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The Golden Rule

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The Golden Rule

“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” Often referred to as the Golden Rule or the Ethic of Reciprocity, this ecumenical moral principle implores adherents to contemplate the feelings and preferences of fellow human beings before acting. Although the rule finds its prominence in Christian theology through the teachings of Jesus, its origin can be traced back to the Hindu tradition and a pronouncement circa 3,000 BC: “This is the sum of duty. Do not unto others that which would cause you pain if done to you.”

The Golden Rule is contained within the ethical systems of many of the world’s most prominent religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism. Alongside these world religions, many prominent thinkers also incorporate the Golden Rule into their philosophies. Plato, for instance, stated: "May I do to others as I would that they should do unto me" while Socrates urged, "Do not do to others that which would anger you if others did it to you." The philosopher Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative disallows personal exceptions unless the same exception can be made for all others in similar situations without an irrational result. Similarly to the Golden Rule, this Kantian categorical imperative requires people to think of others as ends instead of a means to an end and also about the consequences stemming from actions. Finally, from a purely secular viewpoint, both anthropology and psychology can claim a non-religiously-motivated origination of the concept of the Golden Rule. An anthropologist may argue that the rule is a cultural variation of the underlying human relationship principle of social reciprocity and that this principle has defined human organizations and human interaction for centuries. Correspondingly, a

psychologist may argue that the reciprocity urged by the rule is merely reflects the behavioral-cognitive trait of empathy.

But why is the Golden Rule compelling as a moral principle? The morality or immorality underlying a proposed action is not always apparent and such unanalyzed uncertainty often leads people to act without moral clarity. The Golden Rule is compelling as a moral principle because it requires an actor to undertake a comprehensive ethical analysis before acting. First, the actor must analyze the potential consequences of the contemplated action on the primary recipient and assess how the actor would feel if the roles of actor and recipient were reversed. Second, the actor must look beyond the immediate recipient to others who may be remotely affected and assess how the actor would feel if the roles were again reversed. Because the Golden Rule is a moral principle and not a comprehensive ethical system this sequential thought process will not result in a determination as to whether any particular action is moral or immoral. Such contemplation of consequences will, however, allow people to monitor their actions to determine whether they are acting in a manner consistent with their morals and, theoretically, lead them towards taking moral actions. The application of the rule also allows adherents to more clearly see the commonalities between themselves and others.

The Golden Rule has two common formulations – a positive formulation and a negative formulation. The positive formulation requires people to “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” In other words, this formulation tells people what they should do. The negative formulation of the rule – often referred to as the Silver Rule – is formulated “Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.” In other words, this formulation tells

people what they should not do. While certain adherents claim that each formulation captures a different moral principle other adherents claim that the Golden and Silver Rules encompass the same moral principle and need not be bifurcated.

Analyzing the Golden Rule

The Golden Rule is deceptively simplistic. Literally, the rule requires an actor to treat others in the same way that the actor would want to be treated in a similar situation. Such a literal reading of the rule raises two key interpretative questions. First, who are the “others?” Are they comprised only of members of a specific faith community or members of humanity in general? Second, must an adherent strive only to do good or must the same person also strive to avoid evil even though such avoidance of evil is not specifically mentioned in the rule? To address these issues, the Golden Rule has been subjected to the following distinctions: (1) the Complete versus Partial Distinction and (2) the Inclusive versus Selective Distinction.

The Complete Distinction requires adherents to abide by both the positive and the negative formulations of the rule. In other words, an actor must strive to both do good and avoid evil when acting. The Partial Distinction, on the other hand, only requires adherents to abide by the negative formulation of the rule. Therefore, actors must avoid hurting others through their actions but have no obligation to affirmatively help others. This distinction requires adherence to the Silver Rule and not the Golden Rule in its positive formulation.

The Inclusive Distinction of the Golden Rule requires adherents to treat all of humanity – not merely members of a specific faith community – in accordance with the rule. This inclusive

interpretation can be accompanied by adherence to either the Complete or Partial Distinction of the rule. The Selective Distinction, on the other hand, interprets the rule in such a way that it only applies to a select class of people and not to humanity in general. For example, a Christian adhering to the selective version of the rule need only treat other Christians – or possibly only members of a particular Christian denomination – in accordance with the Golden Rule. The Selective Distinction can be accompanied by adherence to either the Complete or Partial Distinction of the rule.

Criticism of the Golden Rule

The Golden Rule – despite its broad theological, philosophical and secular acceptance – faces two prominent criticisms: (1) the Social Norms problem and (2) the Social Rules problem.

The Social Norms problem results when an action violates a social norm but is nevertheless acceptable under the rule because the actor would not object to the same action if the roles were reversed. For example, an employee enjoying situations where other employees start frivolous arguments – completely unrelated to an employment relationship – acts in compliance with the rule by starting non-work-related frivolous arguments with other employees. Such argument-starting violates the generally-accepted social norm that it is impolite to start frivolous arguments with others in the workplace while at the same time apparently complying with the Golden Rule.

The Social Rules problem results when a person commits any act that violates an established social rule – such as a state or federal statute – and would not object to a similar violation if roles were reversed. For example, assume that an actor offers non-public investment information to a

friend in the form of a stock tip and that the offeror would want, or even expect, the friend to reciprocate if roles were reversed. At this point, the offeror is acting in accordance with the Golden Rule but in violation of state and federal law.

Rule adherents argue that the critics' interpretations of the rule violate its spirit; a spirit requiring an actor to consider two aspects neglected by the two problematic actors above: (1) the dignity and consent of all recipients and (2) the secondary recipients as represented by societal segments and not just individuals. Therefore, in the argumentative employee example above, the actor would not adhere to the spirit of the rule by starting frivolous arguments because this action does not take into account the dignity and consent of the recipient – an individual who would not likely endorse this social norm violation. Just as a rational actor would not tolerate invasions of personal dignity and consent, such an actor should not treat others in an undignified and non-consensual manner. As for the insider trading example, actors must consider that company stockholders are also indirectly affected by this insider stock tip. Therefore, assuming a role reversal, the actor must ponder a reaction as a stockholder harmed by insider trading and not just as the recipient of inside information. With this in mind, proponents argue that both the Social Norms Problem and the Social Rules Problem would be eliminated if actors complied with the spirit and not merely the literal interpretation of the Golden Rule.

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See also:

➤ Business Ethics and Religion

- Christian Ethics
- Divine Command Theory
- Equality
- Jewish Ethics
- Moral Rules
- Spirituality in the Workplace

Further Readings and References:

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