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Shining Ideal and Uncertain Reality: Commentaries on the “Golden Rule” in Confucianism and Other Traditions

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Abstract

This paper considers a number of problematic issues underlying the seemingly unassailable truth of moral philosophy expressed in the “Golden Rule” in a variety of cultural spheres. These issues include the place of this teaching within its given religious or philosophical context, the defense of this principle as an inviolable tenet of revealed dogma or as a piece of utilitarian advice for the regulation of social life, the manner in which the precise rhetorical structure of a given formulation reflects the specific intellectual underpinnings of its cultural milieu, claims of universal validity as a statement of moral truth for all men and all time or as a culture-specific value understood to apply exclusively within a particular religious community, and modes of commentarial expansion by scriptural exegetes and textual scholiasts seeking to ground this teaching within the logic of philosophical or theological discourse. After outlining several points of uncertainty that emerge in the context of transferring the ideal of human empathy to the messy reality of concrete existence, we then turn to a number of attempts by leading commentators in the Confucian, rabbinic, and other scholastic traditions to grapple with these contradictions and to reconcile them within the framework of their respective value systems.

Keywords

cultural comparison – Confucianism – Golden Rule – Judaism

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In this study, I consider a number of problematic issues lurking beneath the seemingly unassailable truth of moral philosophy expressed in the “Golden Rule” in a variety of cultural spheres. After giving an outline of certain points of uncertainty that emerge in the context of transferring the shining ideal of human empathy to the messy reality of concrete existence, I then consider a number of attempts by leading commentators in the Confucian, rabbinic, and other scholastic traditions to grapple with these contradictions and to reconcile them within the framework of their respective value systems.

Basic Issues

The expression “Golden Rule” has come into use in various modern European languages over the past few centuries as a popular reference to the dictum: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” best known in Western culture from its formulation in the New Testament.¹ Identical or similar axioms of moral behavior are nearly universal, however, appearing in a wide variety of cultural contexts from oral folk wisdom to ancient scriptural and philosophical writings. The written canonic versions most frequently cited as explicit or implicit examples of golden-rule thinking include those found in early Jewish sources, both in the Mishnaic and Talmudic corpus (Mishna-Avot [Pirquei-Avot] 2:13-17; Babylonian Talmud: Shabbat 31a) and in the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature (e.g., Ben Sira 31:15; Jubilees 36:8; Tobit 4:15); additional passages in the New Testament (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14; Acts 15:20 [Western recension, codex D]); Koranic and post-Koranic Muslim teachings (Sura 83: “The Deceivers” [At-Taṭfif, or Al-Muṭaffifin]; Al-Nawawi, *Forty Hadith* 13; Ibn Al-Arabi, “Instructions to a Postulant” [*Risāla . . . l'il murīd*]); classical Greek and Latin texts (e.g., Plato, *Republic*, 443d; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 9:8; Isocrates, “To Nicocles” 61b; “To Demonicus” 14, 17); sacred precepts imparted in the Udyoga and Anuṣasana sections of the Sanskrit epic Mahābharata;² and comparable pronouncements in the Zoroastrian Avesta³ the Buddhist Dhammapada,⁴ Jain Āgamas: Sutrakritanga⁵ and other sutras, the Baha’i scriptures (Kitab-i aqdas 148); as well as striking parallels in the *Analects*⁶ and other

1 Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12.

2 Mahābharata 5:39:57, 13:114:8.

3 Dadestan-i denig 94:5, Shayest na-shayest 37:51.

4 Dhammapada 10:129-130.

5 Āgamas: Sutrakritanga 1:10:13, 1:11:33.

6 *Analects*, 4:15, 5:12, 15:23.

works of the Confucian canon (*Daxue* 10:2, *Mencius* 7:A:4, *Zhongyong* 13:3—to name just a few).

Occurrences in these and other traditions can be multiplied virtually without limit, inasmuch as statements preaching a basic consideration for the feelings of others—in ideal conception, if not in common practice—are all but self-evident in human culture, reflecting both the fundamental imperatives of social organization and a deeply ingrained, though regularly ignored, instinct of empathy for fellow members of the species. However, many apparently parallel statements about elementary human decency are simply too vague or sweeping to support detailed comparison, while others may have been taken out of their original contexts and put forward as equivalent teachings by apologists keen on defending the validity of one ethical system or another. In order to properly assess the cultural and religious significance of various golden-rule formulations, therefore, it is vital to scrutinize them from the perspective of a number of specific variables and issues:

