

The Golden Rule Not So Golden Anymore

Stephen Anderson analyses as he would be analysed

Pluralism is the most serious problem facing liberal democracies today. We can no longer ignore the fact that cultures around the world are not simply different from one another, but *profoundly* so; and the most urgent area in which this realization faces us is in the realm of morality. Western democratic systems depend on there being at least a minimal consensus concerning national values, especially in regard to such things as justice, equality and human rights. But global communication, economics and the migration of populations have placed new strains on Western democracies. Suddenly we find we must adjust to peoples whose suppositions about the ultimate values and goals of life are very different from ours. A clear lesson from events such as 9/11 is that disregarding these differences is not an option. Collisions between worldviews and value systems can be cataclysmic. Somehow we must learn to manage this new situation.

For a long time, liberal democratic optimism in the West has been shored up by suppositions about other cultures and their differences from us. The cornerstone of this optimism has been the assumption that whatever differences exist they cannot be too great. A core of 'basic humanity' surely must tie all of the world's moral systems together – and if only we could locate this core we might be able to forge agreements and alliances among groups that otherwise appear profoundly opposed. We could perhaps then shelve our cultural or ideological differences and get on with the more pleasant and productive business of celebrating our core agreement. One cannot fail to see how this hope is repeated in order buoy optimism about the Middle East peace process, for example.

It seems clear there is some similarity in the various intuitions about moral responsibility that people have had in various times and places around the world. But what could the elusive universal 'core' of the many diverse moralities be? For over a century now, the chief candidate has been *the Golden Rule*. The Golden Rule, whether articulated as 'Treat others as you would wish to be treated', or 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you', or in any of the other several ways in which it has been stated, is by far the most oft-cited formulation of universal morality. Policy makers declare it. The media repeats it. School textbooks promote it. Many ordinary folks simply believe it. It is generally believed that not only does it appear in all major cultures and religions, but that it can be detected in some submerged form even in moralities that seem only dubiously compatible with it.

A few brief examples will have to suffice: there are simply too many I could list. For example, in 'A Short Essay on the Golden Rule', ethicist Harry Gensler writes,

"The golden rule is endorsed by all the great world religions; Jesus, Hillel, and Confucius used it to summarize their ethical teachings. And for many centuries the idea has been influential among people of very diverse cultures... These facts suggest that the golden rule may be an important moral truth."

In fact, Gensler argues that an awareness of the Golden Rule is the most important practical resource for the performance of ethical thinking. Likewise, theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg in 'When Everything is Permitted' (*First Things* 80), calls this kind of 'rule of mutuality' a basic concept of the natural law. Multiculturalism advocates also proudly cite the Golden Rule as the lynchpin of universal morality: the Scarborough Interfaith Mission presents what it perceives to be Golden Rule variations in twenty-one religious traditions from around the world (see later for some of them). It is also advocated by experts in moral education. For instance, in *Moral Education: Theory and Application* (eds Berkowitz & Oser, 1985), Thomas Lickona writes,

"in a pluralistic society, respect for persons is common moral ground. It is something that all people, regardless of what else they believe, can agree on. Indeed, the best-known expression of the principle of respect – the Golden Rule – can be found in religions and traditions all over the world."

We can detect the Golden Rule in various forms even in ethical reflection of the most scholarly kind. For instance, it is not hard to see that it re-emerges as essential components of things such as John Rawls' 'veil of ignorance' and Jürgen Habermas' 'U' principle. Golden Rule Universalism is also commonly disseminated in the press. For instance, we find Heather MacDonal of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Studies announcing in *USA Today* for Oct 23rd, 2006, "The Golden Rule and innate human empathy provide ample guidance for moral behavior." She goes on to argue that from these two things essential moral principles "are available to people of all faiths or no faith at all."

Thus Golden Rule Universalism is a recurrent theme. Clearly there are large numbers of intelligent people operating under the assumption that something like the Golden Rule provides the essential core of a universal morality. It is hard, then, to fault the ordinary person for believing likewise.

