

Reflections on the Golden Rule

Harry J. Gensler, S.J.

THE GOLDEN RULE (GR) says “Treat others as you want to be treated.” The idea is global. It’s common to all major world religions; Confucius, Hillel, Jesus, and others used it to sum up how to live. For centuries across the planet, it’s been important in families and professions, and in thinkers and cultures, both religious and non-religious. Today GR is part of a growing global-ethics movement.

I became a golden-rule junkie in 1968, after hearing a talk by the Oxford philosopher R.M. Hare. I went on to write a master’s thesis and then a doctoral dissertation on GR, and then many articles and parts of books. In a few months, I have a rather comprehensive book on the golden rule coming out;¹ my talk today will sketch some ideas from this book. Since my book is intended for everyone, it has two introductions: a simpler one that uses stories and a complex one that uses principles and objections in the manner of technical analytic philosophy. I’ll base my talk on the simpler introduction, which is more entertaining, but beef it up in some ways.

Introduction

I’ll begin with a story.² There once was a grandpa who lived with his family. As Grandpa grew older, he began to slobber and spill his

¹ *Ethics and the Golden Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Several of my earlier books also deal with the golden rule in some way, including an ethics textbook (*Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2011]), a logic textbook (*Introduction to Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010)), and a technical ethical treatise (*Formal Ethics* [New York: Routledge, 1996]).

² My story is from “The old man and his grandson,” which was published in 1812 by the Grimm Brothers (see <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2591>). Variations on the story exist across the globe; the earliest one I know of is a Buddhist version from ancient India (see <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4010.htm>). Ramona Moreno Winner has recently published a bilingual version of this story for children: *The Wooden Bowl, El Bol de Madera* (Goleta, Calif.: Brainstorm 3000, 2009).

food. So the family had him eat alone. When he dropped his bowl and broke it, they scolded him and got him a cheap wooden bowl. Grandpa was so unhappy. Now one day the young grandson was working with wood. “What are you doing?” Mom and Dad asked. “I’m making a wooden bowl,” he said, “for when you two get old and must eat alone.” Mom and Dad then looked sad and realized how they were mistreating Grandpa. So they decided to keep quiet when he spills his food and to let him eat with the family.

The heart of the golden rule is *switching places*. You step into another’s shoes. What you do to Grandpa, you imagine being done to you. You ask, “Am I willing that if I were in the same situation then I be treated that same way?”

GR seems simple. But GR’s loose wording can be confusing to apply and can give strange results. It’s easy to come up with devastating objections to the usual formulations; and many academics dismiss GR as a folksy proverb that self-destructs when analyzed carefully. Because of this, GR is so unpopular in academic circles that it seldom gets mentioned in moral philosophy or moral theology courses. But I contend that GR just requires more subtlety in how we understand and apply it. And so my job, as a philosopher, is to try to clean up the wording.

I put my attempt at a clearer wording on a t-shirt, which I am now wearing.¹ The top of the shirt says “the golden rule” and has symbols for eight major world religions. The bottom has my GR formula (which itself has to be taken with a certain subtlety):²

Gold 1. Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation.

Most who react to my formula nod in approval. It’s intended to help us apply GR to difficult cases.

The golden rule, as I understand it, commands consistency. It demands a fit between my act toward another and my desire about how I’d be treated in the same situation. GR doesn’t replace other

¹ You can get your very own GR t-shirt, in many styles and colors, from my GR Web page (<http://www.harryhiker.com/gr>). This popular page also has further information, videos, stories, links, and so on relating to the golden rule.

² I call this “Gold 1” because many variations are equally correct GR formulas (so my book has a “Gold 2,” “Gold 3,” and so on).

moral norms or theories or give all the answers. GR doesn't say specifically what to do (and so doesn't command bad actions if we have flawed desires). Instead, it forbids an inconsistent combination. It tells us not to combine these two things:

- I do something to another.
- I'm unwilling that this be done to me in the same situation.

