

# The Place of the Golden Rule and Formal Ethics in a Philosophy of Living

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## Abstract

Formal ethics sharpens one's capacity for (insightful) moral intuition and sheds light on the golden rule, which I discuss in relation to the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and Harry Gensler. I consider the rule in the context of a philosophy of living which is designed to promote the sharpening and integration of our capacities for intuition in the realms of science, morality, and spiritual experience.

## 1. Introduction

Science, morality, and religion are realms in which the mind has capacities for *intuition*—a term that I use as equivalent to insight. Each of these capacities needs to be sharpened. Philosophy at its fullest cultivates a wisdom which integrates insights to promote the development of a balanced character in all three domains. Matter, mind, and spirit are so basic that their reality can neither be proved nor disproved. Attempts to prove or disprove any one of them either assume too much or disprove too little. One may of course choose not to develop these capacities, all of which I regard as essential in the adventure of experience and discovery in the full integration of the human person.

Moral intuition is autonomous in the sense that its principles are not reducible to scientific truths of cause and effect or to truths of spiritual experience. Philosophical insight into duty functions as a bridge by forming moral decisions on the basis of an understanding of the meanings of relevant facts and values.<sup>1</sup> Excellence in this understanding involves scientific

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of how Socrates brought together meanings of facts and values in the great decision portrayed in the *Crito*, see my *Living in Truth, Beauty, and Goodness (TBG)*, 34-39. Note that intuition (or insight) can be defined in such a perfectionist way that we can never have reasonable assurance that we have one. True, we can be mistaken in attributing intuition to ourselves. Moreover, many an insight needs to be clarified. And our sense of the meaning and value of an intuition can develop over time—but not in ways that overturn the intuitive core. On

knowledge and an appreciation of the supreme values of truth, beauty, and goodness that can be actualized in the situation.

On the path of integrated living, the golden rule—Do to others as you want others to do to you—can play a pivotal role. Years of working with the rule in science, philosophy, or daily life tend to lead to the discovery of different levels of interpretation. Some persons find that the rule leads away from a self-centered and materialistic perspective, through sympathy and reason, to the spiritual level.

## 2. Formal ethics and the golden rule

Formal ethics is an expression of the sublime desire to take rigorous moral thinking to its limits. Working with it sharpens the capacity for moral intuition and makes one a better person.

Harry Gensler's project in *Formal Ethics* is to combat evils such as racism by articulating the golden rule as a principle of consistency that can be accepted by everyone, regardless of one's ethical theory. He does so by developing a formal ethics based on symbolic logic.<sup>2</sup> His project culminates in a form of reasoning which can assist with philosophy's logic of concepts.<sup>3</sup> In this book, he sets forth the following core ideas.

- Consistency among beliefs
- Conscientiousness (interpreted as consistency between our moral beliefs and our actions, resolutions, and desires)
- Ends-means consistency

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the contrary, we have every right to be confident as we go forward in our evolution. See the discussion of the stability of scientific truth (*TBG* 27f), the coherence of philosophical truth (60f), and three theories of spiritual intuition (88-90). For an account of sharpening the capacity for intuition through reason and wisdom, see *TBG*, 40-51.

<sup>2</sup> My thoughts on formal ethics depend much on a decades-long conversation with Harry Gensler. He and I are like two miners tunnelling into the same golden-rule mountain, starting from opposite sides (formal ethics and religious ethics) and looking to meet in the middle. His publications on the golden rule and ethics range far beyond his formal ethics, for example, in *Ethics and the Golden Rule* and *Ethics and Religion*. For the purpose of this article, I depend on his *Formal Ethics*. See also his article, "Formal Ethical Principles" in this number of this journal, *Filosofiska Notiser*.

<sup>3</sup> Plato made an analogous distinction between geometry and dialectic in his exposition of the divided line (*Republic* 510b1-511d3). Kant distinguished *Verstand*, understanding, with its mathematical and scientific power, from *Vernunft*, reason, which, if we could use it reliably, would give us metaphysical insight. Hegel also distinguished these two concepts, and he articulated a logic of concepts with wide-ranging implications for epistemology and metaphysics.