The Universality of the Golden Rule

That many people from a variety of situations seem intuitively to have discovered the values articulated by the Golden Rule would seem to imply that the Rule is not the exclusive possession of one culture or of a group of cultures, but taps into a universal moral recognition. At the very least, the Golden Rule seems to address the very widespread tendency to think that morality means *equity*: that everyone should be treating everyone else in the same way. Perhaps even if we agree upon nothing else, we can be said to agree upon this rule. This might well prove to be our moral salvation in an increasingly complex and conflicted world.

But is it plausible to argue that the Golden Rule or some close variation of it articulates the hidden core of human morality at all times and in all places? In order to answer that, we must look more closely at the Golden Rule itself, especially at the variations it appears in in our major religious and philosophical traditions.

It becomes obvious immediately that no matter how wide-spread we want the Golden Rule to be, there are some ethical systems that we have to admit do not have it. In fact, there are a few traditions that actually *disdain* the Rule. In philosophy, the Nietzschean tradition holds that the virtues implicit in the Golden Rule are antithetical to the true virtues of self-assertion and the will-to-power. Among religions, there are a good many that prefer to emphasize the importance of self, cult, clan or tribe rather than of general others; and a good many other religions for whom large populations are simply excluded from goodwill, being labeled as outsiders, heretics or infidels.

Humanist George Bernard Shaw also had no affection for the Rule. He famously (and paradoxically) quipped, "The Golden Rule is that there is no golden rule." Shaw believed that to assert any universal moral principle was to deprive the individual of the chance to form his or her own morality.

Therefore, there are some views of morality that simply exclude the Golden Rule. But perhaps it would be unfair to say that this fact alone militates against our belief in the universality of the Golden Rule. Perhaps we can say that although there are *marginal* traditions that reject the Golden Rule, the *bigger* and *more important* traditions embrace it.

Two Distinct Forms of the Golden Rule

So let's consider some articulations of the Golden Rule as it appears in the various major religious traditions, and see how well we can get this last idea to work. Firstly, of course, there is the best-known account of the Golden Rule in the West. Here Jesus says, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." Below is a list of some other articulations of this idea:

- 1) Buddhism: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." (*Udana-Varga* 5:18)
- 2) Confucianism: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." (*Analects* 15:23)
- 3) Hinduism: "This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." (*Mahabharata* 5:1517)
- 4) Humanism: "Don't do things you wouldn't want to have done to you." (The British Humanist Society)
- 5) Islam: "None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." (#13 of Imam Al-Nawawi's *Forty Hadiths*.)
- 6) Jainism: "A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated." (*Sutrakritanga* 1.11.33)
- 7) Judaism: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (*Leviticus* 19:18)
- 8) Zoroastrianism: "That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself." (*Dadistan-i-dinik* 94:5)

(Quotations selected from the Scarboro Missions list.)

This provides us with a good sample of at least some of the major equivalents of the Golden Rule. Since the wording of each is somewhat different, we can begin by saying that probably the outstanding feature is that they all seem to suggest that there is some kind of relationship between how we ought to treat others and what we would wish for ourselves. Superficially, this might lead us to think these injunctions all amount

to the same thing. But look again. Reading carefully, we will note that some of these statements appear in a positive form ('Do...') and some appear in a *negative* form ('Do not do...'). Jesus' version, plus numbers 5, 6 and 7, might be called positive, whereas all the rest are in the negative form.

Considering the Negative Golden Rule

Does it make a difference? Some people argue that the two types of versions are functionally the same thing. But they are not. Consider, for instance, that your children are fighting and you say to them, "Leave each other alone!" This would be the negative commandment. On the other hand, "Be nice to your sibling!" would be the positive commandment. Anyone who has had children (or siblings) will quickly recognize that it is easier to enforce commands *in the negative* (ie not to do things) than it is to enforce commands *in the positive* (ie to do something).

This difference is substantial, and we can see how it works out in practice. If we have only a negative duty, an obligation to avoid harming people, that can be construed as imposing minimal obligations. We simply are not allowed to do anything actively harmful – anything additional is left to our discretion. In fact, the *negative* version may be fulfilled (if we wish to construe it that way) simply by *ignoring* our neighbor, for as long as we are not directly implicated in his harm, we have not transgressed the negative version of Golden Rule ethics.

