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THE CONFUCIAN GOLDEN RULE: A NEGATIVE FORMUALTION

It has perhaps been a source of wonder why Confucius sought to formulate the so-called Golden Rule of Morality in a negative fashion:

> Never do unto others what you would not like them to do onto you.[1]

And again:

> Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you.[2]

While a fair amount has been said upon this subject, most of the discussion seems to center around the point of explaining why this formulation, while negative, does not differ at all in intention from the positive formulation.[3] It is my opinion that such attempts may have the effect of blurring the essential point behind the specifically negative formulation – a point which I hope to elucidate. For it seems to be a first principle of scholarship to attempt to take the philosopher at his word, and if he has formulated this fundamental principle in a certain fashion, then perhaps he had a very good reason for so doing. As Confucius regards this negative formulation of the Golden Rule as the most important single proposition for ethical practise, it would appear to this reader that: (a.) he would take great care in the manner of its elaboration; and, (b.) if he has taken pains to express it in its most efficacious form, its negative formulation is no semantic accident.[4] With these presuppositions tucked safely under my belt, I proceed perilously to propose to analyse the strategy behind such a formulation.[5]

It is my contention that such a formulation is first of all consonant with other basic implicit Confucian attitudes such as modesty or humility,

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naturalism, humanism and the belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, and is, as such, consistent with what we might then term the more inclusive framework of Confucian morality.[6] Secondly, that such a formulation might very well have the intent and/or the effect of promoting moral growth and preventing moral harm.

To take up the first point first, that such a formulation is consonant with the attitude of modesty or humility and is, as such, consistent with the Confucian moral outlook as a whole, we might consider the following point. It is to be noted that many great ethical sages, among them Socrates, Buddha and Confucius, refused to make very many positive statements about matters which they claimed to possess little or no knowledge.[7] If we understand a negative formulation of the Golden Rule as carrying the implication that one does not know with certainty what is good that one ought to do unto others, then such putative lack of knowledge concerning the positive nature of the good would be at once a sub-set of the lack of certain knowledge in general and would be thus consistent with the attitude of modesty. We might say that such an absence of certain knowledge concerning that which is good would be consistent with the attitude of not claiming to be good or thinking oneself as good, and *a fortiori*, exhortations to act in such fashions towards one's fellows, would appear to be a logical consequence of the attitudes of modesty and humility. Modesty we may take as the non-claim to the possession of certain knowledge in general. Humility we may take as the lack of knowledge about what is good and its consequent attitude of not claiming to be or thinking oneself as good. The specific formulation of the Golden Rule in negative terms, then, might be as a result of an adherence to the attitudes of modesty in epistemological matters and humility in ethical matters. At the very least we can say that such an absence of a positive formulation of the Golden Rule is consonant with such implicit values of modesty and humility and is, as such, consistent with the more inclusive framework of Confucian morality.

It would seem to be consistent with the attitude that one could possess certain knowledge about various matters that, about such matters that one possessed certain knowledge, one could and perhaps should make definite, concrete and positive statements. For example, to take the case in point, if one knew what the good were, one could go about simply stating its positive content quite concretely. If one possessed a positive definition of the good,

it would not be at all surprising to find a positive formulation of the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Two presuppositions would appear to be required by such an elaboration: (i) that you know how others ought to act towards you and therefore, by implication, that you know what the good is; (ii) that what is good for you is also good for others. It would appear that such presuppositions would require a certain amount of what we may call moral *hubris* – that is to say – the opposite qualities from those of modesty or humility.

On the other hand, it would appear to be consistent with the attitude of (a) not knowing for certain what the good is, not to know what is good for oneself and (b) *a fortiori*, not knowing that this would be good for other people. Such an absence of knowledge about the positive content of the good would entail such an attitude of modesty which would preclude either knowing what is good for oneself or what is good for others. Indeed, such an absence of knowledge about the positive content of the good would entail such an attitude of humility such that, even if I were to think that something, x, were good for me, I should not then have the right to assume that it would be good for someone else. For such a knowledge claim to the positive content of goodness would not only be a claim to knowing what is good but what is more, that what is good, is also universalizable.