GR, far from being a vague platitude, is a precise consistency test. Suppose I force Grandpa to eat alone. I switch places in my mind: I imagine that *I'm* forced to eat alone in the same situation. Do I condemn this same act done to me? Then I condemn how I treat Grandpa. *I condemn how I treat another, if I condemn the same act when I imagine it done to me in the same situation.*

Switching places is a golden idea that's global and beautifully simple. It promotes justice, consideration, cooperation, and unity. But alas, there are ways to mess up the GR reasoning, and I call these "GR fallacies." So I'll now present five GR fallacies and illustrate each with a story.

Literal GR fallacy

- (1) The literal GR fallacy assumes that everyone has the same likes, dislikes, and needs that we have.

There once lived a monkey and a fish. The monkey followed GR, always trying to treat others as he wanted to be treated. But he sometimes applied GR foolishly. Now one day a big flood came. As the threatening waters rose, the monkey climbed a tree to safety. He looked down and saw a fish struggling in the water. He thought, "I wanted to be lifted from the water." And so he reached down and grabbed the fish from the water, lifting him to safety on a high branch. Of course that didn't work. The fish died.

The monkey applied GR literally: treat others as you want to be treated. He wanted to be taken from the water, so he took the fish from the water. He didn't consider how monkeys and fish differ. Being taken from the water saves a monkey but kills a fish. So the monkey applied GR foolishly.

Here's another example. I visit my sister Carol at her house. In the morning, I wake energized and like to chat. But Carol absolutely

hates early chatting, since she needs to wake up before she can deal with others. Should I chat with Carol? The literal GR says yes: “If I want Carol to chat with me, then I’m to chat with her.” But this is inconsiderate, since her needs differ from mine.

Or suppose I’m a waiter, and I hate broccoli (which I do). Becky orders broccoli (which she likes). Should I serve her broccoli? Not by the literal GR, which says: “If you want Becky not to serve you broccoli, then don’t serve her broccoli.” Becky would be upset, and I’d likely be fired.

So it may be wrong to treat others in their situation as I want to be treated in my situation – since their situation may be different. Does this show that GR is flawed? Many think so. They contend that GR wrongly assumes that everyone’s the same (in likes, dislikes, needs, and so on). Since we’re not all the same, they conclude, GR is simplistic and flawed. I think, rather, that this literal understanding of GR is flawed. Fortunately for us, the island with a foolish monkey also had a wise monkey.

Kita, a wise GR monkey

Kita was a wise GR monkey. She learned that fish die when taken from water. When the flood came, she considered taking a fish from the water. But she imagined herself in his situation. She asked, “Am I now willing that *if I were in the same situation as the fish*, then I be taken from the water?” She answered, “Gosh no: this would kill me!” So she left the fish in the water.

We are to treat others only as we consent to being treated *in the same situation*. The same-situation clause is important. We imagine ourselves having all the other’s qualities – including likes, dislikes, needs, and so on. So Kita asks: “Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation as the fish, then I be taken from the water?” And she says “No, that would kill me.”

The same-situation clause also helps our other cases. With Carol, I ask, “Am I willing that if I were in the same situation as Carol (who absolutely hates early morning chatting), then someone chat with me in the morning?” I answer no; so I won’t chat with her. With Becky, I ask, “Am I willing that if I were in the same situation as Becky (who loves broccoli and ordered it) then I be served broccoli?” I answer yes; so I can serve her broccoli.

By a marvelous coincidence, “Kita” is also an acronym (Know-Imagine-Test-Act) for some main elements for using GR wisely:

K. Know: “How would my action affect others?”

I. Imagine: “What would it be like to have this done to me in the same situation?”

T. Test for consistency: “Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation then this be done to me?”

A. Act toward others only as you’re willing to be treated in the same situation.

When Kita considered taking the fish from the water, she tried to *know* how her action would affect the fish. She *imagined* being in the fish’s exact place and having this same thing done to her. She *tested* her consistency by asking: “Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation as the fish, then I be taken from the water?” Finally, she *acted* on GR (leaving the fish in the water).

