when it is not punished (359a2-c5). So what Glaucon wants to investigate is what it would be reasonable to expect of the behaviour of a person who knows s/he can commit injustice with impunity. One way to acquire impunity is not to be seen when committing injustice. Gyges exemplifies a person who commits injustice taking precautions not to be seen.

2. *A classical topos*

Stories about Gyges abound in the ancient literature to such an extent that we may have to do not so much with the name of an individual as with something more like a dynastic title⁵, which would go some way to explain the slight contortion in Plato's text, where Gyges is referred to as the ancestor of the Lydian (359d1), which latter reference may in turn denote Croesus⁶. Yet, when reference to the ring returns in *Republic* X (612b5), it is attributed directly to Gyges. For present purposes, we may downplay some of these complications, which have been extensively studied⁷, to concentrate on the special use to which Plato puts his version of the tale. So far as I have been able to discern, the scholars who have excavated the diverse figures of Gyges have not been much exercised by the sort of worry that we wish to raise here, and have tended to take Plato as offering a mere variant on a theme. It may even be that classical scholars are so inured to stories with magical elements as not to be fazed by what we find in the *Republic*.

To simplify, then, we may stick to the two main versions of the tale⁸.

One, whose *locus classicus* is in the first book of Herodotus' *Histories* (chapters viii and following), has Gyges ordered by Candaules, king of Lydia, to view his wife – whose name is not given⁹ – while she undresses at night in order to prove to Gyges that she is the most beautiful of women. Despite his protests at the order, while Gyges watches from behind the bedroom door, the queen catches sight of him and, the following day, she offers Gyges a choice between killing Candaules for so

⁵ K. Flower Smith, "The Tale of Gyges and the King of Lydia", *American Journal of Philology*, 223, 1902, pp. 261-82 and 361-87 counts as many as five different versions of his seizure of power (p. 267, n. 1).

⁶ S.R. Slings, "Critical Notes on Plato's *Politeia* II", *Mnemonsyne*, 42, 1989, pp. 380-97; also Vegetti's note to this passage: *La Repubblica* Italian translation with commentary edited by M. Vegetti (Vol. II, devoted to books II and III), Bibliopolis, Naples 1998, p. 30.

⁷ A splendidly well-documented and compact overview is offered by Francesca Calabi in note [B] in Vegetti ed. cit., pp. 173-88.

⁸ Others who have made this simplifying move include G. Danzig, "Rhetoric and the Ring: Herodotus and Plato on the Story of Gyges as a Politically Expedient Tale", *Greece and Rome*, 55, 2, 2008, pp. 169-92.

⁹ Referring to Photion, Calabi, notes the name Nysia and recalls also the names Tudo, Clyzia and Abro (in Vegetti, ed. cit., n. 29, on p. 186).

dishonouring her or being killed himself. Reasonably enough, Gyges goes for the former option and becomes the husband of the queen and, so, king, which promotion is later endorsed by the oracle at Delphi. In this version, which was recurrent in the subsequent Greek and also Latin literature, we have little more than some blood-thirsty palace politicking, with a bit of sexual voyeurism thrown in for good measure.

The other version of the Gyges story has a rather more supernatural edge to it. This is the version that we find in Plato (*Resp.*, II, 359d-60c) and that hardly resurfaces either in Greek or in Latin before Cicero's *De officiis* (III, 38-9), a text that names Plato as its inspiration. We (or at least I) do not know whether Plato was drawing on some pre-existing bit of folklore. But, from the curiously circumstantial way in which the story opens, with a humble shepherd not merely stumbling on a magic ring, but finding it on the finger of an outsize corpse hidden inside a buried bronze horse revealed by a rain-induced landslide, we might imagine a tradition of story-telling among shepherds around the camp fire that accreted circumstantial elements in the transmission. Or, more simply, it may have been Plato himself who conjured a scenario in which the discovery of so curious an object is no more surprising than the circumstances of its discovery. In this version, it takes Gyges some time to learn how to use and how to exploit the powers of the ring. But, as in the Herodotus version, he seduces the queen or rapes her: Plato uses *moikhaio*, while Cicero uses *stuprum*. Then, with her help, he kills Candaules (who, in these versions is anonymous) to become king of Lydia himself.