If one did possess such attitudes of modesty and humility, it would follow that one might chart a very careful course to avoid making knowledge claims either for oneself, or more importantly, by extension, for others. One could avoid making such knowledge claims with respect to what is good by stating the moral rule in such a way as to exhort one to the avoidance of evil without stating that one should do good. This would appear to presuppose that one has knowledge about what is evil but it would not appear to presuppose that one possessed knowledge about what is evil; on the other hand, it may well be the case that it is easier to know what is evil than to know what is good. If knowledge of evil is easier to come by than knowledge of good, to know what is evil or to presuppose to know what is evil would be less immodest than to claim to know what is good. That the knowledge of evil is less difficult to possess would appear to be the case in the Western tradition of morality wherein the ten commandments are all commandments which proscribe evil-doing of one kind or another. Moreover, as a general epistemological point, from Aristotle onwards, it would seem that philo-

sophers in the West have a much easier time stating what something is not rather than stating what something is. One may be referred, *exempli gratia,* to the Western tradition of the *via negativa* in the attempt to formulate the definition of the properties of the Divine. It would appear, then, that it is more consonant with the attitudes of modesty in epistemology and humility in ethical knowledge to claim to know only what is evil. In order to avoid appearing to possess knowledge about what is good, one might take special care, then, to formulate the ethical principle in terms of the avoidance of evil-doing. Such a formulation of the ethical principle in order to remain consistent with the attitudes of modesty and humility could be accomplished by stating the ethical principle in a negative version.

I think that in order to avoid undue prolixity, we may consider the consonance of the negative formulation of the Golden Rule with such implicit Confucian attitudes as naturalism and humanism at one time. We may also notice the consistence of the negative formulation with the belief in the inherent goodness of human nature. If one possessed an attitude akin to what we may call naturalism, it would imply that there would be no need for an ethics that would in some way either oppose human nature – or to attempt to impose upon human nature some set of values which would not be present by nature. The connection between humanism and naturalism on the one hand and the belief in the inherent goodness of human nature on the other, should appear to be obvious if one utilizes this definition of naturalism. To believe in the inherent goodness of human nature is simply another way of stating the case that one would not need an extrinsic moral framework in order to correct the inherent evil in human nature. What moral rules that would exist would have as their sole purpose the elimination of any obstacles that could arise that would keep one from expressing one's true nature. If one were good by nature, there would not be a need for positive, concrete moral rules. One would need only to ensure that one's nature be given an opportunity to express itself in its original character. It would only be if goodness were something extrinsic to human nature that one would require a specific injunction to act in a positive, concrete way in order to know how to proceed morally.

To put the point rather simply. If one did not know how to act morally, he could be offered the set of moral instructions to act towards others as he liked others to act towards him, Thus, the positive formulation

of the Golden Rule would be a means of instructing one how to act morally. Such an instruction, however general be its formulation, would appear to have as its presupposition that one is in need of such a formulation because one would have no inclination by nature to act towards others in some way or ways that would be considered good. If one's moral actions, on the other hand, arose from a natural inclination, there would be no necessity for a stipulation to act in such and such a manner. One would do so naturally. The proper function of ethical dicta might be to ensure that one did not choose to act in such ways that might impede the original character of human nature.

One might raise the question at this point why one would need a negative version to instruct us as to what evils to avoid – or that one need avoid evil-doing – if we are good by nature. Would this not also be unnecessary? If we have a natural disposition to the good, a counsel to avoid evil would also appear to be superfluous.