My favorite historical GR example is a civil rights speech by President John F. Kennedy, during the first black enrollment at the University of Alabama.¹ While Kennedy didn’t know about GR monkeys, his speech followed Kita. He first got people to *know* how blacks were treated as second-class citizens (in areas like voting, education, and employment). He had whites *imagine* themselves being treated as second-class citizens on the basis of skin color. To *test* their consistency, he asked whether they’d be content to being treated that way. Finally, he urged *acting* on GR: “The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.”

The heart of morality is GR. And the heart of GR is switching places. What we do to Grandpa (or blacks, gays, or whomever we mistreat) we imagine being done to ourselves. And to avoid the literal GR fallacy, we can imagine ourselves in the other’s exact place (having their likes, dislikes, needs, and so on).

¹ Kennedy gave his speech on 11 June 1963 (see <http://www.Presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/kennedy/civilrightsmessage.html>).

Soft GR fallacy

(2) The soft GR fallacy assumes that we should never act against what others want.

There once was a baby squirrel named Willy. Being curious but ignorant of electricity, he wanted to put his fingers into electrical outlets. Now Momma Squirrel thought about stopping him. But she asked, “If I were in Willy’s exact place, then would I want to be stopped?” She answered no: if she were in his exact place, then she too would be a curious baby squirrel, ignorant of electricity, wanting to put fingers into outlets, and she wouldn’t want to be stopped. Following GR foolishly, she didn’t stop him. So Willy put his fingers into an outlet and was electrocuted.

Foolish Momma Squirrel asked the GR question wrongly, in a way that forced her to follow Willy’s desires. She should have asked about her *present reaction to a hypothetical case*: “Am I now willing that if I were in Willy’s situation then I be stopped from putting my fingers into electrical outlets?” She would have answered yes. She’s willing that if she were a baby squirrel in his exact place then she be stopped. And she’s grateful (now!) for when her parents, showing tough love, stopped her from doing this when she was young.

Sometimes we need to act against what others want. We may need to stop a baby who wants to put fingers into electrical outlets, refuse a salesperson who wants to sell us overpriced products, fail a student who doesn’t work, forcibly defend ourselves against an attacker, or jail a dangerous criminal. And yes, we’re now willing that if we were in their situation then we be treated that way. GR lets us act against what others want, as long as we’re now willing that if we were in their situation then we be treated similarly.

A famous and influential objection GR by Immanuel Kant commits this soft GR fallacy.¹ Here you’re a judge, about to sentence a dangerous criminal to jail. The criminal protests and appeals (incorrectly) to GR: “If you were in my place, you’d want not to be sent to jail; so by GR you can’t send me to jail.” You should respond: “I can send you to jail, because I’m now willing that if I were in your place

¹ Kant’s objection is in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964, originally published in 1785), p. 97 footnote.

(as a dangerous criminal) then I be sent to jail.” You could add, “If I do such things, then please send me to jail too!”

Doormat GR fallacy

(3) The doormat GR fallacy assumes that we should ignore our own interests.

There once was a woman named Frazzled Frannie. Frannie wanted to follow GR. But she thought GR makes us always do what others want (the previous fallacy). So she said yes whenever anyone asked a favor. People took advantage of her, asking “Please loan me \$50,000” and “Could you watch my children while I vacation for three months?” Frannie always said yes; she thought saying no violates GR and makes you a bad person. Soon Frazzled Frannie had no life. She became a doormat for others, serving their every whim, ignoring her own interests. She shriveled up and became cranky.

For every Frannie there’s a dozen Frannie-wannabes, who sometimes say no but feel guilty about this. Both groups misunderstand GR. GR doesn’t force us to do what others want, or say yes to unreasonable requests. GR lets us say no, if we’re willing that others say no to us in similar circumstances.

GR should build on self-love and extend this to others. It isn’t supposed to destroy self-love and make you a doormat. GR works best if you love yourself and care about how you’re treated. If you lack a healthy self-love, you need to build this up – by seeing yourself and your good points more positively, for example, and not fixating on your defects. If you’re a doormat, repeat to yourself, “As others have needs and rights that ought to be respected, so too do I.” Take comfort that most of us have the opposite problem: we treat others, not ourselves, as doormats.