This negative version of the Golden Rule is particularly minimal if we happen to be among those millions of people in the world who believe that a person's lot in life, even his suffering, is caused by fate or *karma*: to 'not do harm' might then mean that we have a duty to leave him alone. Perhaps we might think it is in his ultimate best interest to suffer, and thereby to achieve his penance, enlightenment, or *moksha*. To be sure, we might not see things this way, and we might decide to help the sufferer. But – and here is the key point – under the negative version of the Golden Rule we would have no *obligation* to help him.

The Positive Version

The positive version of the Golden Rule has somewhat different implications. Under it, we would be obliged to help a sufferer, on the assumption that if we ourselves were suffering we would want to be helped. Actually, ultimately the positive version imposes a burden on us to bring others up to whatever standard of well-being we would wish for ourselves. Of the three positive versions we have listed, 6 and 7 make this most clear, but 5 could also imply it.

Inevitably, this points to a supplementary problem. If it is our duty to 'love' our 'neighbor' (version 7) or our 'brother' (version 5), then we might well ask, "Who is my 'neighbor'?" or "Who is my 'brother'?" Does it only include people of our own kind who live close to us and with whom we have natural sympathies? Or does it include people who live in distant lands, and whose suffering thus seems remote and unreal? Does it include men and women; children; people of a different tribe or language? Does it include those who deny our cultural or religious traditions? Does it include criminals, the unborn or the physically challenged? Thus one problem with even the *positive* version of the Golden Rule is that it is escapable depending upon who one identifies as the entitled recipient of the goodwill.

This problem arose when the Christian version was first articulated. A young scholar of the Jewish religious Law approached Jesus and asked him what he would have to do if he was to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied, quoting, among other things, the Judaic Golden Rule. But the passage says that the law student, wishing to justify himself, asked “And who is my neighbor?” – to which Jesus told the famous ‘Good Samaritan’ parable in reply (see *Luke* 10:29). The problem highlighted by the young scholar is that people can still find an escape-clause from the *positive* version of the Golden Rule by choosing not to see someone as a ‘neighbor’.

Can the Positive Golden Rule Work?

Any rule, golden or otherwise, that demands no more than ignoring one’s neighbor (ie, the *negative* version) has a doubtful claim to reflect the essential core of human morality. It would be only marginally better if it were improved to the point that it mandated goodwill only to a select membership, not to the human race at large (ie a limited *positive* version). Yet perhaps we still have a way to save the Golden Rule. Let us suppose that, as suggested earlier, we eliminated all those peripheral moral systems that reject the Golden Rule outright; and furthermore, that we add the claim (though it seems rather snobbish to say it) that traditions that have only the negative form of the Golden Rule are possessed of only *part* of the essential core of morality. But perhaps that is fair, and they are capable of taking the next step, and converting to a positive view of the Golden Rule. If, then, we could get all *major* religious and philosophical traditions to admit the validity of the positive Golden Rule, could we at last say we had discovered a secure core for a universal morality?

That might initially sound plausible. Perhaps we can get people to see that we owe our neighbor whatever we would wish for ourselves. Some Golden Rule advocates call this ‘reciprocity’. Reciprocity means equal give and return. It views morality as a balanced equation, in which a person who receives the benefit of a moral action has a responsibility to respond in kind. Such moral treatment of others requires things like being fair, equitable or even-handed. It means ‘I’m-okay-if-you’re-okay’, or ‘you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours’. Reciprocal responsibility between citizens sounds like a pretty good way to run a society, especially a liberal democracy, at first.

However, there are good reasons to suspect reciprocity will not work on its own. Many aspects of society cannot work on simply an equitable give-and-take basis: something higher and much more morally demanding is involved in maintaining a society. Societies require the principle of *sacrifice*.