3. *The ring's powers*

The question then is: what powers are we meant to attribute to the ring in the Plato/Cicero version? At the very least, we may say that, when Gyges turns the bezel or collet of the ring towards the inside of his hand, no-one else can see him. This is as far as Cicero goes, saying that he could not be seen by anyone (*a nullo videbatur*: III, 38). But Plato hazards a bit more, saying that Gyges has become *adelos* (360a6), a word whose most primitive sense seems to be something like «secret», but that gets extended to mean «invisible», which corresponds to what appears in all the translations into modern languages that I have consulted.

In the Herodotus version of the story, when Gyges hides behind Candaules' bedroom door, he should not be visible from within the bedroom. But he is surely visible to someone who happens to be passing by outside the bedroom, and he is not sufficiently well hidden to prevent the queen from catching a glimpse of him and recognising him. That is to say, the relative spatial positions of Gyges and potential viewers make all the difference to his visibility. But, in the Plato-Cicero version, when the ring is suitably adjusted, there seems to be no position from which Gyges can be seen.

Almost irrespective of what theory we might adopt of how light propagates, it is not unreasonable to say that light passes through Gyges' body at least in this sense: if he is standing against the door of Candaules' bedroom, what we see is the door and

not Gyges. One way of expressing this is to say that his body is transparent.

4. *Being transparent*

One way that a body can be transparent is for it to be made of glass. I do not see the glass of the window in my study because I can see the tree outside; or: I can see the tree outside because my window is made of glass and, so, transparent. As readers of Descartes' *Meditations* will recall¹⁰, the delusion that one is made of glass was something of an epidemic in early modern Europe, especially among persons who were much in the public eye, such as king Charles VI of France in the fifteenth century. If he had indeed been made of glass, poor Charles would not have been «in the public eye». Not only did he feel himself to be as fragile as glass, but also wished not to be seen. In this fantasy, though his robes and crown would have been visible, they would have seemed to be moving on their own without a wearer. Yet, presumably, someone who had the audacity to place their hand under the crown would have encountered something solid, namely the glass that had taken the place of Charles' flesh and bone¹¹.

The glass delusion epidemic has sometimes been attributed to the relative novelty of paned windows in the period in question and it seems to have gone extinct by the beginning of the nineteenth century. But, over the last century and a half, variants of it have returned with a vengeance in fiction, perhaps beginning in 1897 with H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man*¹². In this case, we have a chemist called Griffin who concocts a brew that alters the refractive index of his body so as to make it invisible. Wells' deployment of the quasi-technical term «refractive index» is meant to make Griffin's experiment seem scientifically plausible. Indeed, this is something like the direction that some recent technological developments have been trying to exploit in order to render objects invisible by cloaking them with dielectric materials so as to disperse the light that would otherwise be reflected off their surfaces. It can hardly be a coincidence that, at least in their popularisations of their researches, the scientists working in this direction occasionally make reference to the cloak that Professor Dumbledore bestows on Harry Potter¹³. Harry can see through the cloak, but anyone looking in his direction cannot see him, nor indeed the cloak itself. Yet it seems that a cloak made of a dielectric material will be opaque and thus not allow someone behind it to see out.

¹⁰ C. Adam, and P. Tannery (eds.), *Œuvres de Descartes* (12 voll., 1897-1913) corrected and added to by J. Beaudet and P. Costabel (et al.), Vrin, Paris, 1964-76, VI, p. 19.

¹¹ In her *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1988), K. Wilkes seems to think that an invisible person would also be intangible (p. 11) and that this would be a limitation on his/her efficacy in, for instance, committing theft.

¹² H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2017.

¹³ See, e.g. the report on the work of David R. Smith at Duke University: "Invisibility Cloak Demonstrated!" in *Computing News* 2006 (<https://home.nestor.minsk.by/computers/news/2006/10/2003.html>).

To return to Gyges, the advantage the ring confers rests on two conditions. One is that others cannot see Gyges when he is up to no good. The other is that Gyges can see what he is doing. If the first condition is satisfied by his invisibility, we might wonder whether his invisibility is compatible with the second condition.