Third-parties GR fallacy

(4) The third-parties GR fallacy assumes that we should consider only ourselves and the other person.

There once was a student named Pre-law Lucy. Lucy realized that she needed good grades to get into law school. But she was lazy. Now

one day Lucy had a bright idea. She'd plead her case to her professor: "Please give me an undeserved A in this course so I can get into law school! This will help me and not hurt you – so there's no GR objection to this."

Alas, Lucy ignored third parties. If she's accepted, then another student will be rejected. Imagine yourself being rejected because a less qualified student gets in dishonestly. And if Lucy becomes a lawyer, then we've likely added another lazy and dishonest lawyer. Imagine having to deal with such a lawyer.

The *generalized GR* has us satisfy GR toward each affected party: "Act only as you're willing for anyone to act in the same situation, regardless of where or when you imagine yourself or others." If your action affects X, Y, and Z, you must be willing that it be done regardless of your place in the situation. The affected parties may include future generations. This leads to the carbon rule: "Keep the earth livable for future generations, as we want past generations to have done for us."

Easy GR fallacy

(5) The easy GR fallacy assumes that GR gives an infallible test of right and wrong that takes only seconds to apply.

There once was a woman named Electra. Electra wanted to follow GR, but she got her facts wrong. She thought severe electrical shocks were pleasant. So she shocked others and, yes, she was willing that she be shocked in their place. She followed GR but acted wrongly.

While Electra satisfied GR consistency, she can be faulted for not getting her facts straight. Applying GR wisely requires more than just sitting down in ignorance and asking how we want to be treated. To lead reliably to right action, GR must build on *knowledge* and *imagination*. But even if we're misinformed, GR doesn't command specific wrong acts – because it doesn't command specific acts. Instead, GR forbids inconsistent combinations.

Here's a second example. There once was a coal-mine owner named Rich. Rich was very rich, but paid his workers only a miserly \$1 a day. He was asked if he'd be willing to be paid only \$1 a day in their place. He said yes, and so was consistent. But he said yes only because he thought (wrongly) that his workers could live tolerably on this much. If he knew how little \$1 buys, he wouldn't have answered

that way. Rich needed to get his facts right. He might have tried going to the store to buy food for his family with only \$1 in his pocket.

Now suppose that Rich decides to run his mine by the golden rule. What would he do? Following Kita, he'd do four things.

(K) Rich would gain *knowledge*. He'd ask, "How are my company policies affecting others – workers, neighbors, customers, and so on?" To know this, Rich would need to spend time talking with workers and others.

(I) Rich would apply *imagination*. He'd ask, "What would it be like to be in the place of those affected by these policies?" He'd imagine himself as a worker (laboring under bad conditions for a poor salary), or a neighbor (with black smoke coming into his house). Or he'd imagine his children being brought up under the same conditions as the workers' children.

(T) Rich would *test* his consistency by asking: "Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation (as my workers, neighbors, or customers) then I be treated that same way?" If the answer is no, then his actions clash with his desires about how he'd be treated in a similar situation – and he must change something. Changing company policies requires creativity. GR doesn't tell Rich what alternative policies to consider. Instead, it gives a way to *test* proposed policies. Any acceptable policy must be one he can approve regardless of where he imagines himself in the situation: as owner, worker, neighbor, or customer. The final solution will likely be a compromise that's minimally acceptable (but not ideal) from everyone's perspective.

(A) Rich would *act* on GR: "Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation." Yes, it's a simple formula. But applying it wisely requires *knowledge* and *imagination* – which may be difficult. Our knowing and imagining will never be perfect. But the fact that we'll never do something perfectly doesn't excuse us from trying to doing it as well as we reasonably can.

Consistency requires GR

Why does consistency require that we follow GR? Suppose I make Grandpa eat alone but am unwilling that I be treated that way in the same situation. Why is that inconsistent?