- The place of this teaching within its given religious or philosophical context: does it simply describe a commendable mode of behavior, or is it enshrined as the central pillar of an entire moral edifice?
- The defense of this principle in the face of abundant evidence of its non-observance in human conduct: is it taken a priori as an inviolable tenet of revealed dogma, or is it proposed as a piece of utilitarian advice for the successful regulation of social life? Does it merely enjoin a correct attitude toward one's fellow man, or does it require one to translate these feelings into the praxis of concrete acts?
- The manner in which the precise rhetorical structure of a given formulation reflects the specific intellectual underpinnings of its cultural milieu: is it presented as an incontestable point of doctrine, or is it put forward as a polemical position or a defensive response within a context of moral disputation? Is its verbal form, especially its framing in either positive or negative grammatical terms, simply an aspect of literary style, or does its linguistic mode of presentation correspond to deep-seated assumptions about the moral ground of the human condition and the possibility of man's spiritual perfection?
- Claims of universal validity: is a certain culture-specific version held to be a statement of moral truth for all men and all time, or is it understood to apply exclusively within a particular religious community or sociohistorical context?
- Mutual influences and borrowing: does a given citation represent an independent enunciation of the principle, or can it be traced back to a chain of inherited sources or to ur-texts shared with other traditions?

- Commentarial expansion: how do scriptural exegetes and textual scholiasts seek to elucidate the message of empathetic self-projection expressed in canonic teachings and to ground this in the logic of philosophical or theological discourse?

The Golden Rule as the Core of Morality

What makes various “Golden Rule” formulations in different cultures not simply shining precepts of moral excellence but truly *golden*—in the sense of setting the highest standard of moral value—is the explicit claim that the exhortation to treat one’s fellow man by the same criteria of behavior that one wishes to enjoy oneself constitutes the essential core of an entire system of belief. For example, the unmistakable echo heard in Hillel the Elder’s folding of all of Jewish law into one succinct reply, while his questioner “stands on one foot” so to speak, as “What is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow man,”⁷ linking it with the language of slightly later enunciations of the same message in several New Testament passages, may reflect no more than direct borrowing or the use of common oral and written sources drawn from the fount of Eastern Mediterranean wisdom literature. But what gives this parallel its primary significance is the manner in which both the Jewish and the Christian versions go on to cite these gnomic statements as encapsulations of religious truth: “the entire Torah” in Hillel’s words and “the law and the prophets” in the Gospel refrain. Significantly, we observe very much the same impulse to elevate the Golden Rule to the status of an all-embracing universal principle in a wide variety of other cultural contexts, including a number of passages among the vast pool of edifying verses in the Mahābhārata identifying this teaching as the “essence” or the “summation” of the *dharma* (e.g., 5:15:17: “This is the sum of duty: Do naught unto others that would cause you pain if done to you”), Al-Nawawi’s blanket pronouncement that one who fails to observe this precept cannot be called a member of the Muslim community of the faithful,⁸ and the set of linked passages in the Confucian *Analects*⁹ that use words virtually identical to those of Hillel (“what is not desirable to you yourself do not do . . .”) to define the “single thread [binding all of Confucius’ thought] into a consistent whole.”

7 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a.

8 Hadith 13: “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”

9 *Analects*, 4:15, 5:12, 6:28, 12:2, 15:24.

In all these examples, it is noteworthy that what is claimed to be the “central thread” of the Golden Rule is reduced to a rather unexpected point of doctrine, one that seems to pass in silence over what we would otherwise regard as the indispensable teachings of the respective traditions: the creation of the world and the acceptance of the Lord’s commandments in Judaism, the unity and singularity of God in Islam, the ideals of virtuous rule and ritual order in Confucianism, or the metaphysical underpinnings of Hindu and Buddhist thought: spiritual liberation, enlightenment and nirvana, and the universal godhead. In many of these passages, therefore, one suspects that the citation of the Golden Rule as the ultimate ground of an entire body of moral teachings is pointedly intended to be provocative, its stark enunciation designed to shake listeners from complacent belief in their conventional articles of faith, and to force them to contemplate the core principle of primary human empathy underlying all ethical thinking. As a result, it is not surprising that in each of these respective scriptural traditions, legions of commentators—some of whom we consider below—have come forward to meet this intellectual and spiritual challenge, exercising their best exegetical skills in an attempt to reconcile the sublimely simple message of the Golden Rule with finer points of doctrine.

