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Golden Rules

A person with free will can choose what to do. How then to decide? We have evolved many moral rules and principles. Which of these are the most important?

Compassion appears to be the common thread of many religions, with the golden rule of loving one's neighbor as oneself being the main principle for human action.¹ The golden rule occurs in the Torah "Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord."² Some have suggested that this only applied to fellow Israelites, in keeping with the first part of the verse. However, later in the chapter strangers are considered the same as kin.³

When asked what one should do to inherit eternal life, Jesus agreed with the Levitical injunctions to worship God, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus answered the question about who is the neighbor that we are enjoined to love by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Figure IV.4)⁴ A Jewish man journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by thieves, robbed and left for dead. A Jewish priest and then a Levite (a member of the Hebrew tribe devoted to the temple) both saw him, but passed by without offering help. A Samaritan (an adherent of an Abrahamic religion distinct from Judaism), however, took compassion on the unfortunate man, bound up his wounds, carried him to an inn, and promised to return later to pay for his expenses. The Samaritan is not the neighbor we must love, but rather the person who understands the commandment: our neighbor is anyone in need of help, regardless of their religion or their relation to us. And love requires acting.

However, the parable can have other meanings.⁵ The fathers of the Christian Church interpreted the story as an allegory of salvation. The good Samaritan is Christ, the traveler who fell among thieves the sinning man, the inn the church

¹ Armstrong, K. (2010). *Twelve steps to a compassionate life*. New York: Knopf.

² Leviticus 19:18

³ Leviticus 19:34

⁴ Luke 10: 25-37

⁵ Young, B. (1998). *The parables: Jewish tradition and Christian interpretation*. Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson. (pp 102-118); Snodgrass, K. (2008). *Stories with intent: A comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans (pp 338-362).



Figure IV.4. The Good Samaritan. Vincent Van Gogh (after Eugène Delacroix), 1890. The traveler's box emptied by the robbers is to the left. The Levite has just passed by without giving any aid, and the priest is already far along the path. (Wikimedia Commons). What is striking is the contrast between the powerful activity of the compassionate Samaritan and the passivity of those who have just passed by.

and the Samaritan's promise to return later a prophecy of the Second Coming. However, Jesus was likely telling a story to illustrate points of Jewish law, to demonstrate how it was wrong to pass by on the other side of the road because the man appeared dead. The possibility of life takes precedence over the

commandments not to be defiled by contact with a corpse. And even if the man were dead, he was in need of burial.

Jesus also formulated the golden rule as “all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”⁶ However, the rule is not universally applicable. Just because someone thoroughly enjoys listening to loud rock music does not mean that she or he should subject his neighbor to these sounds. Just because someone likes to argue does not mean that he or she should pick a quarrel with their neighbor. The simple precept of acting toward others in the same way that we wish them to act toward us requires qualification, perhaps along the lines of “provided this is what they also wish.”

Understanding the wishes and feelings of one’s fellow is essential to moral behavior. Compassion is an empathy with the needs of others that is sufficiently strong to cause action. However, completely ignoring our own needs in our interactions with others can lead to absurdity. The shopkeeper who wishes to do what his customer wishes (and what he would wish if he were that customer) might give away his wares for free and rapidly become bankrupt. Essential to human morality is a sense of fairness. The needs of one must be balanced with the needs of another. The shopkeeper should charge (and the customer should pay) a fair price. Fairness is perhaps the most basic of moral principles.

Following the wishes of another provided they are compatible with one’s own may also not always be the right thing to do. Should we tell others that they are wrong even if they do not wish to be so told? People hold their delusions dear, and may not want to be disabused of them. To argue with a neighbor who is suffering from the delusion that there is a god can be interpreted as virulent blasphemy. To argue with a neighbor who is under the delusion that there is no god is obtrusive evangelism. In both cases, discussion requires mutual respect. In today’s pluralistic world the infidel must commune with the benighted.

A negative formulation of the golden rule might therefore be a more reasonable basic principle. In the Babylonian Talmud, Hillel summed up the teachings of Judaism: “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.”⁷ This negative or proscriptive formulation is often called the “silver rule.” This

⁶ Matthew 7:12

⁷ Freedman H. (translator) *Babylonian Talmud: Shabbath*, Folio 31a. Available at http://www.come-and-hear.com/shabbath/shabbath_31.html

may be simpler and more effective than the usual version. Though others may not desire what we desire, they are probably more likely to dislike what we dislike. However, the silver rule cannot be the sole basis for morality. Though it prevents us from harming our neighbor, it does not tell us to assist those in need of help. We could follow the silver rule by completely ignoring our neighbor.