In the Herodotus version, Gyges' not being seen was meant to be secured by his hiding behind the door, but this failed. In the Plato version, the second condition seems more problematic. There are of course circumstances in which one can see without being seen. Setting aside the technology of video-cameras and the like (in which at least the camera is potentially detectable by sight), the one-way mirrors that the police install in interrogation rooms allow the interrogator's colleagues to see what is going on, without the suspect seeing them. The trick is quite easy and indeed dates to just a few years after Wells' story: a certain Emil Bloch was granted US patent 720877 in 1903 for the design of a one-way mirror. In the interrogation room there is a glass surface that reflects light; and in the adjacent observation room there is the other side of the same glass that is transparent. While light does indeed pass in both directions through the glass, the observation room is dimly lit relative to the brightly lit interrogation room. As a result, the suspect is able to see *something* – what appears to be a normal mirror and hence, for instance, his own face in it – and yet the police have a window on him without themselves being seen. Even when, as in the Clint Eastwood movie *Absolute Power* (1997), the spyhole is very small, there is still something to be seen that might alert suspicion.

But this will not quite do for what Gyges needs, which is for there to be *nothing* that others see while he sees them. Moreover, Gyges needs to be mobile and not restricted to just one viewing post.

5. *What the invisible man sees*

It may be at this point that we run into what Williamson might have been thinking of as an impossibility in having a clear and distinct conception of Gyges' predicament. We may put the point in the manner that Soviet science populariser Yakov Isidorovich Perelman (1882-1942) used to debunk Wells' invisible man. In the second volume of his *Physics for Entertainment*¹⁴, Perelman points out that, if Griffin is invisible, then light passes through him. If light passes through him, then it is not stopped even by the retinas of his eyes. Unless his eyes stop light, Griffin must be blind. If he is blind, then he will not be able on his own to find his way about. So Griffin's invisibility does not give him an advantage in putting through his affairs. And the same would, presumably, apply to Plato's Gyges.

Plato himself might not have been wholly impressed by this move, but if we restrict ourselves to at least moderately plausible theories of how seeing works, it seems that a person who is invisible will be transparent and, so, will be blind. If so, one sort of impossibility that Williamson might have been thinking of in saying that

¹⁴ Y. I Perelman, *Physics for Entertainment*, (13th ed., 1936); tr. Eng., Hyperion, New York 1975, pp. 242-9.

the Gyges story is impossible arises precisely from the incompatibility of invisibility with sightedness.

As indicated, the incompatibility derives from what we understand about how seeing works. Up to a point, this is a matter of how eyes work. Yet there are in nature very different conformations of eyes, some of which, for instance, obviate the blind spot that, in humans and other mammals, is due to the connection of the optic nerve at the back of the retina. It is perhaps not completely irrelevant to note that, on Earth, there are at least forty kinds of animals – butterflies, squid, juvenile eels, shrimps, slugs, even frogs, but especially, deep-sea fish such as *salpa maxima* – whose bodies are transparent. But, again, only up to a point. In all the cases I have been able to identify, such animals are able to see because at least the retinas of their eyes are opaque: generally black and also large relative to body size. But there are reasons for thinking that their visual capacities are rather limited by the lack of the *camera obscura* effect provided by the opaque sclera of, for instance, the normal human eye.

Given that there is some leeway or contingency about how seeing actually works in the animals we know something about, we might find wriggle room for the possibility of there being a creature that was both transparent and sighted. We might say that this is a logical or metaphysical possibility, without committing to its being a physical possibility: the description of such a creature may not lead to a flat-out contradiction or other incoherence, but it is at least at the outer edge of conceivability. After all, Plato and Wells at least took themselves to be conceiving of such cases. As has been much discussed in recent literature¹⁵, the fact of conceivability may be a poor guide to what is physically possible. Indeed, we might think that we are conceiving of St Anthony of Padua's bilocation or of Pegasus' musculature that allows him to fly. But that shows neither that such phenomena are physically possible, nor even that we are thinking the things through sufficiently to say that we really have such conceptions (especially not of the «clear and distinct» variety to which we have already made reference).

One impression that one might come away with is that the Plato/Cicero version of the story of Gyges is rather an intuition pump, in something like Dennett's sense¹⁶, than a fully-fledged thought experiment: it encourages us to think about impunity in a certain way, but need not depend on our granting the physical possibility of an invisible man who can act effectively because he is sighted. For myself, Gyges' blindness is an obvious consequence of his invisibility and my experience is that, when I present this consequence even to seasoned philosophers who are acquainted with Plato's text, its obviousness is pretty uniformly accepted without need of further explanation. I would even go so far as to say that some of my interlocutors have had

¹⁵ E.g. T. Szabò-Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002.

¹⁶ D.C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, Clarendon, Oxford 1984, esp. pp. 17-8 and pp. 32-4.

