Plato, “The Myth of Gyges”

Sample quotation: “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.”

1. Moral theories often turn on whether one is more *optimistic* or *pessimistic* about human nature. Optimists tend to believe people can be trusted with freedom, since they will mostly use it for good. Pessimists tend to believe people need to be controlled, so that the bad effects of their bad nature will be contained. But how does one go about deciding whether human nature is basically good or basically bad?
2. The ring is a metaphor for power, and Gyges is an ordinary human being, so Plato’s myth seems to be telling us that to the extent one has power it’s human nature to be a predator. Does Gyges fit the predator type of self-interested *intent* that leads to taking *action* from others, the *consequences* being a loss for them and a gain for the self?
3. A famous line from Lord Acton is: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” How similar do you think Acton’s line is to Plato’s myth of Gyges?
4. Critics of the myth point out that many people who have power—mothers over their children, teachers over their students, police over their neighborhoods, bosses over their employees—do *not* abuse their power but rather use it for good. Do you think that such examples refute the myth of Gyges?
5. Applying Plato’s myth to business, what does it imply for how we should think about core business concepts: *making* versus *taking* wealth, *competition*, *trade* versus *theft*, and *profit*?