

That Fallacious 'Golden Rule'

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Humanist Dilemmas I

Francis Bennion is author of The Sex Code: Morals for Moderns. Here he starts a series in which he considers moral questions for humanists.

I must decide each moment what to do next. Wishing to be good, I yearn to decide as I ought. I want to guide my children to do the same.

For all this I need help: none of us can puzzle everything out alone. If we try to be so cockily self-sufficient, we make avoidable errors. They are avoidable because other people have already made them, and unavoidably left records of the fact. We escape the infliction of pain on ourselves by learning the lesson of its earlier infliction on another. Let the mistakes that matter to me be someone else's, then the pains will be theirs too.

Yet people try to keep mistakes to themselves, for they are seldom proud of them. Even where they are known and written about, the writing may not come my way. If it does come my way, I may not feel like troubling myself to read and absorb it.

So what I yearn for is a simple, straightforward, once-for-all rule of thumb that amounts to a rule of life. This will tell me at each moment what to do, and relieve me of the agonies of moral choice.

Some think they have found that boon in the so-called Golden Rule. All European languages know this as a rule of conduct. It was laid down in the New Testament: whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so to them. It is found earlier in Confucius and ancient Greece and Rome. Lord Chesterfield said: do as you would be done by. The W. C. Fields version is: do unto others before they do unto you.

Barbara Smoker, President of the National Secular Society, calls the Golden Rule good reciprocal utilitarian morality. She believes it to be an excellent guide in the maze of ethical dilemma, the soundest moral principle there is. It has been adopted by the humanist movement generally. Many think it 'all you need to know about morality'.

So there you are. The Golden Rule enjoys support both from the religious and the irreligious. Have I then found the guidance I am seeking? Alas no.

The Golden Rule is a fallacy.

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Do as you would be done by, says the Golden Rule. How then would we be done by? Let us spell it out. The truth (if we could be persuaded to admit it) is that each and every one of us would want other people to treat us royally. Let them shower love, riches and honours upon us. It is only what we deserve.

We would each desire, if our inmost wishes were known, to be the most cosseted and adored creature on earth. We want to be respected more than anyone else, to have more power than anyone else, to have first priority if we are sick, the best seat at every spectacle, the best suite in whichever luxury hotel we choose to patronise at any time anywhere on the globe's surface. Minions, wherever we chance to be, must be present in multitudes to kow-tow and

bow down to us. They should, *always without secretly mocking*, defer to our every word and whim. It is, after all, no more than our due.

We want the handsomest and cleverest man or woman as our lover, the finest palace as our residence, the most amusing and faithful creature as our devoted steadfast friend, the trustiest servitor as the chief of our body-slaves. Nothing, in our own humble opinion, is too good for us.

That is how we would be done by. *That* is why we ‘invest’ in the pools, or the Irish Sweep, or the premium bond, or the *Sun* Tringo-Bingo, or the latest piece of Government privatisation. One and all, we want to be winners. We are meritorious; and that is what we merit.

If in this way I wish all other people to give *me* the best, how can it be my rule of life to give each of *them* the best? The best can be for the very few only, or it must cease to be the best. Preferably it is for me alone!

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We might try to rescue the Golden Rule by expressing it differently. Suppose we introduce the concept of reasonableness. It is plainly unreasonable to expect everyone in the world to treat *me* better than they treat anyone else. Could it be a useful rule of conduct to say *do as you might reasonably expect to be done by*?

Alas no. It is *reasonable* to expect other people to treat us badly. They so often do.

Suppose then we make the rule say *treat other people in the way that it is reasonable for them to treat you*. All we have then is a rule of conduct that is a long-winded way of saying *behave reasonably*. While admirable in its way, this maxim is of little practical use.

Confucius dealt with the problem by framing the Golden Rule negatively. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others. Or as Thomas Hobbes put it: do not that to another which thou wouldst not have done to thyself.