This will come as no surprise to anyone who has been married, or who has had children. Marriages simply do not function unless the partners are prepared to make sacrifices without expectation of return, and children certainly cannot be expected to repay the sacrifices parents find it necessary to make in raising them. Those who have been in a serving profession – a teacher, a cleric, a doctor, a charity worker, a counselor, or even a politician (sometimes) – know that

their profession could not continue without what they contribute to the public welfare without expectation of reciprocity. A society cannot survive without the things people do while not demanding that society should equitably repay them. But if reciprocity is not enough to ground a society, we can hardly argue that it represents the essential core of human morality.

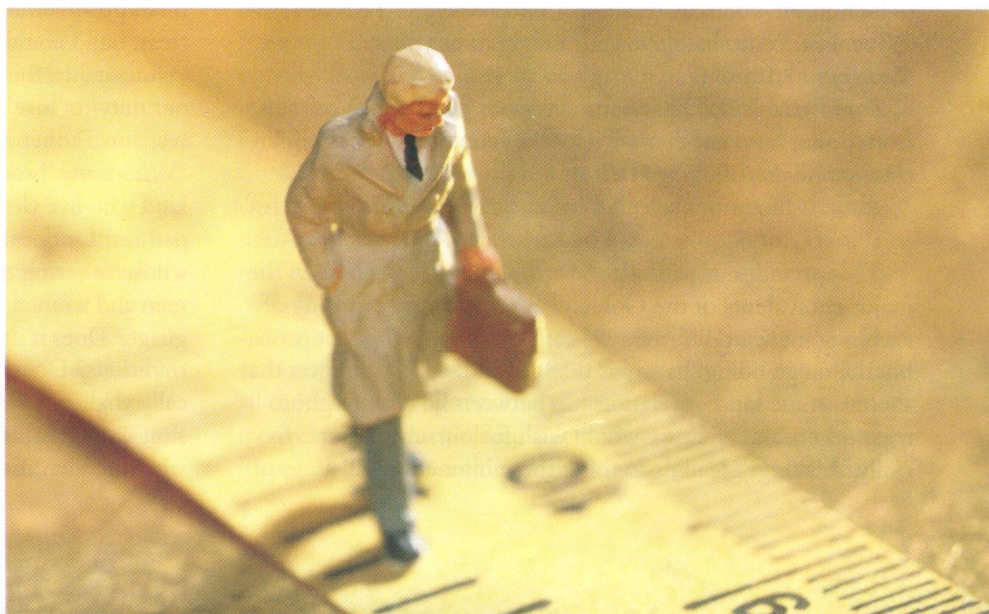
No principle of equity would be sufficient to make people see the value of sacrifice. Rather, they need a reason to accept *inequity*. They must be content to render, for the good of others, things that cannot be returned. The very height of this behavior is the one who, like a soldier in a good cause, lays down his life in order that others may live freely. Such we regard nearly as moral ‘saints’.

The Platinum Rule

There is even a level of morality above the level of simple sacrifice. Sacrifice for an acknowledged cause may have some attractions. Yet what about those who make sacrifices for those whom they do not know, or even for those who are, on some level, their enemies? Perhaps we would have to call the principle behind such sacrifices *the Platinum Rule*, for it seems so far above even the positive articulation of the Golden Rule that most of us find it hard to imagine. Yet it’s found in our moral traditions; for instance as, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” (*Matthew* 5:43-45.)

I think anyone who views the case objectively must admit that this principle of sacrifice represents a higher moral value than the *laissez-faire* attitude of the Golden Rule in its negative form, and a higher moral value than the reciprocity principle of its positive form as well. The chief criticism that can be raised against the Platinum Rule is that it requires more than most of us are able to deliver. However, that may say less about the Platinum Rule than about human nature.

Nevertheless, the Platinum Rule has influenced at least one modern political project, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This aspires to transcend the reciprocal idea of *justice*, and to orient a solution to the higher values of *mercy* and *forgiveness*. Given that injustice and inequality have been so rife in modern history, it may never be possible to restore justice to our world through any principle of reciprocity. In such conditions, the higher principles of the Platinum Rule may offer the only hope, as it did in South Africa.



Judaism

What is hateful to you,
do not do to your neighbour.
This is the whole Torah;
all the rest is commentary.

Shabbath 31a

Christianity

Thou shalt love thy
neighbour as thyself.

