

THE (NOT SO) GOLDEN RULE

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1. GENERAL PLATITUDES

TGR is, arguably, an example of a universal rule of morality *par excellence*. The Traditional Golden Rule (TGR) states "Treat others as you want to be treated" and is as ubiquitous as it is a *prima facie* simple principle to remember and follow.

We tend to believe things that are true. It is not a surprise that it is strange when we encounter someone who does not believe that " $1 + 1 = 2$," or "Slavery is wrong." Perhaps there is something to the ubiquitousness of TGR.

Platitudes: 1) It is everywhere. 2) TGR is universal, it applies to everybody. 3) It is easy to understand and follow.

2. WHY THIS RULE IS GOLDEN: J.C. MAXWELL

1) This is a literal version and is familiar. 2) Maxwell is well-known and influential.

1. The Golden Rule is accepted by most people.
2. The Golden Rule is easy to understand.
3. The Golden Rule is a win-win philosophy.
4. The Golden Rule is a compass when you need direction.

5. The Golden Rule should be accepted. (P. 18-23)

1. Widely accepted premise: "It is clear that the Golden Rule cuts across cultural and religious boundaries and is embraced by people from nearly every part of the world. It's the closest thing to a universal guideline for ethics a person can find" (p. 18).
2. Even a child can understand: "One of the wonderful things about the Golden Rule is that it makes the intangible tangible. You don't need to know the law. You don't need to explore [the] nuances of philosophy. You simply imagine yourself in the place of another person. Even a small child can get a handle on that" (P. 22).
3. There is no loser and there are no loopholes (P. 21-22).
4. Gives solid direction every time, it points in the same direction every time, and it actually works: "The Golden Rule can provide that [guidance]. It never changes, even as circumstances do. It gives a solid predictable direction every time it's used. And best of all, it actually works" (P. 23).

3. MAXWELL'S MISTAKES

Perhaps it seems like I'm swinging at some pretty low hanging fruit, here. 1) seen as an expert (\$1195), 2) lots of people swear by the TGR, 3) raises some serious philosophical issues.

1. Accept means many things. a) to recognize (weak sense), b) to believe that a proposition is true (strong sense), c) "to act in a (morally) relevant way commensurate with the recognition and belief in some proposition or state of affairs." (robust) (Flores, 2014) I argue that for Maxwell's claims to be meaningful, then he must mean c). But there is no evidence/proof/justification for believing c). (P. 103, Flores)
2. Exactly how easy is it to imagine yourself in the place of another? a) the phenomenological problem (the Malkovich Dilemma; p. 107, Flores), b) different meanings of what it means to be treated well, c) we don't all want to be treated well (even if there were a universal standard).
3. Mike the Molester. Isn't the world just a little more complicated than what Maxwell would have you think? Plus, is Maxwell doing philosophy?
4. A broken compass that points in the same direction regardless of situation: the geographical landscape is very different from the moral landscape. This is just a bad analogy.

4. A GOLDENER RULE: HARRY GENSLER

1. Gensler recognizes the obvious loophole that we all recognize. Two problems: a) difference of situations, b) defective desires: "To a violent little boy who loves to fight: If you want your sister to fight with you, then fight with her." (P. 83) And "I want to be tortured by X; therefore, I should torture X" (p. 87). Clearly wrong.
2. GGR "is about our *present reaction* to a hypothetical case. It isn't about how we would react if we were in the hypothetical case (P. 84)." (My emphasis)
3. Do not combine the following:
 - A) I do something to another
 - B) I am unwilling that this be done to me in the same situation.
4. *Treat others as you consent to being treated in the same situation* (P. 81).
Three Key Features:
 - 1) *same-situation* clause
 - 2) *present-attitude* clause
 - 3) a *don't combine* form.

So,

MODIFIED: *Treat others as you consent to being treated in a relevantly similar but hypothetical situation given your current beliefs and attitudes about that situation and relevant circumstances.* (Flores, P. 114)

The golden rule "is a consistency principle. It doesn't replace regular moral norms. It isn't an infallible guide on what is right or wrong. It only prescribes consistency – that we not have our actions (toward another) be out of harmony with our desires (about a reversed-situation action)" (P. 81)

5. GENSLER'S GAFFE

1. Same-situation clause. "Exactly similar situation" & "exact place". This is still a problem even if we are charitable (what we *think* is relevant to the situation).
"To apply the golden rule, we need to *know* what effect our actions have on the lives of others. And we need to *imagine* ourselves, vividly and accurately, in the other person's place on the receiving end of the action. When combined with knowledge and imagination, GR is a powerful tool of moral thinking." (P. 81 & 89)
2. GGR & TGR don't *do* anything. They don't say what specific acts to perform, it doesn't replace regular moral norms (ordinary moral principles (OMPs)). **P. 116. 1)** If our default positions are OMPs, then GGR is useless because OMPs already cover things. **2)** And, as far as being a consistency principle, a) all one needs is a good lesson is logic and some practice, and b) asking people to act in harmony with their beliefs and desires is a requirement that itself is already subject to moral inquiry.

6. TAKING STOCK

1. GGR & TGR captures the *spirit* of morality. I'll take what I can get.
2. Golden Rule is inherently selfish. Counterintuitive. But not always a bad thing. If we look at GR just right, then we can see that it would be difficult for me to help others, or to care about justice, or to consider the well-being of my neighbors and family if I did not attend to my own well-being.
3. Studying GR shows us that "The real world is a complicated mess. It turns out to be more complicated the more we know about it." (Hutteman, 2004; p. 96). Maxwell is just wrong about simplicity, here.
4. Studying the GR shows us that what is really at stake, what we are really interested in are OMPs. GR does not replace OMPs and we believe in them. This is, after all, the focus of ethics (as a discipline) and morality (as dogma). Our job is to keep pursuing the inquiry of the truth and falsity of OMPs. GR is just a red herring.

REFERENCES

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Gensler, Harry. *Ethics: a contemporary introduction*. 2nd Edition. Routledge (2011).

Maxwell, J. C. *Ethics 101: what every leader needs to know*. Center Street: New York (2005 [2003]).