Perhaps we might approach an answer to such a question in this way. The ethical problem for Confucious, if I might be so bold as to say, is not that we are not naturally good, but that from practise we are removed from our original natures.[8] Thus, in order to return to our original natures, while it would be senseless (or at least redundant) and possibly useless to counsel us to act in certain positive ways, it might be necessary to counsel us to avoid evil-doing in the meanwhile, such practises having arisen from our having been removed from our original nature. The positive prescription would be senseless or at least redundant if offered as an extrinsic moral command, if it were already in our nature to act in such a moral fashion. Indeed the positive version might well be useless if our moral behaviour were to arise from a natural inclination. For, to offer a moral commandment to follow which is supposed to arise from one's own nature is useless if it is not already arising from one's own nature (for if the moral action is not present by nature then how can an extrinsic moral rule summon it into being?) and if it is present by nature, then the moral rule would appear to be otiose. On the other hand, if it is present by nature, but removed by practise, then a moral rule might be necessary to remove the practises which have arisen. Such a moral rule might help to remove the negative practises that obstruct the operation of the true human nature. Thus, perhaps, the counsel to avoid evil is the most important, and in this analysis, the only kind of moral instruction that

can be given. For the injunction to positive, concrete actions would be at the least superfluous – that is to say – parasitic upon a return to our own real nature and to that extent at best a secondary counsel while the counsel to avoid evil-doing would be a crucial and important moral stipulation since few if any of us are in harmony with our real natures very much of the time.[9]

It would appear, then, that it is consistent with the values of naturalism and humanism that one would offer a negative formulation of the Golden Rule. For, if we understand by naturalism that one should attempt to in some way uncover one's original nature and follow that, moral prescriptions would be in the nature of services to that end and not extrinsic commands which would be imposed upon human nature from an external source. In order to serve the ends of naturalism, one might offer such a negative version of the Golden Rule so as to avoid the pitfalls one might fall into through the adoption of incorrect practises. To offer a negative version only would be to demonstrate a faith in humanity, or, if you like, a humanism. Such a faith in humanity, or humanism, we can see would be consonant with if not identical to a belief in the original goodness of human nature.

I would like to broach a second topic, however briefly, which relates closely to the first. In fact, the second topic might well be a logical derivation from the first. For, I would argue that in addition to the fact that the negative formulation of the Golden Rule is logically consistent with the implicit Confucian values of modesty or humility, naturalism or humanism and the belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, such a negative formulation might well have the intention and if not the intention, the hidden benefit of the promotion of moral growth and the prevention of moral harm.

If one is not good by nature, one has no way of behaving morally other than following some external moral principle. If moral action is good and I am not good by nature, then it follows that the following of a moral principle which has positive content is good for me. This may be universalized. If my neighbor, like myself, is also not good by nature, then he, too, is in need of an extrinsic moral principle. His life is better, just as mine is via the imposition of a moral principle upon his otherwise evil nature just as my life is better by the imposition of a moral principle upon my nature.

Following the above reasoning, I would be performing a service for my neighbor if I were to impose some moral principle of conduct upon him.

For, if it is good for me to impose such a principle upon myself, if we follow the positive version of the Golden Rule, it is good for me to impose such a principle upon my neighbor.

It is perhaps in order to avoid such a consequence that Confucius formulates the Golden Rule in a negative fashion. We might call, for lack of a better word, the mistaken imposition of a moral principle upon our neighbor, the fallacy of committing moral *hubris*. I might inadvertently do moral harm to another – through persuading him to adopt some moral principle of mine to follow (which I thought was good for myself) – through the consequent prevention or stifling of his moral growth.

It might be thought that we are taking this case to extremes, but it might be that it is to avoid such a possible abuse of the Golden Rule, that such great care is taken to formulate it negatively. To take an extreme example. What I might consider to be good for myself might be the suppression of my nature as I consider it to be inherently evil. Just as I must suppress my own natural self, I would want to suppress it in my neighbor. If I have any evil urges, I am indebted to my neighbor if he eradicates these from me by aiding me to act in conformance with some positive moral principle. Likewise, I have the right, and even the duty to act in such a way towards him. Empirically, we may find many examples from history which perhaps arise from this abuse of the positive version of the Golden Rule.