Leviticus 19:18

Hinduism

This is the sum of duty:
do not do to others
what would cause pain
if done to you.

Mahabharata 5: 1517

Confucianism

Do not do to others
what you do not want
done to yourself.

Analects 15:23

Taoism

Regard your neighbour's gain
as your own gain
and your neighbour's loss
as your own loss.

*T'ai Shang Kan Ying Pien,
213-218*

Buddhism

Treat not others in ways
that you yourself
would find hurtful.

Udana-Varga 5:18

Islam

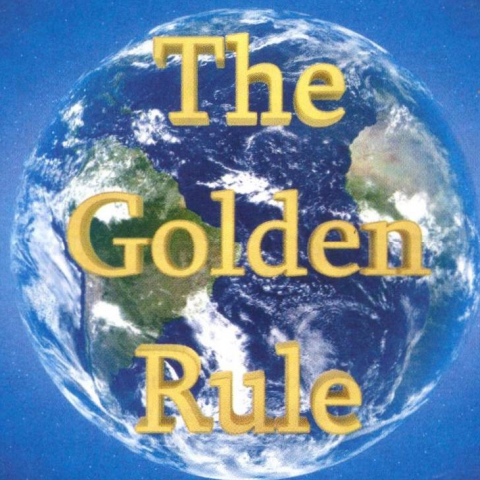
Not one of you truly believes
until you wish for others
what you wish for yourself.

The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith

Sikhism

I am a stranger to no one;
and no one is a stranger to me.
Indeed, I am a friend to all.

Guru Granth Sahib



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Concluding Concerns

Several things become apparent even from this brief survey of the Golden Rule:

- It is not actually universal.
- It has two forms, negative and positive.
- The two forms create very different results.
- Both forms fall short of requiring the sacrifices society needs.
- Neither form represents the highest moral standards.

At this point perhaps I may be accused of having a spoilsport disposition, for casting doubt upon a rule of life so widely celebrated, thus chipping away at a source of common moral optimism. I can only reply that it should be a source of wonder that a belief so open to criticism should be so widely celebrated, adding that optimism is no virtue if glibly invested. If, as I have suggested, we stand in need of a core universal morality upon which we can base liberal democratic social projects, then we would be ill-advised to embrace a counterfeit; for counterfeits notoriously prove unreliable at the crucial moment. Thus the Golden Rule, in either its positive or negative articulations, cannot be the gold standard of moral behavior: it cannot support the things liberal democratic nations need in the 21st Century – like consensus on policy, general standards of justice, and a warrant for human rights. First, it is not universal; but even if it is generally reflected in all *major* cultures, the Golden Rule can still hardly be the core of all morality. It offers little resistance to weak, inconsistent or morally-questionable applications, and it fails to reflect our highest moral standards. Thus we should be concerned about the enthusiasm with which some people tend to embrace something like the Golden Rule as a cure-all for the

modern problems of value pluralism; and we should wonder what that tendency tells us about our unwillingness to squarely face the fact that cultures have disharmonious moral styles. It is true that if we could find a universal rule of morality – something *like* the Golden Rule – it would help us resolve a great many serious moral and political problems. But the fact remains that the Golden Rule is very clearly *not* the core of morality, and yet it has been embraced as such nonetheless.

Moreover, whatever advantages to democratic politics may come from Golden Rule universalism, it also has an insidious side. Its subtext is the denial of the unique moral contributions of diverse societies in the name of creating superficial harmony. We may well doubt that people who indwell particular cultural/religious traditions and who have long labored under the impression that they have unique moral positions to contribute to humanity would be happy to hear that they have been wrong, and that their whole heritage can be boiled down to the same thing as everyone else's. We might also have a hard time convincing them that our attitude was not born more of cultural tone-deafness than of tolerance.

The arguments here against Golden Rule universalism are obvious ones. Very clearly, we *ought* to know better, but we appear to have a strong emotional stake in *not* knowing better. Our refusal to face this has to be troubling to any rational person, and a source of concern to anyone genuinely interested in pursuing mutual understanding in a pluralistic world.

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