Confucius used the format of the silver rule when he recommended the virtue of *shu*, often translated as “reciprocity.” The meaning of this virtue is given in the *Analects*:

Zigong asked: “Is there a single word such that one could practise it throughout one’s life?” The Master said “Reciprocity perhaps? Do not inflict on others what you yourself would not wish done to you.”⁸

However, the word *shu* only occurs twice in the whole *Analects*. Confucius is much more concerned with another virtue called *ren* (humaneness). The Chinese character for *ren* (仁) combines the a representation of the human being with the number two. Thus it might mean the way in which two people should interact. *Shi* is part of *ren*, but *ren* is the more inclusive virtue. Confucius typically recommends *ren* to those in power. Here “benevolence” is a reasonable translation. Though their cultural contexts were completely different, the *ren* of the Confucian *junzi* (“ruler’s son”) and the character of an English gentleman are similar.

The golden rule can be pushed to its limits by inversion: always act toward another as they wish you to act.⁹ This clearly cannot be applied without condition. We should not submit to rape or robbery simply because this is what the rapist or the robber wants. However, the idea is related to Jesus’ counterintuitive concept of turning the other cheek, with which he introduces his formulation of the golden rule:

Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,
Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use
you.
And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other;
and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also.
Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy
goods ask them not again.

⁸ Confucius (translated Dawson R., 1993) *The Analects*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁹ Singer, M. (1963). The Golden Rule. *Philosophy*, 38 293-314

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.¹⁰

Doing good to those who hate you has been considered the “platinum rule.”¹¹ It is surprising how well it works in many situations. However, in addition to not reacting to violence, it requires some assertion of what is right and wrong. Gandhi’s *satyagraha* or “insistence on the truth” combined demonstrating for what is right with not reacting violently when such demonstrations were suppressed.

Gandhi’s ideas worked in India, because the colonial government had a modicum of morality. Satyagraha was also effective in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, because the federal government was founded upon the idea of human rights, even though it had long failed to guarantee them. Gandhi suggested that the Jews might have protested the holocaust by civil disobedience.¹² This seems irrational:

For non-violence to work, the powers that be had to have at least some ethical and moral boundaries. Conscience, therefore, was the pacifist’s secret weapon. But where the human conscience had died, as in the Soviet Union and Germany, nonviolence was simply a form of surrender.¹³

Sometimes, however, violence may be the only reasonable response to irrational cruelty. In recent years, we have come to the conclusion that there is such a thing a “just war.”¹⁴ We have a “responsibility to protect” populations who are being maltreated and murdered by their governments.¹⁵ We must not always turn the other cheek.

Forgiveness was also part of the message of Jesus: “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall

¹⁰ Luke 6: 27-31

¹¹ Anderson, S. (2009 July/August). The golden rule: not so golden anymore. *Philosophy Now*, pp. 26-29.

¹² Kling, B. B. (1991). Gandhi, nonviolence and the holocaust. *Peace & Change*, 16, 176-196

¹³ Preston, A. (2012). *Sword of the spirit, shield of faith: Religion in American war and diplomacy*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf (p. 306).

¹⁴ Dombrowski, D. (2000). Nonviolent resistance and Hitler (Milosevic). *Peace Research*, 32, 42-51.

¹⁵ Arya, N. (2007). Is military action ever justified? A physician defends the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ *Medicine, Conflict and Survival*. 23, 172-188.

be forgiven.”¹⁶ Forgiveness is good for the victim since it removes the need for revenge; it is good for the sinner since it removes the burden of guilt. In both cases it allows life to be lived with new resolve. However, it cannot work without some making of amends. Perhaps forgiveness is only worthwhile in the context of restorative justice.¹⁷ Most importantly, forgiveness can only be given when there are clear protocols to prevent recidivism. The child molester must not be forgiven and then allowed to molest again.

The doctrine of forgiveness can sometimes have unexpected effects. If hardcore criminals believe that they will be forgiven for their crimes, religion may provide no deterrence for doing wrong. Criminals may easily distort Christian teachings:

The way it work is this. You go out and do some bad and then you ask for forgiveness and Jesus have to give it to you, and you know wipe the slate clean. So I always do a quick little prayer right before and then I'm cool with Jesus.¹⁸

The doctrine of hell may be far more effective. A recent investigation found that national crime rates correlated positively with the proportion of people who believe in heaven and negatively with the proportion that believe in hell.¹⁹ Fear of eternal punishment may be far more effective that promise of reward.

Human morality has no hard and fast rules. We follow some general principles but we need to work out how they should be applied in particular situations. We perceive the good in much the same way we perceive the real. We determine the laws that fit what we perceive, test them out and then reconsider them if they do not always work.

¹⁶ Luke 6:37

¹⁷ Braithwaite, J. (2002). *Restorative Justice and Responsive Regulation*. New York: Oxford University Press; Acorn, A. (2004). *Compulsory compassion: a critique of restorative justice*. Vancouver: UBC Press; Braithwaite, J. (2006). Narrative and “compulsory compassion.” *Law and Social Inquiry*, 31, 425-446.

¹⁸ Topalli, V., Brezina, T., & Bernhardt, M. (2012). With God on my side: The paradoxical relationship between religious belief and criminality among hardcore street offenders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17, 49-69

¹⁹ Shariff, A. F., & Rhemtulla, M. (2012) Divergent effects of beliefs in heaven and hell on national crime rates. *PLoS One* 7(6): e39048. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0039048