If it is actually the case that our nature is inherently good, then if I suppress the natural urges of my neighbor, I might in fact be culpable of committing moral harm. For, the natural moral expression of my neighbor might never see the light if it becomes buried under the observance of some external moral rule. In my effort to do my neighbor good, I might inadvertently do him moral harm.

It would appear that the way to avoid the perpetration of moral harm would be through the avoidance of any generalization of positive instructions as to how to act concretely towards one's neighbors. The negative formulation of the Golden Rule might then have this as its intent. If I am advised only to avoid doing moral harm to my neighbor, I will run no chance of unwittingly perpetrating moral harm upon him through the unintentional effect of preventing his own natural moral growth.

On the other hand, the negative formulation, would be consistent with the basic affirmation of the goodness of human nature. One could not be

counselled towards the performance of any action which would entail acting towards another in some specific, concrete way. One could not be counselled towards the imposition of some moral rule upon one's fellow creatures. Consequently, there is no possibility of the perpetration of some unwitting moral harm upon another.

But the positive formulation is subject to another, more specific form of abuse. Through the general permissiveness allowed via the positive formulation of the principle, specific moral actions could be counselled. These specific moral actions might not only have the inadvertent effect of preventing moral growth, but also might actually bring about moral harm in more specific terms.

For example, if I am counselled to act towards others as I like others to act towards me, I might possibly act towards others in such ways as to cause them actual moral harm. To illustrate, if I find that there are people in India who are starving who happen to be vergetarians, I might bring them meat to keep them from starvation. This could be justified under the positive version of the principle. Since I would like to have meat if I am hungry, I will give others meat to eat if they are hungry. My intent to perform a morally good act might have as its unintended consequence an act which causes moral harm.

Such a possible abuse is prevented through the negative version of the Golden Rule as it in no way encourages us to act in specific, positive ways towards others. It merely prevents us from acting in ways which we take to be evil. But it could not be applied in such a case as to justify acting towards others in concrete, positive ways. It would appear, then, that the couching of the Golden Rule in negative language might well have as its intent the prevention of the unintentional perpetration of moral harm onto another.

We might argue, then, that the negative version of the Golden Rule has the advantage – if not the intent – of the prevention of moral harm. It prevents both the passive form of moral harm which can come about through the stifling of the natural impulse towards good via the imposition of an extrinsic moral principle upon human nature and the active form of moral harm which can have specific, concrete instantiation. From the prevention of the moral harm which we may speak about as the passive form another hidden benefit may arise. For, if the negative version has as one of

its effects the preventing of moral harm through the prevention of the stifling of human nature it actively promotes the growth of the moral nature. If, as we stated above, evil-doing arises only through the adoption of incorrect practises that are contrary to nature, then if the negative version adjures us not to act towards others it would seem to have as its possible intent and at least its effect of encouraging each and every one of us to develop our own intrinsic moral nature. By discouraging positive expressions of moral action towards others, it not only would have as its intent the prevention of moral harm but also the promotion of moral growth.

It can be seen, now, that the goal of the prevention of moral harm and the promotion of moral growth is in reality a logical consequence of the adherence to the Confucian values of modesty or humility, naturalism, humanism and the belief in the inherent goodness of human bnture. For it would follow from the attitude of epistemological modesty and ethical humility that one would not wish to make mistakes, in particular, mistakes that would possibly prevent others from developing the capacities that could rectify their making of mistakes. It would follow from the implicit belief in naturalism and humanism that one would not only wish to prevent moral harm to others but that one would wish to encourage moral growth. Finally, it would follow from the implicit or explicit belief in the goodness of human nature that one would attempt to remove all possible obstacles to the proper expression of true or original human nature. One would make a special attempt, perhaps, to formulate the basic ethical principle in such a wise as to avoid the abuse of such a principle. In particular, one would wish to avoid the possible abuse of such a principle which would block the avenue towards moral growth.

