

The Not So Golden Rule

Dan Flores argues that the Golden Rule can't be followed, even in principle.

The Golden Rule is (roughly) as follows: *treat others as you would have others treat you*. Philosophical reactions to it vary; it has both supporters and detractors. In any case, almost nobody who thinks critically about morality takes the literal version of the Golden Rule seriously, since there are just too many problems with it. To demonstrate this, I will look at a literal version of the Golden Rule espoused by John C. Maxwell, a well-known and influential motivational speaker, and briefly discuss some of the obvious problems that it faces. I will then examine a more sophisticated version of the Golden Rule espoused by philosopher Harry Gensler. While able to overcome some of the problems of the literal Golden Rule, Gensler's version nevertheless shares a common difficulty with it: in both cases, the moral agent is asked to imagine themselves in the place of another. Maxwell thinks this is easily done, and Gensler asks for vividness and accuracy in this act of imagination. I wish to show that any version of the Golden Rule that takes seriously the need to imagine oneself in the place of another is to ask one to do the impossible, so any versions of the Golden Rule that require this should be rejected.

An Argument For The Golden Rule

In *Ethics 101* (2005), John C. Maxwell claims that the Golden Rule should be accepted for the following reasons (pp.18-23):

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.
- Therefore
5. The Golden Rule should be accepted.

The claim that the Golden Rule is accepted by most people is arguably the most common feature of just about any discussion of the Golden Rule. Indeed, many religions and moral systems, from Islam and Christianity, Nigerian proverbs to Jainism, do have some version of it. And what could be simpler than to treat others as you would want to be treated? To do so, just imagine yourself in the place of the other; if, while in the place of the other, you would want to be treated as you were treating them, then treat them that way; if not, then don't.

Further, as Maxwell reflects, "When you live by the Golden Rule, everybody wins. If I treat you as well as I desire to be treated, you win. If you treat me likewise, I win. Where is the loser in that?" (p.23). The point is obvious: presuming all of us want to be treated well, faced with a choice of a world where individuals are treating others as they want to be treated, or one where they are not, it seems obvious to choose the world where everybody is acting in such a seemingly reciprocal way. Plain enough. Thus, Maxwell's Premise 3.

Maxwell's fourth premise is a type of guidance step, if you will.

He writes, "In a world with much uncertainty, I think many people are seeking direction." (p.27). Now certainly this is true. Maxwell continues, "The Golden Rule can provide that. It never changes, even as circumstances do. It gives a solid predicable direction every time it's used. And best of all, it actually works." What better to have when lost, than a compass? So when morally lost, who would not want a moral compass? On these grounds, Maxwell would have us believe that the Golden Rule is a standard of morality and that we should act in accordance with it.

Literal Golden Rule Problems

I take Maxwell's version to be the traditional, literal version of the Golden Rule. It is more-or-less the version that most of us have grown up knowing and loving. Yet, as is the case with so much of what is traditional, following the traditional Golden Rule is an unreflective reaction to inherited customs. "The Golden Rule," writes, Neil Duxbury in the article 'Golden Rule Reasoning, Moral Judgment, and Law' in the *Notre Dame Law Review* (2009), "is a routine principle of action... the Rule usefully serves as an interruptive tactic, like counting to ten to prevent losing our temper, or as a way of checking our standards... But most of the time the Rule is practiced unreflectively – the spontaneity of so much social action makes this inevitable" (p.84). So be it. And as is true with so much of what is traditional, the Golden Rule comes with some very traditional criticisms.

