

Reflections on the Criticisms of the Golden Rule as a Moral Principle

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ABSTRACT

The term Golden Rule is used in reference to the maxim that dictates do unto others as you would have them do unto you whether positively or negatively. Although the GR is acknowledged by most religions and traditions, it has attracted criticism especially with regard to the emotions which, according to critics, undermine reason and hence would not pass for a moral principle. This paper reviews the four main criticisms of the GR. The first criticism is the GR as a slave morality by Friedrich Nietzsche. He argues that the GR sanctioned slave morality, rather than the master morality and hence was against human instinct of dominating others. The second criticism reviewed is the GR as unrealistic and impractical by Sigmund Freud who asserted the selfless or agape love of the GR in preference of erotic or selfish love. Criticism by Immanuel Kant which refers to the GR as absurd is also reviewed. Precisely, it preferred a Categorical Imperative (CI) to the GR arguing that the latter was open to abuse by wrongdoers to benefit themselves and in the process render the precept absurd. Lastly, the paper reviews the GR as inferior to 'the new commandment' which is a criticism by Paul Ricoeur. In this criticism, Ricoeur using his rhetoric of paradox, sought to play off the logic of superabundance or the love for enemies against the GR. The review concludes that criticisms to the GR revolve around the issue of morality. Morality from the four perspectives is viewed in terms of power, self-legislation versus duty to all and humanity's expectations from morality in comparison to the new commandment's expectations. The paper recommends that the GR is a moral principle that advocates for a morality that enhances the good for all without discrimination and without being preoccupied with reciprocation. Such a moral principle transcends the reciprocity or retaliatory principles.

Key words: *Golden Rule (GR), master morality, slave morality, Categorical Imperative (CI) love, GR and morality, Golden Rule criticisms, morality and criticisms, Nietzsche GR criticisms, Sigmund GR criticisms, Kant GR criticisms, Ricouer GR criticisms*

INTRODUCTION

The Golden Rule (GR) is a term that is popularly used with reference to the maxim “Do unto others as you would like them to do unto you” or “Do not do unto others what you would not like them to do unto you.” It is the act of treating other people impartially irrespective of their color, religion, ethnicity, race or geographical location.

Despite receiving wide recognition across different fields such as religion, philosophy, culture etc, the GR has elicited a number of criticisms, especially. It seems that critics of the GR were so absorbed in their different professions that they could not see the value of the maxim itself. For instance, Sigmund Freud's criticism has a psychoanalytic outlook with an assertion on *eros* (or sexual) love and, to some degree, *storgē* (or familial) love. This made him perceive *agape* (or sacrificial) love on which the GR is based as impractical and unrealistic. Similarly, Kant, with his attachment to reason, could not see the need for feelings or emotions, which are accommodated by the GR.

Essentially, the main bone of contention that the critics have with the GR is around its general outward-look through *agape* love, which makes the maxim tower over the *lex talionis* and/or the reciprocity inclinations of the critics. Thus, the intention of this paper is to respond to the criticisms of the GR and thereby demonstrate how the principle could be a solution to the endless tension between individuals, communities and even nations.

The main objections against the GR are philosophical in nature. This article samples four main criticisms of the GR, namely: the GR as a slave morality, the GR as unrealistic and impractical, the GR as absurd and the GR as inferior to 'the new commandment'.

CRITICISMS OF THE GOLDEN RULE AS A MORAL PRINCIPLE

The Golden Rule as a Slave Morality

Nietzsche's view on morality was characterized by the desire to lord it over others. Whether benefiting or hunting others involves sacrifices for us does not affect the ultimate value of our actions. Even if we offer our lives, as martyrs do for their church, this is a sacrifice that is offered for our desire for power or for purpose of preserving our feeling of power. Certainly the state in which we hurt others is rarely acceptable, as that in which we benefit others. According to Nietzsche (1954) every living being wants above all else to release its strength as they strive instinctively for an optimum combination of favorable conditions. Thus, for Nietzsche, morality is not achieved by morality itself, but by immoral means such as force, lying, slander and injustice (Nietzsche, 1968). He claimed that the good or right meant whatever heightened the feeling of power in humans while the bad or wrong meant everything that is low or born of weakness. Conclusively, he viewed life from the context of power, and more of it, rather than contentment; and war rather than peace (Nietzsche, 1954).