In conclusion, then, we might say that the negative version of the Golden Rule is not a semantic accident. We might also say that one should be careful not to immediately seek to reduce the negative version to the positive version without first examining the negative version to see if it possesses some distinct qualities which would not be possessed by the positive version. If it does possess some distinct qualities, it might behoove us to examine what they are and to see if they offer us some unique ethical insights.

It would appear from our analysis that the negative version of the Golden Rule does differ significantly from the positive version and that the difference that exists might well be intended by the author who has taken

such great care to formulate the principle in negative terms. From our specific analysis, it would seem that we have indicated that such a negative version of the Golden Rule is consistent with the inclusive whole of Confucian morality in that it is consonant with such implicit values as modesty or humility, naturalism, humanism and the belief in the inherent goodness of human nature. It would also seem that we have illustrated how such a negative version can have the effect of the prevention of the unintended perpetration of moral harm and the promotion of moral growth. Such effects in turn can be seen as part and parcel of the most basic insights that are unique to and form a basis of Confucian morality as a whole. Such conclusions may encourage us to avoid the reduction of the negative version to the positive version and to seek further to clarify why Confucius has couched his most basic principle in these terms.

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NOTES

1. Lun-yü, XV, 23; XII, 2; V, 11.
2. Chung Yung, ch. 13.
3. *Cf.* e.g., Wing-tsit Chan, *Neo-Confucianism, Etc.*, Oriental Publications, Hong Kong, 1969, pp. 6–7; H. G. Creel, *Confucius, The Man & The Myth*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., London, 1951. p. 142. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way*, Harper & Row, New York, 1960, pp. 131–2.
4. Tzu-kung asked saying, Is there any single saying that one can act upon all day and every day? The Master said, . . . 'Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you.' Lun-yü, XV, 23, (A. Waley, transl.)
5. Such a negative formulation occurs in the original formulation of the Golden Rule in *Leviticus*, XIX, 18. *Vide*, the well-known story of Hillel who when asked to condense the whole Law in its briefest possible form answers, 'What is hateful unto thee, do it not unto thy fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is explanation.' *Shab.* 31a.
6. There is debate, to be sure, as to whether the latter point can be considered intrinsic to Confucius. (*Cf.*, D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1970, pp. 12, 44, *et. passim*.) But, Lun-yü, XVI, 9 would appear to grant the point that a man may be born naturally wise. In addition, Wing-tsit Chan, by clearly attributing quotations from Chung Yung to Confucius, would appear to be ascribing such works to Confucius in which explicit references to the goodness of human

nature do appear. *Cf.*, Wing-tsit Chan, *Neo-Confucianism, Etc.*, pp. 6–7. In any case, we can take such attitudes as characteristic of Confucianism if not Confucius.

7. '. . . I don't know even the least little thing about virtue, I don't know what virtue is!' Plato, *Meno*, 70A. Chan states: 'But what is this general virtue in concrete terms? Confucius offered neither a precise definition nor a comprehensive description (*jen*).' *Ibid., p.* 6. 'There were four qualities from which the Master was entirely free: he had no foregone conclusions, he was not overpositive, not obstinate, and never saw things from his own point of view alone. Lun-yü, IX, 4. Arthur Waley says, 'In view of this repeated refusal to . . . accept or give a definition of Goodness, there is surely nothing surprising in the statement of Book IX (opening sentence) that 'the Master rarely discoursed upon Goodness.' *The Analects of Confucius*, Random House, New York, 1938, p. 29.. *Cf.*, also Lun-yü, II, 17; V, 7, 12; VII, 16, 19; XVII, 17; XVIII, 8.
8. It is in this way that I interpret, 'By nature men are pretty much alike; it is learning and practise that set them apart.' Lun-yü, XVII, 2. (translation, Wing-tsit Chan, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960, p. 25).
9. *Vide*, Lun-yü, V, 26; VII, 16, *et passim.*