«ah-ha» responses¹⁷: even if they had thought about the case of Gyges, for instance for the purposes for which Glaucon introduces it, they hadn't thought of it as raising a question of its physical or effective possibility.

6. *What the ring brings*

We have been speaking of various grades of possibility and impossibility – the logical, the metaphysical, the physical – without recourse to the technicalities of the modal systems that can be used to model them. We have suggested that any circumstance that is impossible in any of these grades is not the case. But there is a large range of uses of modal terms such as «must» and «have to» or «can» and «may» as well as «obligatory» and «forbidden» in which we cannot infer from a necessity that something is the case or from an impossibility that it is not. Some of these uses can help us to get a grip on another way in which the story of Gyges presents us with an impossibility.

At *Republic*, 362b3, Glaucon introduces the idea that, if there could be one magic ring like the one Gyges finds, there might be two. He hypothesises that, if one were given to a just man and the other to an unjust man, they would both act in the same way, robbing and raping and murdering. Glaucon's aim in invoking this scenario is to indicate that no-one, not even the most just person, would be ready to forgo the advantages of being able get away with injustice, and would likewise be ready to accept the disadvantages. So it may be worthwhile considering how the advantages of possessing a magic ring stack up against the disadvantages.

The most obvious advantages that accrue to Gyges' discovery of his ring and of how to use it are made explicit in Plato's text. Having once got into the palace, killed the king and married the queen, he no longer has to work as a shepherd and undergo the hardships of the outdoor life. He has easy access to food, which will be prepared for him at his whim by the palace cooks. The queen, as well as any other woman (or man) he takes a fancy to, will be at his disposal to satisfy his sexual urges. Money and anything that it can buy can be obtained either in his role as king or by further employment of the ring. He can exercise power over others both within Lydia, giving orders whose execution he can verify under cover of invisibility, and beyond, subverting other sovereigns and imposing his own rule. And, being recognised as king, he will be at least outwardly honoured even by those who are envious of his position.

In the terms of Glaucon's tripartition of goods at *Republic*, II, 357b-8c, leisure, nutrition and sexual satisfaction seem to fall at least near the category of things desirable for themselves (though Glaucon mentions only joy and harmless pleasures: *hēdonai ablabeis*), while money, power and honour are closer to being desired mostly as mere means and so desirable primarily for their effects. According to the common opinion that Glaucon sets out at 359-60, justice comes about as a compromise

¹⁷ I am particularly proud of having produced this effect on an incumbent of the Bertrand Russell Chair of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge.

between the strong and the weak, so that those who practice it do so against their will, and injustice pays when it goes undetected and unpunished. If, by strength, cunning or luck, someone is able to avoid detection – as Gyges is –, then it looks as if it is not irrational for him to commit injustice and reap the benefits of so doing.

But at what cost? If what Socrates wishes to argue is that justice is to be pursued come what may, then, even when presented with the case of Gyges, he is free to bring to our attention what Gyges loses, and to argue that these losses are greater than the gains accruing to the ring of invisibility. The losses and gains in question may be hard to quantify, there not being a single obvious scale on which to measure them against each other. But things that are hard are sometimes worth trying¹⁸. Even if Gyges' use of the ring is only to be expected, it may be an open question whether or not it is really the rational course and, so, whether or not he would be better off without the temptations that are put in his way.

At a first stab, there may be as many (or as few) as four more or less interrelated dimensions to Gyges' losses in making his nefarious uses of the ring. At least in Plato's version, we are told nothing about what sort of person Gyges was before his find. All we know is that he was a shepherd, and shepherds may be caring and conscientious or exploitative and devious, with all the other combinations of character traits we might want to pull in. But the temptation that the ring exerts once Gyges grasps its powers may mean that, in some pretty strong sense, he loses his identity, whatever it was. He becomes, rather, the slave of the ring, not unlike Tolkien's Sméagol/Gollum.

Related, but distinct, is Gyges' loss of what we might call his sense of integrity. Even if, before discovering the ring, he was wily and exploited to his own benefit situations in which he could get away with unjust behaviour, the ring's powers mean that he cannot even congratulate himself on not having been detected. Conversely, if he had been sincerely (or merely unreflectively) law-abiding, when he finds himself drawn to all sorts of treacherous behaviour, he should (in one of the senses gestured at above) feel ashamed of himself. He knows that he is acting unjustly and does not deserve the benefits that accrue to him. By way of analogy, an athlete who takes illicit performance enhancers cannot – or at least should not – feel that the medal she wins is fully merited. One might even go so far as to say that she does an injustice to herself¹⁹.