## The Place of the Golden Rule and Formal Ethics in a Philosophy of Living

- Impartiality (interpreted as consistency in our evaluations about similar actions, regardless of the individuals involved)
- Universalizability (consistency of judgment for relevantly similar cases)
- The golden rule defined as a principle of consistency that can be deduced from the previous principles
- *Non-formal ideals*, including the practice of imagining oneself in the place of other persons who would or may be affected by one's contemplated action

My main criticism of Gensler's approach is this. He portrays his version of the rule as superior to its more common phrasings, because his version is almost completely free of absurd implications. He recommends that people generally work with an informal statement of his theorem, for example, this one, which comes from his website: "Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation."<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges that a consistent Nazi could satisfy his version; but a consistent Nazi could not satisfy the golden rule as taught by Confucius, Hillel, or Jesus—with whose teachings Gensler associates his discussions of the rule. To generalize my conclusion: reducing the golden rule to a principle of consistency is absurd.

Here is a revised excerpt from my overall critique of formal ethics.

Contemporary studies of generalization, the implications of moral language, and universalizability demonstrate connections between rationality and morality, and form an essential chapter in the comprehension of the golden rule. . . . Counterexamples will only refute the rule if it is abstracted from every context, taken literally, and made to function as a necessary or sufficient condition for sound moral judgment or as the sole normative axiom in a system of ethics. One always has more to learn from the tradition of Singer, Hare, Alton, Hoche, Kese, Gensler, and others. . . .

Each formal reconstruction of the rule incorporates some discovery of meaning in the rule, but . . . formal interpretations remain partial . . . . In Alton's system, the rule is an axiom, in Gensler's, a derived theorem. . . . No such system can capture or definitively organize all the insights of everyone working on this project . . . .

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.harryhiker.com/goldrule.htm>

If the golden rule is reduced to a principle of consistency or universalizability, then an intuition implicit in the rule is sacrificed. The rule implies respect for persons, as Kant expressed in his second formulation of the categorical imperative, giving his philosophy a balance which the golden rule intuitively has but which the universalizability principle taken in isolation lacks. . . .

Sometimes it seems as though the goal of formal ethics is not to sharpen moral intuition but to replace it as completely as possible by carefully stated propositions. Moral intuition, however, represents the successful exercise of our *capacity for insight into duty*; consequently, the task of ethics is to sharpen, not replace, this capacity on the path toward insight. We need intuition not only for daily living when there may be no time to compose a reflective response to a situation; we also need intuition to sense that we need to reflect on a course of action, to suspect that something has gone wrong in a given moral theory, to choose first principles, to validate rules of inference, to see the point of arguments, and to formulate appropriate descriptions of actions and situations. Most theorists acknowledge that we cannot demonstrate the validity of our basic, intuitive concern for duty. What seem like insights are corrigible, and they are corrected through argument; but argument depends upon the marshalling of evidence based on other prima-facie intuitions. Theory does not descend from the intellectual heights to instruct poor intuition; rather theory builds on intuition and clarifies it. There is an unending mutual correction of apparent intuition by reflection, and of reflection by intuition. . . .

On the problem of giving morally helpful situation descriptions, The golden rule of rational consistency is thus . . . part of the story, but not the whole story. If there are not just two levels of ethics—rough intuition and rational clarity—then it cannot be assumed that formal ethics is the arbiter of its own place within the whole of ethics.