Nietzsche had no kind words to describe the GR and, by extension, morality in general. He referred to the GR as a 'slave' (herd) morality as opposed to 'master' (noble) morality, which he proclaimed (Nietzsche & Kaufmann, 1989). Nietzsche argued that human life, just like animal life, is about dominating and exploiting others especially the weak. He viewed Christianity, with its will to break the spirit of the strong and emphasis on equality, as retrogressive. Thus, Nietzsche criticized Christianity and other religions for glorifying humility, compassion and selflessness the virtues which he described as vulgar. He despised the 'neighbour love' doctrine

claiming that he had suffered a lot by exercising goodwill towards others and began to associate generosity and sympathy with inherent weakness (Nietzsche, 2005).

Moreover, Nietzsche viewed Christianity with its emphasis on ‘neighbour love’, modesty and lawfulness as a sign of weakness unlike the Renaissance or the strong ages and noble cultures that treated Christian virtues with contempt (Nietzsche, 2005). He blamed culture for abdicating its responsibility of producing sovereign individuals and instead has maintained a series of deformations and perversions in the hands of European or Christian moralization. This is what he calls ‘herd or animal morality’ because it assumes that there is a single morality valid for all (Nietzsche, 1990). He asserted that the Christian morality has turned a human being, who is naturally a beast of prey into a household pet (Nietzsche, 1990). In summary, Nietzsche held that human instinct is the origin of morality, which constantly undergoes fundamental transformations, disruptions, innovations, and inventions of morality. As a result of this instinct, it becomes natural for human beings to mourn, to pity and to desire the best for others, an attribute which is also found in the animal world (Nietzsche, 1968).

The Golden Rule as Unrealistic and Impractical

According to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic social psychology, the society is portrayed as a combination of competing impulses of the individual (the selfish) and the social (the selfless) as well as competing desires of love (*eros*) and death (*thanatos*) or the destruction of the otherwise lovely union, Freud observed that this combination is a more accurate description of human behavior than the Golden Rule.

For Freud, the love of all humans expressed in the injunction ‘love your neighbor as yourself’ is misguided and something utterly impossible for humans to attain. He could not make sense of an indiscriminate love and asserted that those to be loved must somehow deserve it (Freud, 1961). Freud emphasized two kinds of love: the sexual love (*eros*), which is the primary drive and the familial love (*storgē*), which is genetically or family based. With this kind of interpretation of love, Freud argued that it would be meaningless for humans to love strangers as they love family members or close friends.

Moreover, Freud contended that while it would be sensible to love one’s neighbor so long as that neighbor loves you, it would be utterly nonsensical to love one’s enemies as Jesus commanded his followers in the New Testament. He maintained that the teaching that enemies ought to be loved ignored the obvious antagonism between some human groups. Freud held that it is natural for humans to be aggressive towards one another, but not to love their neighbors and, worse still, their enemies as themselves. He rejected the GR not only for being unreasonable, but also for being in conflict with the aggressive instinct in humans.

Essentially Freud explains a deserved love is one where the beloved resembles the lover in important ways that the lover can in turn love oneself in the beloved and he claims that this is what Aristotle meant by saying that a friend is really another self (Aristotle, 1869). Freud went

further to demonstrate the pointlessness of the Christian ‘neighbour love’, which he viewed as a threat to self-love. He argues that if one’s neighbor is a stranger to them and if the neighbor cannot attract them by any worth of their own or any significance, it will be hard for them to love that neighbor. Thus, it seems that Freud’s task is to rescue love from indiscriminate and inclusive interpretation by the GR or Christianity. In his advocacy for love as a relationship that resembles exclusive genital (libido) intimacy, Freud dismisses the GR by stating that there is no point of a precept enunciated with so much solemnity if reason does not recommend it (Freud, 1961).

The Golden Rule as Absurd

Immanuel Kant brought the concept of autonomy into ethics. He claimed that all historical moral principles had failed because a person had to be duty bound to laws (heteronomy) and that time had come for each person to know that they are subject only to the laws given by themselves (autonomy). This autonomy must still be universally relevant since each individual is answerable to their own will (Kant, 1998). Therefore, under the notion of autonomy, the concern with human dignity is combined with the principle of universality to produce a conception of the moral law as self-legislated by each and for all.

Kant defended his categorical imperative CI against the historical or hypothetical moral imperative that lacked freedom and was end-oriented (consequentialist). For instance, a hypothetical imperative would take the form: “Do A in order to achieve X” or, in other words, “Give and it shall be given to you. Kant’s CI, by contrast, would simply declare: “Do A”, or “Give” or “You ought to give” without needing to state any future condition to be realized by your being generous or mean. Thus, Kant suggested that the principles of morality should be given categorically by each rational agent to himself or herself.