GR rests on two consistency requirements: that we be *impartial* (in the sense of making similar evaluations about similar actions, regardless of the individuals involved) and *conscientious* (in the sense

of living in harmony with our moral beliefs). If I'm impartial and conscientious, then I'll necessarily follow GR. The argument for this is difficult but gives a deeper insight into GR:

If I'm consistent, then I won't *make* Grandpa eat apart unless I also believe that it would be *all right* for me to make Grandpa eat apart. (Conscientiousness demands this.)

If I'm consistent, then I won't believe that that it would be all right for me to make *Grandpa* eat apart unless I also believe that it would be all right for *me* to be made to eat apart in the same situation. (Impartiality demands this.)

If I'm consistent, then I won't believe that it would be *all right* for me to be made to eat apart in the same situation unless I'm also *willing* that I be made to eat apart in the same situation. (Conscientiousness demands this.)

Therefore, if I'm consistent, then I won't make Grandpa eat apart unless I'm also willing that I be made to eat apart in the same situation.

So if I'm consistent, then I won't do something to another unless I'm also willing that it be done to me in the same situation.¹

So my GR formula can be based on an abstract consistency argument. Similar reasoning justifies many GR variations. So we might consider someone else we care about (maybe our daughter) on the receiving end of the action. Or we might give consistency conditions, not for *doing* something, but for *wanting* something or for *holding a moral belief*. GR can be, and historically has been, expressed in many ways. GR is a family of related ideas.

Given this abstract consistency argument for GR, we can raise a philosophical question: *Why* should we care about being consistent – or about being impartial or conscientious – or about following the golden rule? This is a request to put GR into a wider philosophical framework. But just as GR is part of diverse religions, so too it can be part of diverse philosophies. What do you think ethics is based on? *Self-evident principles*? Then you can see GR (or the consistency

¹ My logic textbook (see the first footnote) uses tools of symbolic logic to put this framework into a "Formalized Ethical Theory." The corresponding 35-step formal proof of the golden rule in logical symbols is a thing of great beauty.

axioms from which it follows) as self-evident. *A rational procedure?* GR uses facts, imagination, and consistency. *God's will?* Almost every religion teaches GR. *Cultural conventions?* Almost every society endorses GR. *A social contract for mutual advantages?* GR promotes cooperation and helps resolve conflicts. *Social usefulness?* GR has this. *Personal feelings?* Many have feelings that support GR. *Self-interest?* Many find that living GR brings self-respect and better treatment from others, and helps us avoid painful inconsistency and self-condemnation.

It's important that GR can be part of diverse frameworks. We live in an increasingly diverse world. How can we get along, when people have such different ways of looking at things, reflecting different religions, philosophies, and cultures? GR offers a global moral framework that diverse groups can share, but for different reasons. GR is a point of unity in a diverse world.

Christianity and GR

GR occurs in two of the gospels:

“So always treat others as you want to be treated, for this sums up the Law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). So GR is given as the summary of the Jewish scriptures.

“Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31).

GR fits into the gospel message in many important ways, of which I'm mention just three.

First, the gospels criticize “Treat others as they treat you,” a rival to GR, whereby we are to love our friends and hate our enemies. Instead, we are to treat *everyone* as we want to be treated, loving even our enemies. Jesus's example of the Good Samaritan brings this out. Here a Samaritan helps out a Jew who has been robbed, beaten, and left to die – helping the poor victim as we would surely want to be helped in this situation – even though Samaritans and Jews were traditional enemies.

Second, the gospels tell us “Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy.” The good things we *want* from others (like mercy, forgiveness, and justice) we are to *give* to others too; but then we'll *receive* these same good things ourselves. The measure we give is the

measure we'll get – how we treat others is how God will treat us. So following GR doesn't hurt us; rather, as we help others we're also helping ourselves – in this life and the next.

