



THE RING OF GYGES

Plato

The Republic, Book I

Now that those who practice justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine something of this kind: having given both to the just and the unjust power to do what they will, let us watch and see whither desire will lead them; then we shall discover in the very act the just and unjust man to be proceeding along the same road, following their interest, which all natures deem to be their good, and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law. The liberty which we are supposing may be most completely given to them in the form of such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges, the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian.

According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of 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 beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he stooping and looking in

saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human, and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and re-ascended.

Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the king; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when 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 collet outwards and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result – when he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; whereas soon as he arrived he seduced the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom.

Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; 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 lie with any one at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a God among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point.

And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever any one thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine any one obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice. Enough of this.

Herodotus

The Histories, Book One

Croesus was Lydian by race, the son of Alyattes and ruler of the nations which dwell on this side of the river Halys; which river, flowing from the South between the Syrians and the

Paphlagonians, runs out towards the North Wind into that Sea which is called the Euxine. This Croesus, first of all the Barbarians of whom we have knowledge, subdued certain of the Hellenes and forced them to pay tribute, while others he gained over and made them his friends. Those whom he subdued were the Ionians, the Aiolians, and the Dorians who dwell in Asia; and those whom he made his friends were the Lacedemonians. But before the reign of Croesus all the Hellenes were free; for the expedition of the Kimmerians, which came upon Ionia before the time of Croesus, was not a conquest of the cities but a plundering incursion only.

Now the supremacy which had belonged to the Heracleidai came to the family of Croesus, called Mermnadai, in the following manner: — Candaules, whom the Hellenes call Myrsilos, was ruler of Sardis and a descendant of Alcaios, son of Heracles: for Agron, the son of Ninos, the son of Belos, the son of Alcaios, was the first of the Heracleidai who became king of Sardis, and Candaules the son of Myrsos was the last; but those who were kings over this land before Agron, were descendants of Lydos the son of Atys, whence this whole nation was called Lydian, having been before called Meonian. From these the Heracleidai, descended from Heracles and the slave-girl of Iardanos, obtained the government, being charged with it by reason of an oracle; and they reigned for two-and-twenty generations of men, five hundred and five years, handing on the power from father to son, till the time of Candaules the son of Myrsos.

This Candaules then of whom I speak had become passionately in love with his own wife; and having become so, he deemed that his wife was fairer by far than all other women; and thus deeming, to Gyges the son of Daskylos (for he of all his spearmen was the most pleasing to him), to this Gyges, I say, he used to impart as well the more weighty of his affairs as also the beauty of his wife, praising it above measure: and after no long time, since it was destined that evil should happen to Candaules, he said to Gyges as follows: "Gyges, I think that thou dost not believe me when I tell thee of the beauty of my wife, for it happens that men's ears are less apt of belief than their eyes: contrive therefore means by which thou mayest look upon her naked." But he cried aloud and said: "Master, what word of unwisdom is this which thou dost utter, bidding me look upon my mistress naked? When a woman puts off her tunic she puts off her modesty also. Moreover of old time those fair sayings have been found out by men, from which we ought to learn wisdom; and of these one is this, — that each man should look on his own: but I believe indeed that she is of all women the fairest and I entreat thee not to ask of me that which it is not lawful for me to do."

With such words as these he resisted, fearing lest some evil might come to him from this; but the king answered him thus: "Be of good courage, Gyges, and have no fear, either of me, that I

am saying these words to try thee, or of my wife, lest any harm may happen to thee from her. For I will contrive it so from the first that she shall not even perceive that she has been seen by thee. I will place thee in the room where we sleep, behind the open door; and after I have gone in, my wife also will come to lie down. Now there is a seat near the entrance of the room, and upon this she will lay her garments as she takes them off one by one; and so thou wilt be able to gaze upon her at full leisure. And when she goes from the chair to the bed and thou shalt be behind her back, then let it be thy part to take care that she sees thee not as thou goest through the door."