Rhetorical Forms and Contexts

With respect to the rhetorical articulation of golden-rule statements, the most commonly debated issue revolves around the use of positive or negative terms of discourse in different occurrences. Much ink and breath has been expended on arguing that these two alternative grammatical modes reflect profoundly different perspectives on the human condition. According to a widely held view, the framing of the precept in positive terms (“Do unto others . . .”) represents at once a more idealistic and a more demanding view of man’s capacity for altruistic behavior, setting standards of moral perfection that, if met, would amount to an *imitatio* of divine compassion. By this same reasoning, the negative formulation would seem to set the bar of moral expectation far lower, at the more “realistic” level of a covenant of non-intervention, requiring of people only that they refrain from aggressive and exploitative treatment of their fellows. In some discussions, however, these assumptions are reversed, and the point is made that basing one’s behavior toward others on what one wishes to receive in return, in a sense, turns the selfless empathy of the Golden Rule into a form of self-interest, at best; or that it may even give license to impose one’s own values and preferences on other people. Conversely, it may

be argued that the idea of mutual non-aggression, far from enjoining simple inaction or restraint, may be understood to sanction an even more open-ended commitment to the inviolability of individual rights.

Regardless of which of these views is upheld, when one surveys the full range of canonic golden-rule statements, one discovers that, typically, the selection of positive or negative verbal form is not set in stone, as a choice between mutually exclusive approaches to the principle of reciprocity in human relations. This observation becomes immediately clear when we note the inseparable connection drawn between the Golden Rule and the command to “love thy neighbor” in both testaments of the Bible (linked in the Gospels by direct textual contiguity¹⁰ and in the rabbinic tradition by virtually automatic exegetical association)—a point underlined by the fact that the original source text for this shared ideal of love for one’s fellow man at the heart of both testamental traditions, in Leviticus,¹¹ presents these words as the culmination of a series of negative ethical injunctions.¹² Moreover, even the uplifting note of positive exhortation in the Gospel versions of this teaching, often held to embody the purest expression of Christian love, did not prevent the early Church fathers from transposing the words recorded in Mark and Luke into negative formulations in certain other early Christian writings, e.g., Acts [Western recension, Codex D] 15:20, Didache 1:2 (“The way of life is this: First, you shall love God who made you. And second, *love your neighbor* as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you.”), and the *Apologia* of Aristides 15 (“whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others”). In the same spirit, we find in post-biblical Jewish texts such as the Mishna Avot (various implicit references) and Ben Sira 31:15 (“Recognize that your neighbor feels as you do, and keep in mind everything you dislike”) a fairly free alternation between positive and negative wording. The same is true of the terms of the Golden Rule enunciated in the Confucian *Analects*. The near-replication here of Hillel’s negative formulation may tend to lead certain Western observers to hasty conclusions regarding the practical, or “this-worldly,” character of traditional Chinese religious thinking—until one notices that this statement is conspicuously counterbalanced by a crucial passage in the *Mencius* 7A:4 (“If one acts with a vigorous effort at the law of reciprocity, when he seeks for the realization of perfect virtue, nothing can be closer than his approximation to it”), where a very positive rhetorical exhortation is used to enjoin concerted efforts to live by the ideal of reciprocal empathy (*shu* 恕).

10 Luke 13:37; Matthew 7:1-6.

11 Leviticus 19:18.

12 Leviticus 18:3-30, 19:4-17.

In weighing the significance of this point of textual analysis, therefore, it is crucial to distinguish between the purely linguistic choice of this or that mode of assertion and the deeper semantic grounding of positive and negative propositions regarding human perfectibility. Just as the negative language in certain Old Testament and Confucian versions in no way precludes a very positive moral signification, so, too, the parallels cited in Hindu texts as the “essence” of the *dharma* can be construed in this latter term's double sense of both a set of restrictive laws and rules of behavior and also a positive evocation of the entire structure of meaning in human existence. In all these examples, the notion that the “evil inclination,” sinful nature, or aggressive impulses of man require the coercive force of moral sanction to prevent mutual injury is in no way inconsistent with a concomitant faith in the spiritual power of primary human empathy. This is particularly clear in the later Confucian development of Mencius's vision of human interrelatedness, within which the all-embracing framework of prescriptive ritual observances is conceived as a modality for recovering and bringing to realization the inborn core of man's essential moral nature (*jinxin* 盡心 or *jinxing* 盡性).

A second rhetorical factor conditioning expressions of the wisdom of the Golden Rule in different cultures concerns the precise positioning of a given formulation within the broader context of intellectual discourse in which it figures. Thus, where the best known Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist versions present this precept as the foundation of universal moral law, we find a number of classical Greek and Latin sources statements of more or less equivalent import that tend to be uttered within the framework of discussions on the ideal fulfillment of human character, especially in connection with the classical ethical conceptions of temperance and moderation (*sophrosyne*) and spiritual well-being (*eudaimonia*). For example, expressions of the principle of reciprocity in Plato's *Republic*¹³ and *Gorgias*,¹⁴ and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*¹⁵ and *Nicomachean Ethics*¹⁶ are oriented more toward the perfection of the individual self than toward the reciprocal relation between man and man. In major works of Stoic philosophy, such as the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (e.g., 5:20, 7:19, 9:4, 11:1), this ideal of altruistic self-transcendence is cited, in a manner reminiscent of Mencius, as the mark of an individual's fullest attainment of harmony with nature.

