Fourth grade students at Whittier Elementary School in Seattle discussed the thought experiment from Plato’s Republic commonly known as the Ring of Gyges. (We reproduce in the sidebar a portion of the 2007 article in Questions which discussed how to use this story to engage in philosophy discussions at different age ranges.) Here are some responses from the students to the question:

**Helen Liska**
No, I think people are good because of what’s inside of them, not because of the fear of being caught. If I had something that enabled me to do dirty things, then I wouldn’t use it for nasty purposes because I am a good person.

**Raven Landwehr**
No, I think that if the inner person is good, they will not do bad stuff even if they have stuff that can enable them to do bad stuff. However, if the inner person is bad, then if they get their hands on things that let them do bad stuff, they probably will.

**Amelia Lewis**
I think some people are only good because they are afraid, but some people are good for other reasons. This doesn’t determine their personality all the time, because sometimes people who are just good will not do something they would do if there wasn’t consequences. Sometimes I have the urge to talk in class, but I hold it in. I am mostly good just because I am, but everybody has those moments. All in all, I think it depends on the person, the place and the thing itself. If I were to talk out in class, it wouldn’t be as bad as if I murdered someone. In conclusion, everyone is not good only because of the consequences.
**Ava Agopsowicz**

I think people are not good only because of the consequences, because people like mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. weren’t good because of the consequences. They were good because they knew it was the right thing to do. I also think people are good for other reasons, because they were raised by good and happy families that made them want to be good and happy people.

**Yura Campbell**

I think that every person, no matter good or bad, would probably do a few bad things if there were no consequences to the things they did. Also, everywhere would be a madhouse. For most people, you are not going to do bad things if you are scared of what will happen if someone catches you. Possibly everyone is controlled by fear, so they do not do things they are not allowed to do. So yes, people are only good because they are afraid of what will happen to them if they do bad things.

**Fiona Dark**

I think that people do good things not because they are afraid of what will happen if they don’t, but because they want to help other people. If you don’t want to help out, then you don’t. If you do, then you do. However, I think some not very bad things, like standing on the table, people (or at least kids) don’t do because they are afraid of the consequences. Doing it or not doing it doesn’t really help or hinder anyone either way. The only reason, consequently, not to stand on the table would be the consequences for doing so.

**Zara Park**

I think that people aren’t only good just because they are afraid of the consequences. Some people are just always nice from the inside out. However, there are some people who are just nice to get something from someone and aren’t all nice to begin with, and are just pretending to be nice.

In *Republic*, Glauccons presents a classic story intended to illustrate that one is just only if one has an audience:

The story goes that [Gyges] was a shepherd in the service of the ruler of Lydia. There was a violent thunderstorm, and an earthquake broke open the ground and created a chasm at the place where he was tending his sheep. Seeing this, he was filled with amazement and went down into it. And there, in addition to many other wonders of which we’re told, he saw a hollow bronze horse. There were windowlike openings in it, and, peeping in, he saw a corpse, which seemed to be of more than human size, wearing nothing but a gold ring on its finger. He took the ring and came out of the chasm. He wore the ring at the usual monthly meeting that reported to the king on the state of the flocks. And as he was sitting among the others, he happened to turn the setting of the ring towards himself to the inside of his hand. When he did this, he became invisible to those sitting near him, and they went on talking as if he had gone. He wondered at this, and finger- ing the ring, he turned the setting outwards again and became visible. So he experimented with the ring to test whether it indeed had this power—and it did. If he turned the setting inward, he became invisible; if he turned it outward, he became visible again. When he realized this, he at one arranged to become one of the messengers sent to report to the king. And when he arrived there, he seduced the king’s wife, attacked the king with her help, killed him, and took over the kingdom.¹

Glauccon then notes that if there were two such rings, “one worn by a just and the other by an unjust person,” that the actions of each would “follow the same path” because one is only just when forced to be.

**Note**


For a discussion of how to use the thought experiment, read Rory Kraft, “Does Virtue Require an Audience?” *Questions* 7 (Summer 2007): 12.