Readers of moral philosophy are divided on whether Kant’s CI and the GR are related or not. On the one hand are those who think that Kant through the CI proposed an ethical principle that is strikingly similar to the GR in that it is based on the same fundamental realization that self and others are similar (Ichthus, 2009). For instance, Helen Simons (2006) thinks that the GR and CI is one and the same thing when she indicates that the Golden Rule is a Categorical Imperative that often guides people's actions and enables them to know that they have done the right thing. Elsewhere, S. B. Thomas (1970) claimed that the CI and the GR are two sides of the same coin where one side (CI) is responsible for the rational scope of the other, and the other (GR) is responsible for the spiritual basis for the correct application of the other (CI).

On the other hand, are those who think that the CI and the GR are two different moral principles. Hirst (1934) argued that the will of the CI is by far inferior to the love of the GR. Hirst (1934) maintained that the GR is universal in its appeal rather than sectional as could happen in the case of the CI. Further, Carmichael (1973) held that the difference between the GR and CI was like that between egoism and high-mindedness where the GR enjoins everyone to make his or her ways a standard for everyone else as opposed to the CI which requires everyone to submit to universal standards.

Apparently Kant objected to the GR for not specifying what should be done and he took issue especially with the GR's love command the element that Kant ruled as pathological or a matter of feeling rather than of will or volition and concluded that there is no such thing as duty to love (Kant, 1889). In his attempt to strip love and all feelings or emotions from the GR in favor of reason or good intentions for ethical action, Kant preferred terms such as 'disinterested benevolence' or 'philanthropy' (Kant, 1797). Kant reasoned that feelings, desires and emotions are subjective and would lead to ethical relativism. He claimed that only reason, which to him is universal, would rescue ethics from relativism that was proclaimed by utilitarianism and religion. Moreover, Kant believed that reason is the ground of the dignity of humans and the source of their moral worth.

Through the CI, Kant rejected the GR as a universal law because it lacked the ground for duties to one's self as well as benevolent duties to others. He concluded that the GR was both vague and absurd. In contrast, the CI, based on reason, forbids any reference to feelings or wants be they one's own or those of others. Instead Kant argues that reason demands that an act is our duty and we must do it regardless of the individual's feelings or those of others.

The Golden Rule as Inferior to 'The New Commandment'

Ricoeur, uses his 'rhetoric of paradox' approach to resolve the inconsistency (as he saw it) between the 'love for enemies' command or what he also calls the new commandment and the GR. He concludes that the love for enemies is based on logic of superabundance and the GR is based on logic of equivalence hence the two do not correspond (Ricoeur, 1990). He claimed that love for enemies is based on unilateral love while the GR is based on bilateral justice. Further, Ricoeur maintained that love for enemies expects nothing in return, but the GR legitimizes a certain kind of reciprocity (Ricoeur, 1990). He viewed the GR as a reciprocity and thus implies equality between the parties involved, which leads to some form of a social contract between equal parties.

Ricoeur saw a progressive path toward true justice that stemmed from observing the love for enemies or the new commandment. For him, this progression, started with retaliation or *lex talionis* ('eye for an eye'), to reciprocity (which he calls 'justice' or the GR) and on to 'love' based on the new commandment of giving without expecting anything in return. It appears, however, that Ricoeur is trying to detach the GR from the new commandment or love for enemies, which is unnecessary because the two rules are identical and originated from the same source, Jesus Christ, who could not have contradicted himself.

CONCLUSION

Nietzsche criticism to the GR argues that human life, just like animal life, is about dominating and exploiting others especially the weak. He viewed Christianity, with its will to break the spirit of the strong and emphasis on equality or slave morality, as retrogressive. He viewed morality in terms of power, and more of it, rather than contentment; and war rather than peace. On the other

hand, Freud criticizes the GR by arguing that it would be meaningless for humans to love strangers as they love family members or close friends. Freud views the GR as impractical since he contends that it would be sensible to love one's neighbor so long as that neighbor loves you. Kant's criticism of the GR as absurd brings in the categorical imperative dimension where the concept of morality is self-legislated in line with what is universally acceptable not duty bound for all. The final criticism by Ricoeur, uses the rhetoric of paradox approach to resolve the inconsistency as he saw it between the love for enemies or what he also calls the new commandment and the GR. He maintained that love for enemies expects nothing in return, but the GR legitimizes a certain kind of reciprocity thereby deeming the GR as inferior to the new commandment.

This paper recommends that a deliberate embrace and application of the GR across all sectors of human interactions would enhance a sense of appreciation, belonging, love and harmony. This will go a long way in building bridges with individuals, communities and even nations with whom we have hitherto not been getting along well together.

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