Perhaps as a corollary of the loss of integrity, the recognition that his ill-gotten gains are mere effects of fortune should lead to a loss of self-esteem. Here, the «should» is relatively weak. It has rather less than the force of a prediction, because of the unsightly fact about human beings that the unjustly advantaged, such as middle-class white males in most Western societies, tend to think of their advantages as deserved. Yet, while a classist, racist, sexist society is what most middle-class white

¹⁸ The remaining books of the *Republic* (especially book VIII and IX) might be read as constituting Plato's own approach to elaborating such a scale.

¹⁹ Thus, for instance, K. Gongaki, "The Platonic Myth of Gyges and the Concept of Justice and Injustice in Modern Day Sport and the Contemporary World", *Electryone*, 5.2, 2017, pp 1-11: 6.

males are accustomed – and hence oblivious – to, Gyges’ radical change of status might give him pause for reflection on the aleatory nature of his sudden promotion: it was no doing of his and, hence, no merit accrues.

A fourth feature of Gyges’ new situation that pretty clearly counts as a loss regards his relations with the people with whom he comes in contact. At the very least, he has to be wary of having the powers of the ring discovered. Indeed, not even the queen can be let in on his secret: she must not know how Gyges pulled the trick in the first place, and then she must be kept in the dark about his subsequent uses of the ring. Here, the «has to» and the «must»s are on pain of the queen’s snatching it for herself. Gyges is in mortal danger if anyone should uncover how he gets away with what he does. As a result, he is condemned to be distrustful and unsocial, an outcast in his own palace, so to say. Perhaps it is no surprise that, as in the cases of Griffin and Sméagol/Gollum, having the power not to be seen easily leads to mental breakdown.

Even if the four drawbacks to the possession and use of the ring of invisibility just outlined may not obviously outweigh the gains emphasised in Plato’s text, it may be worth suggesting that they all seem to be harms corresponding to goods that should fall into Glaucon’s first category: a sense of identity, of integrity, of self-esteem and the ability to socialise at ease all seem to be desirable for themselves and not in view of anything else. The loss of these goods may be tantamount to what Matthew (16,26) and Mark (8:36) call «losing one’s soul».

We may return, then, to the cadaver from which Gyges took the ring in the first place (*Resp.*, II, 359d-e). How did it get to be buried inside a bronze statue of a horse? One attractive hypothesis is that it was a rather elaborate case of suicide, aimed at taking the ring out of circulation. The big man may have grasped that the ring presents a temptation to self-destruction²⁰, and decided to take it with him to the grave for the good of others. Such a gesture would mean that he had come to think that the worldly goods that one might obtain by the use of the ring are outweighed by the harms that a person may do to herself in merely possessing it. Even if the ring were not a physical impossibility, it would threaten a moral impossibility.

7. *What have we seen?*

Not everyone will be impressed by our attempt to illustrate why Gyges’ ring must, if it is to exist, be a supernatural object. After all, not everyone thinks that, to exist, an object must be in line with what nature, as we currently understand it, allows. But we have tried to show that the description of it is at least close to being internally incoherent. Likewise, not everyone will be impressed with our suggestion that, all told, it may not be advantageous to possess the ring. After all, not everyone thinks that the loss of the moral goods at which have gestured would outweigh the gain of the

²⁰ As D.K. O’Connor puts it, in association also with Hades’ cap, “they may as well be gifts from hell”: “Rewriting the Poets in Plato’s Characters” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, (ed.) G.R.F. Ferrari, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 55-89, at p. 68.

material goods that are more readily imagined as accruing to the ring's possessor. But we have tried to suggest that the moral goods do at least have some weight.

Plato's use of the notion of invisibility remains a powerful stimulus to thought about the notion of justice. While he uses it to provoke us into considering an extreme case of impunity arising from not being seen by others, the tables can be turned. For instance, Rawls' use of the Veil of Ignorance can provoke us into considering how we would deliberate if we could not see ourselves and our own position in society, and what sort of society would emerge from the application of those deliberations²¹. But that is another story.

²¹ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971) rev. ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1999, esp. §24. For a vigorous application of his principles to a society like ours, see D. Chandler *Free and Equal: What Would a Fair Society Look Like?*, Allen Lane, London 2023.