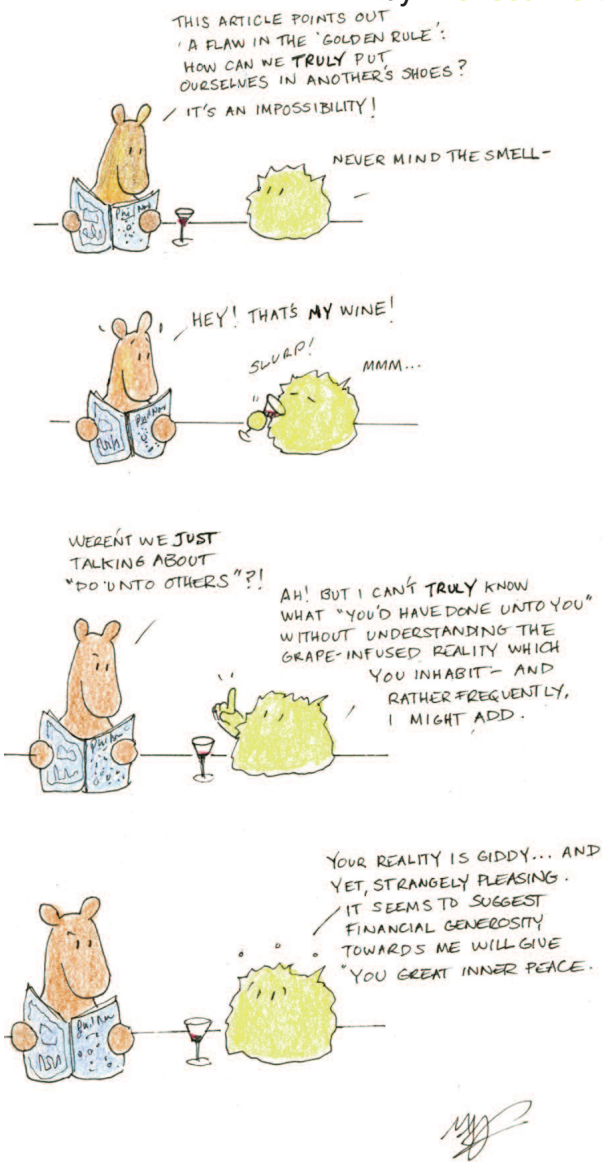
Consider, Maxwell asks, where is the loser in following the traditional Golden Rule? Well, as an obvious example, the loser is the victim of somebody who wishes to be treated brutally who abides by the Rule; or the person on the receiving end of someone who wishes that others would always be nothing but honest with them at all times. In such cases, abiding literally by the Golden Rule would violate what Harry Gensler, in *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (2011), calls 'regular moral norms' – what I will call 'ordinary moral principles' – norms and principles each of us would normally accept so that we would agree that the violation of them would be morally wrong or, at least, inappropriate. Yet treating somebody brutally would be to follow the traditional Golden Rule literally, if that's how *you* want to be treated. This is a rather large loophole. And hot on its heels, another common criticism of the Golden Rule is that it does not say in what specific ways any given person should act, nor does it explain why some action is morally correct or incorrect.

Another criticism is that just because some version of the traditional Golden Rule can be found from culture to culture and religion to religion does not mean that people within that culture or religion *actually* believe it to be true, much less practice it. To add to this, even if we had some universal understanding of what it is to be treated well and poorly, it simply isn't true that we all want to be treated well. Some people might (even rationally) think that they do not deserve to be treated well; others may not understand what it is to be treated well; some

SIMON + FINN

by Melissa Felder

SIMON + FINN CARTOON © MELISSA FELDER 2018 PLEASE VISIT SIMONANDFINN.COM



may simply not care one way or the other.

So insofar as far as the Golden Rule is a compass, I dare say that as Maxwell presents it, it is a broken compass, always pointing in the same direction, because, as I mentioned, it says nothing about A) The way others want to be treated relative to one's own desires of how to be treated; B) Which preferences are morally superior to others; and C) What *makes* certain preferences for behavior morally superior to others. This is hardly suitable for a moral precept.

On these accounts, Maxwell assumes far too much for his argument to work.

So much for the Golden Rule taken literally, then.

Gensler's Golden Rule

I take these criticisms of the Golden Rule as standard and, with the exception of my metaphor of Maxwell's broken compass, I take no credit for them. The fact is, these criticisms are obvious, so it may seem that I'm swinging at some low-hanging fruit. In his chapter on the Golden Rule, for example, Gensler is quick to note that one of the problems with it is that it does not take into account the fact that people stand in different relations to each other and in different sets of circumstances: it does not take it into account that you and I will be in a different situation with different beliefs, attitudes, and cultural practices. Second, the Golden Rule does not take into account the fact that the follower of the Golden Rule may well have 'defective desires'. If the masochist were a follower of the Golden Rule, their reasoning could be formulated as follows (following Gensler): 'I want to be tortured by Xavier; therefore, I should torture Xavier'. But, of course, any form of torture is usually unwanted, unwarranted, and morally wrong. Thus, the Golden Rule taken literally can lead to absurdities.

So, Gensler reformulates the Golden Rule. He begins by noting three key features of it:

1. A *same situation* clause.
2. A *present attitude* clause.
3. A *don't combine* clause; Do not combine the following:
 - a. I do something to another.
 - b. I'm unwilling that this be done to me in the same situation.

The question for the Golden Rule, then, is not, 'Am I now willing that this be done to me in my present situation?' Rather, the question surrounding the Golden Rule should be, 'Am I *now* willing that if I were in the *same* situation, then this be done to me?' As Gensler writes, The Golden Rule "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). There is a subtlety here. Imagine the case of a judge sentencing a criminal. The Golden Rule says 'Treat others as you would want to be treated'. Criminals want to be free, not incarcerated; therefore, if the judge were to put herself in the place of the criminal, the judge would want to be free; therefore, the judge should not incarcerate the criminal. This is obviously wrong-headed. Imagine now a case where the judge imagined herself in the place of the criminal, but with *the present attitudes and beliefs of the judge*. The judge/criminal would realize that as a criminal she poses a threat to society, and that as judge, the best thing for society would be to be incarcerated. Thus, the judge/criminal would hold that "While I do not want to be incarcerated, I nevertheless realize that I should be; I, therefore, consent to being incarcerated." And, so, by stipulating a same-situation and present attitude clause, Gensler's version of the Golden Rule is able to avoid the problems of the diversity of desires that the traditional Golden Rule faces.