He then, since he might not avoid it, gave consent: and Candaules, when he considered that it was time to rest, led Gyges to the chamber; and straightway after this the woman also appeared: and Gyges looked upon her after she came in and as she laid down her garments; and when she had her back turned towards him, as she went to the bed, then he slipped away from his hiding-place and was going forth. And as he went out, the woman caught sight of him, and perceiving that which had been done by her husband she did not cry out, though struck with shame, but she made as though she had not perceived the matter, meaning to avenge herself upon Candaules: for among the Lydians as also among most other Barbarians it is a shame even for a man to be seen naked.

At the time then she kept silence, as I say, and made no outward sign; but as soon as day had dawned, and she made ready those of the servants whom she perceived to be the most attached to herself, and after that she sent to summon Gyges. He then, not supposing that anything of that which had been done was known to her, came upon her summons; for he had been accustomed before to go whenever the queen summoned him. And when Gyges was come, the woman said to him these words: "There are now two ways open to thee, Gyges, and I give thee the choice which of the two thou wilt prefer to take. Either thou must slay Candaules and possess both me and the kingdom of Lydia, or thou must thyself here on the spot be slain, so that thou mayest not in future, by obeying Candaules in all things, see that which thou shouldest not. Either he must die who formed this design, or thou who hast looked upon me naked and done that which is not accounted lawful." For a time then Gyges was amazed at these words, and afterwards he began to entreat her that she would not bind him by necessity to make such a choice: then however, as he could not prevail with her, but saw that necessity was in truth set before him either to slay his master or to be himself slain by others, he made the choice to live himself; and he inquired further as follows: "Since thou dost compel me to take my master's life against my own will, let me hear from thee also what is the manner in which we shall lay hands upon him." And she answering said: "From that same place shall the attempt be, where he displayed me naked; and we will lay hands upon him as he sleeps."

So after they had prepared the plot, when night came on, (for Gyges was not let go nor was there any way of escape for him, but he must either be slain himself or slay Candaules), he followed the woman to the bedchamber; and she gave him a dagger and concealed him behind that very same door. Then afterwards, while Candaules was sleeping, Gyges came privily up to him and slew him, and he obtained both his wife and his kingdom: of him moreover Archilochos the Parian, who lived about that time, made mention in a trimeter iambic verse.

He obtained the kingdom however and was strengthened in it by means of the Oracle at Delphi; for when the Lydians were angry because of the fate of Candaules, and had risen in arms, a treaty was made between the followers of Gyges and the other Lydians to this effect, that if the Oracle should give answer that he was to be king of the Lydians, he should be king, and if not, he should give back the power to the sons of Heracles. So the Oracle gave answer, and Gyges accordingly became king: yet the Pythian prophetess said this also, that vengeance for the Heracleidai should come upon the descendants of Gyges in the fifth generation. Of this oracle the Lydians and their kings made no account until it was in fact fulfilled.

Thus the Mermnadai obtained the government having driven out from it the Heracleidai: and Gyges when he became ruler sent votive offerings to Delphi not a few, for of all the silver offerings at Delphi his are more in number than those of any other man; and besides the silver he offered a vast quantity of gold, and especially one offering which is more worthy of mention than the rest, namely six golden mixing-bowls, which are dedicated there as his gift: of these the weight is thirty talents, and they stand in the treasury of the Corinthians, (though in truth this treasury does not belong to the State of the Corinthians, but is that of Kypselos the son of Aëtion). This Gyges was the first of the Barbarians within our knowledge who dedicated votive offerings at Delphi, except only Midas the son of Gordias king of Phrygia, who dedicated for an offering the royal throne on which he sat before all to decide causes; and this throne, a sight worth seeing, stands in the same place with the bowls of Gyges. This gold and silver which Gyges dedicated is called Gygian by the people of Delphi, after the name of him who offered it.

Now Gyges also, as soon as he became king, led an army against Miletos and Smyrna, and he took the lower town of Colophon: but no other great deed did he do in his reign, which lasted eight-and-thirty years, therefore we will pass him by with no more mention than has already been made.



Sources:

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