13 *Republic*, 443d.

14 *Gorgias*, 507b.

15 *Rhetoric*, 1166-1167.

16 *Nicomachean Ethics*, 9:8.

In many passages, the wisdom of the Golden Rule seems to carry a markedly utilitarian message with reference to the ordering of specific sets of human relationships, as, for example, in the citation of this principle in the writings of Seneca¹⁷ with respect to the treatment of slaves (“But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters”), in the context of punishment in the Buddhist Dhammapada 10:129-130 (“All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill”), and honest measurement in the Koran,¹⁸ and in the preaching of kingly virtues in the “Letter to Aristeias” 207 included within the corpus of the Jewish apocrypha (“As you wish that no evil should befall you, but to be a partaker of all good things, so you should act on the same principle towards your subjects and offenders, and you should mildly admonish the noble and good”). Indeed, discussions of the “practical” implications of such teachings for the maintenance of primary social order constitute a central focus of more recent golden-rule discourse, from the classic analysis of the essential structure of power in works such as Hobbes’ *Leviathan*¹⁹ to Freud’s scathing critique of man’s hypocritical sacralization of his own self-interest in *Civilization and Its Discontents*.²⁰

Within the Greek vision of the maximum fulfillment of human capacity, this issue is commonly linked to the concept of justice, in the sense of the interpersonal balancing of conflicting needs and desires. In this light, certain negative formulations of the Golden Rule may be understood as mirror images of the concept of retributive justice, prescribing a sort of proactive or reactive payment in kind for undesirable behavior. In its starkest form, this type of interpretation may even be reduced to the unforgiving terms of the *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye”—in apparent opposition to the doctrine of compassionate forgiveness suggested by the textual contiguity of the Golden Rule to the Sermon on the Mount in its Gospel manifestations. But just as the literal application of the principle of retributive justice was replaced early on in Jewish law by the concept of mutual responsibility, “requiting love for love” (*gemilut chasadim*),

17 Epistles, 47:11.

18 Sura 83: “Woe to those who give less [than due], Who, when they take a measure from people, take in full. But if they give by measure or by weight to them, they cause loss. Do they not think that they will be resurrected?”

19 *Leviathan*, chap. 15.

20 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 21: 108-116.

so, too, in a famous passage in the *Analects*,²¹ Confucius is pictured as rejecting the idea of repaying injustice with justice (lit., “requiting injury with virtue”) on the grounds that this would constitute a breach of equity, preaching instead that one repay only virtuous behavior in kind, and respond to injury with the “correctness” of justice (*zheng* 正).

Metaphysical and Theological Implications

In a number of important canonic enunciations of the Golden Rule, both in scriptural and in commentarial writings, thinkers go beyond simply positing its wisdom as the central pillar of their respective ethical systems espousing consideration and justice toward one’s “neighbor” (variously construed as one’s fellow Jew, fellow members of the Muslim community of the faithful, and the like, or, in the broadest sense, all of one’s fellow human beings), and ascribe to this precept significance of a metaphysical or theological character. Thus, for example, an authoritative rabbinic commentary on the Leviticus injunction to “Love thy neighbor”²² cites this single verse as comprising the entire “book of the creation of man” (*sefer tol’dot ha’adam*). In certain formulations (e.g., the Jain *Sūtrakritāṅga*) the scope of application of the principle of universal empathy is expanded to a cosmic level, to take in all one’s fellow creatures, indeed all of creation, as coterminous with one’s own eternal self. This same exegetical impulse also finds expression in the philosophical writings of a number of later Confucian thinkers, among them Wang Yangming (王陽明, 1472-1529), who see in the moral message of the Golden Rule enunciated in the *Analects* a metaphysical identification with the “single body” (*yiti* 一體) of the entire universe. This understanding gives new meaning to Mencius’ attachment of his own positive formulation of the Golden Rule in chapter 7A to the startling proposition that “the ten thousand things are all within myself,” here not an expression of the vaunt of unbounded ego but, rather, a soaring affirmation of the innate moral core lodged within every human heart. This leap of faith, from basic human interrelatedness to a spiritual identification with all creation, may also help to explain the textual linkage in both Jewish and Christian scripture between the parallel commands to “love thy neighbor” and to “love thy God,” the same theological conception that finds expression in Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical extrapolation from the wisdom of the Golden Rule to the submission of man to the infinity of the divine will.

²¹ *Analects*, 14:34.

²² Palestinian Talmud, Nedarim 9:4.

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