A Conceptual Flaw

Although Gensler is trying to be fair and consistent by taking into account relevant differences of situations, it remains unclear whether what he is asking a moral agent to do is actually possible. Consider:

“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, the Golden Rule is a powerful tool of moral thinking.” (p.84).

So we are to ‘vividly and accurately’ imagine ourselves in the place of another. Maxwell holds the same condition. My question is, even if your imaginations have been vivid, how can you *know* that you have *accurately* imagined yourself in the place of another? If we are to take the ‘vividly and accurately’ criteria seriously and yet it cannot be met, then the Golden Rule cannot itself be met and, therefore, it cannot be a suitable moral standard.

In the movie *Being John Malkovich* (2000), one of the characters, Craig, realizes that by entering through a small door he can experience whatever the actor John Malkovich experiences. Now a puzzle arises – let’s call it the ‘Malkovich Dilemma’. Presumably, whoever Craig is, Craig is that person and no other. In the parlance of the metaphysics of identity, one might say that what it is to be X is that it stands in relation to another thing Y such that X is not Y and Y is not X. Given such an identity condition, ‘each thing is what it is and is not another thing’ (a phrase attributed to Bishop Joseph Butler). If this is so, and Craig (X) pops into John Malkovich’s (Y’s) mind and experiences precisely what Malkovich experiences, then how can it be said that Craig is still Craig and not John Malkovich? This is the Malkovich Dilemma. Conversely, if Craig has Malkovich’s experiences and yet Craig is still very much aware that he is Craig (as is the case in the movie) then Craig, as a separate mental, conscious being, could not *know* that the experiences he’s having are the ones Malkovich is having, because, after all, Craig is not Malkovich. Furthermore, if Craig were *apparently* having the same experiences as Malkovich, but reacts differently to them, it seems clear that Craig wouldn’t *actually* be having the same experiences, since our reactions to our experiences are still part of the web of our experiences. If X had exactly Y’s experiences, then this would include all relevant experiences for the same duration, with the same vividness and meaning, otherwise it wouldn’t be the same experience. But if X truly does have Y’s experiences, including the precise reactions that Y would have, how is X different from Y? There would simply be no difference between the two. Indeed, there would only be one experiencer, since strictly the same experiences could not have both difference and identity.

So, why does this fancy metaphysics spell trouble for the Golden Rule? Well, if what I will call the ‘identity condition’ – that one must be able to imagine one’s self in the place of another – is meant in a strong sense, as Maxwell and Gensler imagine it to be, then if the identity condition is an impossibility, so too is the Golden Rule. And since it *is* impossible to truly imagine one’s self in the place of another in a strong sense, even a mod-

ified Golden Rule is thus an impossibility.

One final consideration. Perhaps you think I am being unjustly dismissive of the idea of putting one’s self in the place of another, and that I should be a little more charitable toward Gensler. After all, Gensler tells us that when I am imagining myself in the place of another, I am to imagine myself only as having those

properties of another person “that I think are or *might be*” relevant to the situation (p.84, my emphasis). However, even if we were to adopt a softer, more charitable interpretation, the simple fact of the matter is that as long as I am allowed to act on what I merely *think* are the relevant properties and circumstances, then I can no longer be asked to *accurately* imagine myself in the place of another, if ‘accurately’ means what we normally take it to mean – ‘being precisely factually true’.

Conclusion

We can be even more charitable with Gensler. He tells us that the Golden Rule is a ‘consistency principle’, and that “It does not replace regular moral norms” (p.81); and so, “the Golden Rule does not compete with principles like ‘It’s wrong to

steal’ or ‘One ought to do whatever maximizes enjoyment.’ The Golden Rule operates on a different level”:

“The golden rule captures the *spirit* behind morality. It helps us to see the point behind moral rules. It engages our reasoning, instead of imposing an answer. It counteracts self-centeredness. And it concretely applies ideas like fairness and concern. So, the Golden Rule makes a good one-sentence summary of what morality is about.” (p.89).

Here however the problem with the Golden Rule is fully exposed. It is precisely because 1) It is not an ‘infallible guide’ to what is right or wrong; 2) It doesn’t say what specific acts to do; 3) It “does not replace regular moral norms”; and 4) It asks that the moral agent do something impossible, that any version of the Golden Rule that would still be recognizable as the Golden Rule doesn’t really *do* anything.

Notice that when somebody follows the Golden Rule to the letter and by doing so does something morally bad, our default position is to say, “Well, they clearly had defective desires,” or “They made a mistake because they did not take everything into consideration.” In other words, the Golden Rule defers to our ordinary moral principles. Consider further, if the default position in cases where the Golden Rule fails is our ordinary moral principles, then the Golden Rule cannot ground our ordinary moral principles. If ethics is the inquiry into the basic claims of morality, then upon philosophical scrutinization of the Golden Rule, we find that, in the words of Quine, “there is nothing to scrute” after all. We should focus our attention on ordinary moral principles instead.

© DAN FLORES 2018

Dan Flores teaches philosophy and humanities and is the Director of the Northwest Honors College at Houston Community College.