This critique can be put positively by saying that the golden rule functions properly within the context of a wider philosophy of living.<sup>5</sup>

The problem of giving helpful situation descriptions comes up in Gensler's discussion of a practice widely associated with the rule—imagining

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<sup>5</sup> *The Golden Rule*, 135-38. I would also note another difference with Gensler's theorem. He relies on the formal logical equivalence of negative and positive formulations of the golden rule and chooses the negative formulation for the purposes of his system. Experientially, these formulations are profoundly different; in particular, holistic growth transforms the experience of doing.

oneself in another person's situation. At the heart of his answer to this problem is his definition of universalizability. "If act A ought to be done (would be all right), then there is some conjunction F of universal properties such that (1) act A is F and (2) in any actual or hypothetical case, every act that is F ought to be done (is all right)."<sup>6</sup> Gensler's informal discussion does indeed show the usefulness of the concept of universalizability, but his formal definition is not helpful in practice.

I propose that virtue ethics helps answer this question. Specific virtues are responses that correlate with different types of situation. Asking what virtues are called for in a particular situation may call to mind intuitions (*or prima-facie* intuitions) that help us spot morally essential features—aspects which can be the same in different situations.<sup>7</sup> For example, courage may come to mind in a situation that we might classify as a response to situations that are dangerous or painful. Moreover, the challenge can call for various blends of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual courage. Learning more about the situation can call forth intuitions of the need for balancing virtues or even the proverb, "Discretion is the better part of valor." In this way, a mind well-provisioned with study and experience of a wide range of virtues will help one describe situations well.

### 3. Ethics and a Kantian philosophy of history

In *Formal Ethics*, Gensler includes an outstanding chapter on ideals that he calls "semi-formal" and classifies as "aspects of rationality." But once we acknowledge a broad spectrum of ideals, creative tensions between them put pressure on the concept of consistency.

In those who are responsive to them, the ideals involved in science, morality, and God-centered spirituality stimulate endless striving for personal growth and planetary progress. In setting forth his categorical imperative, Kant may have been putting two concepts from his culture through the filter of reason: the golden rule and the kingdom of God, both of which he may have learned first from his Pietist parents. On this hypothesis, Kant replaced the golden rule with his concepts of universalizability and respect for persons, and replaced the concept of the kingdom of God with the idea of a kingdom of ends in which each person would be treated always also an end, and never merely as a means. Since Jesus' golden rule could be interpreted as the rule of living in the kingdom of God, it becomes interesting to wonder

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<sup>6</sup> *Formal Ethics*, 69.

<sup>7</sup> Can we ever be justifiably confident of having something better than a *prima-facie* intuition? Yes—in particular cases, because God sometimes reveals his will successfully and at other times embraces less clear discernment.

how the golden rule might operate within the context of evolution as portrayed in a Kantian philosophy of history: a long, slow, painful, struggle with ups and downs on the path from barbarism to an advanced planetary civilization, in which the ideal of the kingdom of ends would never be completely actualized.

In the context of evolution, scientific realism is essential to wise action. In the philosophy of living that I work on, moral and spiritual ideals are also essential. Gensler would agree that today's achieved consistency among one's beliefs and actions may properly be overturned by tomorrow's growth of insight. My question: *How could formal ethics reformulate the ideal of consistency in such a way as to clarify the concept of acting consistently with moral and spiritual ideals, insofar as that is realistically possible given evolutionary conditions?*<sup>8</sup>

#### **4. The golden rule as including spiritual love**

Although Kant did not recognize the mind's inherent capacity for spiritual intuition, he enriched ethics by transplanting selected religious ideas from his culture into the garden of his moral philosophy. Jesus found the golden rule in his culture and enriched it by transplanting it into a spiritual garden.

The golden rule is an imperative. As a speech act, it is a command. But there was more going on when Jesus taught it. In the light of his life and teachings, we can also say that he

- encouraged us by his faith in our capacity for intuition and in what we can do and be
- expressed the heart of morality in a way that everyone can readily understand and begin to work with
- promoted the discovery of the rule's higher levels of meaning
- gave guidance that applies to every person every day, for the long term best of everyone involved<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For the fullness of the planetary history of the golden rule, nothing compares with the works of Olivier du Roy. His books give the most exhaustive array of its contexts and meanings in philosophy, world religions, theology, anthropology, and law. It is to be hoped that a translator will be found for his encyclopaedic *La Règle d'Or: Histoire d'une maxime morale universelle* and the book based on its concluding chapters, *La Règle d'Or: Le retour d'une maxime oubliée*. His early religious and theological *La réciprocité* is also a solid contribution to the discourse on the rule's levels of meaning.