In this form the rule is merely a precept against evil doing. It possesses some small value, but nothing like as much as a positive rule of life would have if only it were genuine. Furthermore it is in some applications deceptive. As a guide to the administration of justice for example. (If I have done wrong I may have a strenuous and earnest desire to avoid punishment, yet nevertheless richly deserve it.)

Suppose we put the Golden Rule in another New Testament form: thou shalt *love* thy neighbour as thyself. Is this any more practical?

Not for mortals who are unable to be saints. While I should have goodwill towards everyone, I am not capable of *loving* more than a very few. To pretend otherwise is to debase the meaning of human love. Slice yourself too thin, said Alex Haley, and pretty soon you’ll have nothing.

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In small, clearly-defined matters, the Golden Rule can be a help. If a letter addressed to Hoskins is mistakenly delivered to Haskins, he can do nothing or readdress it. If Haskins thinks for a moment of how much he would hope that Hoskins would readdress a letter of his delivered to Hoskins by mistake, he may be spurred to make the slight effort involved in doing the decent thing and redirecting.

Whether I do such a thing or not will depend on whether it pleases me to do good. I am not to be coerced into goodness by fear of divine retribution (since I have no such fear). Therefore I shall not be good unless I enjoy it - or there is some realistic human sanction against not

doing good. We are not here discussing the case where there is a human sanction, such as a legal penalty. The Golden Rule is about *altruism*, or good conduct in the abstract. It is not a Criminal Code, or it would need to be much more detailed. (Perhaps lack of detail *is* its great defect.)

But there is no such thing as altruism: it is an invention of Auguste Comte's.

If, not being under compulsion, I do you a good turn it is to please myself. I do it because it makes me feel good to do you a good turn. It makes me feel bad to see you suffer. I enjoy your expressions of gratitude, and like basking in the approbation of those who witness my good deed. I might even get an Honour from the Queen for it, if it is repeated often enough (and someone influential happens to be watching).

Some do good by stealth. They are not altruists either. It is merely that they are more sensitive. They fear that a witness would say what is said here: he only does it to get praise.

Who does good by stealth is content with *self* praise. That is not the worst kind. Nor is it the least potent.

The self-praiser hugs himself to think how virtuous he is. It is not the worst kind of hug. To devote yourself on principle to furthering the good of others as your highest moral obligation is to realize, not sacrifice, yourself. Stop feeling so guilty.

While altruism and self-sacrifice do not exist, it is for the good of society that people should act as if they did exist. People will then treat each other better. For the common good, we should aim to be generous. We should seek to do much more than the minimum for our fellows. Never mind what our motives are. Let us light with our own small flame a fragment of the murky landscape that engulfs us.

How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

To accomplish this, having learnt what lessons we can, we must use our own judgement in each circumstance that befalls. There are no short cuts to goodness. A large spirit does not flourish on the paltry rule of thumb.

This brings us to yet another defect of the so-called Golden Rule: it is value free. What I would like done to me is not necessarily what my neighbour would like done to him or her. It depends on our respective systems of values. If I am a good Muslim who has written *The Satanic Verses* I would like someone to be kind enough to shoot me. My neighbour Salman Rushdie does not reciprocate this wish.

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So where does all that leave the Golden Rule? My hope is that the reader will feel it leaves it shattered in pieces. The Golden Rule, said George Bernard Shaw, is that there are no golden rules. What does exist is moral philosophy. Aristotle called for 'Practical Wisdom' by very detailed arguments. Kant expressed his categorical imperative concisely, but accompanied it by a great deal of explanation. Rawls spelt out his universal position at considerable length. None of the great moral philosophers was concerned to provide any kind of rule of thumb, for life isn't that easy.

So let Humanists stop pinning their faith on the Golden Rule and start studying moral philosophy in earnest. Then Humanist ethics might start to mean something, and the public at large might come to respect Humanists more than they seem to do now.

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