Third, in the Our Father we pray “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In effect, we ask God to treat us as we treat others. We can't sincerely pray this prayer unless we follow GR toward others, unless we forgive them as we want to be forgiven. So the prayer ties our relationship to God to our relationship to our fellow human beings.

Many Christian thinkers over the ages have seen GR as somehow central to the moral law that is “written on the human heart” (Romans 2:15). While I could talk for hours about this, again let me mention just a few points. First, GR occurs in early Christian teaching in a variety of places, from the *Didache* to Aristides¹ (likely Christianity's first professional philosopher), Justin Martyr, Origen, and Chrysostom. Augustine said that GR is part of every nation's wisdom and leads us to love God and neighbor (since we want both to love us); and he gave perhaps the first recorded objection to the literal GR. Gratian, the father of canon law, identified natural law with GR. Francis of Assisi, who often invokes GR, at least four times formulates it using a same-situation clause (the earliest such use that I'm aware of), as in “Blessed is the person who supports his neighbor in his weakness as he would want to be supported were he in a similar situation.” Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* (I-II, q. 94, a. 4) says GR is common to the gospels and to human reason; he adds (I-II, q. 99, a. 1) that “when it is said, ‘All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you also to them,’ this is an explanation of the rule of neighborly love contained implicitly in the words, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Martin Luther and John Calvin gave GR an important place in Christian life – as do recent natural law thinkers, like John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Hans Reiner.

GR has become especially important in interfaith dialogue. John Paul II and Benedict XV, in addressing interfaith groups, have pointed to GR as something shared by many faiths. A “Declaration for a

¹ *The Sheed & Ward Anthology of Catholic Philosophy*, ed. James C. Swindal and Harry J. Gensler (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 45. See my upcoming *Ethics and the Golden rule* for other references. See also Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Olivier du Roy, *La règle d'or: Le retour d'une maxime oubliée* (Paris: Cerf, 2009) and *Histoire de la règle d'or*, 2 vols (Paris: Cerf, 2012).

global ethic,” drafted by Hans Küng, was endorsed by the second Parliament of the World’s Religions in 1993; it calls GR “the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life.”¹ Paul McKenna, an interfaith GR activist with Scarboro Missions in Toronto, in 2000 created a poster that teaches GR’s global importance and presence in the world’s religions; the poster has sold 100,000 copies across the globe, with copies in different languages and many prominent places.² And in July 2011 the North American Interfaith Network (an umbrella organization for interfaith groups) had a conference in Arizona on the theme of “many people, many faiths, one common principle, the golden rule”; I gave a keynote address along the lines of earlier sections (so they too heard about golden-rule monkeys).

Conclusion

There’s much more to be said about GR – how it relates to world religions and history, and to moral education, egoism, evolution, society, racism, business, medicine, and so on. And there are further objections and theoretical issues. Hey, read my book.

Here’s one last question: “How does GR connect with the *faith* and *justice* mission of our Jesuit order?” I’d say that GR is a *justice* norm that can be rooted in our Catholic *faith* but also can be rooted in the *faith* (religious or otherwise) of everyone else on the planet. So GR, as the *interfaith-justice* norm, brings both ideas together.

¹ Every group overwhelming approved the document. It was signed by 143 representatives from Bahá’í, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhism, Christianity, Native Religions, Hinduism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, Neo-Paganism, Sikhism, Taoism, Theosophism, Zoroastrianism, and Interreligious Organizations. Many religions had subgroups. So Judaism had Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed signatures. Christianity had Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, and Roman Catholic signatures (the Catholics included Cardinal Bernadine of Chicago, Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame, Hans Küng of the University of Tübingen, a Vatican representative, religious sisters, and many others). And yes, the Dalai Lama signed the document along with over a dozen others who represented various branches of Buddhism. See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* (New York: Continuum, 2006); the Declaration is on Küng’s site (see http://www.weltethos.org/1-pdf/10-stiftung/declaration/declaration_english.pdf).

² McKenna’s http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden_rule is the most extensive GR site on the Web and his poster (which is an excellent teaching device) can be obtained online (see http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Golden_rule/poster_order.php).