<sup>9</sup> This interpretation of a command in the teaching of Jesus comes from my current manuscript for a book on Jesus and his message.

A command is addressed to our moral freedom. But isolated duty consciousness cannot love. Spiritual love consciously or unconsciously expresses the divine spirit within.

Divine commands are not, as Kant thought, external, heteronomous impositions that compromise moral autonomy. Rather they are *theonomous*, inherent in the deep structure of moral reason.

In terms of religious philosophy, in God's creation all things and beings are inherently structured by one or more of the following: laws of material cause and effect; the moral law; and the laws of love, which imply a summary description of what it means to live on the spiritual level.

Jesus' concept of the golden rule is best sought in the context of his life and teachings.<sup>10</sup> For example, he taught three love commandments. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And "Love one another as I have loved you."<sup>11</sup> The last two commandments set up a creative tension between loving others as oneself and loving others as Jesus did. That tension stimulates growth in the interpretation and practice of the golden rule.

When it is illuminated by the love commands, the golden rule teaches us how to fulfill duty in a way that attracts our motivational center of gravity from the material through the moral to the spiritual level. But spiritually mature love does not depart from realistic, practical handling of material matters, or moral responsibility. Mature love is based on, includes, and helps motivate activities in these domains. In this way, the golden rule can become a principle expressing the ideal of mature love toward every person.

### **5. Levels of interpretation of the golden rule**

In different cultures and academic disciplines, those who work with the rule find different levels of interpretation of it. Its rich and diverse meanings cannot be reduced to a single precise definition. Rather, the rule promotes growth in its own interpretation. Personally, I sometimes work with six levels. Here is one way to express them.

The first level is the golden rule distorted by flawed desires, which give rise to the kind of counterexample which some critics of the rule regard as a decisive refutation. "What if an adulterer or sadomasochist goes out and treats others as they want to be treated?"<sup>12</sup> The lesson of this level: Do not treat others in a way that is distorted by physical desires, as you do not want

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 6:31; Matthew 7:12.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 12:30-31 and John 13:34.

<sup>12</sup> For my response to this counterexample, see *The Golden Rule*, 176-180.

others to treat you. Since I know that my human heart can get distorted, I sometimes simply acknowledge this possibility and release whatever unbeautifulness there may be. Doing so typically brings a feeling of relief and relaxation, like letting air out of an over-inflated tire.

The second level is to treat others with sympathy and pity, as you want others to do to you. This level engages the tender emotions of the heart. The fact that this level is the lowest positive level should not obscure the recognition that it is very important.

Third, treat others with profound respect in the light of a realistic understanding of their needs and the consequences of your action, as you want others to treat you.

Fourth, serve others wholeheartedly as brothers and sisters in the family of God, as you (ideally) want others to serve you.

Fifth, treat others in accord with high ethical standards, as you want others to treat you.

Sixth, treat others in a God-like way, as you want others to treat you.

Each higher level corrects deficiencies in the previous level(s), and the last level is defined to contain within itself all their positive gains.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, a caveat. I have found two dangers in this series of steps. First, I can become so interested in pursuing higher levels as to lose touch with the rule's essential intuitive simplicity, which puts us all on a plane of equality as family, brothers and sisters. Second, some people think that they can skip levels. True, one can productively think of levels that one has not yet attained; but character growth cannot be hurried. And one never knows when it will be necessary to learn a lesson from a lower level than what one is mainly working on.

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<sup>13</sup> For most purposes in teaching, I present three levels of the golden rule—a rule of sympathy, reason, and spiritual love. I have written on the expanded list in "Levels of Meaning in the Golden Rule" and "Philosophical Reflections on the Golden Rule."

The Place of the Golden Rule and Formal Ethics in a Philosophy of Living

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