# What Is Wrong with the Golden Rule?

# Alan Tapper

Curtin University

alandtapper@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The Golden Rule (“what you want done [or not done] to yourself, do [or don’t do] to others”) is the most widely accepted summary statement of human morality, and even today it continues to have philosophical supporters. This article argues that the Golden Rule suffers from four faults, the first two related to the ethics of justice and the second two related to the ethics of benevolence. One, it fails to explain how to deal with non-reciprocation. Two, it fails to make clear that my obligations are obligations regardless of how I would wish to be treated by others. Three, it lacks any special value in explaining the right occasions for benevolence. And, four, it has no power to motivate benevolence.

KEYWORDS: The Golden Rule, justice, benevolence, reciprocity

1. THE UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF THE GOLDEN RULE

The Golden Rule is by far the most generally acknowledged summary statement of human morality. Harry J. Gensler is right to call it “a global standard—en­dorsed by nearly every religion and culture.”1 Here are various expressions of the rule from classical sources.2 From the *Upanishads*: “Let no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself; this is the sum of righteousness. . . .” In the Buddhist *Dhammapada*: “Doing as one would be done by, kill not nor cause to kill.” In the *Analects*, Confucius says: “What I do not wish men to do to me, I also wish not to do to men.” In the *Laws*, Plato says: “. . . do to others as I would they should do to me.” His contemporary Isocrates says: “Do not do to others that at which you would be angry if you suffered it from others.” In *De Beneficiis* Seneca says: “let us so give as we would wish to receive.” The Jewish rabbi, Hillel, teaches: “Whatsoever you would that men should not do to you, do not do that to them. This is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary.” In the New Testa­ment his contemporary Jesus teaches: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6: 31; Matthew 7: 12).

In modern times the moral standing of the Golden Rule has remained surpris­ingly durable. Thomas Hobbes holds that the rule is “one easy sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity,” in effect a summary of all morality.3 John Locke calls it “that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue.”4 John Stuart Mill tells us that: “To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbour as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.”5 Charles Darwin says that “To do good unto others—to do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you—is the foundation-stone of morality.”6 C. S. Lewis calls the rule a “summing up of what everyone, at bottom, had always known to be right.”7 According to Kurt Baier, the negative version of the Golden Rule sums up “the moral standpoint.”8 John Finnis says the Golden Rule is “a potent solvent and determinant in moral matters.”9 Jeffrey Reiman says: “That the Golden Rule is a nearly universally accepted test of morality strongly suggests that it corresponds to a natural tendency of reason, perhaps the very structure of con­science itself.”10 Hans Küng says that the Golden Rule “should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations and religions.”11 Jeffrey Wattles contends that “The rule is an expression of human kinship, the most fundamental truth underlying morality.”12 Michael Shermer tells us that “at its base lies the foundation of most human interactions and exchanges.”13 Richard Dawkins makes it the first commandment of his ten alternatives to the biblical Ten Commandments.14 Derek Parfit says: “By requiring us to imagine ourselves in other people’s positions, the Golden Rule may provide what is psychologically the most effective way of making us more impartial, and morally motivating us.”15 Gensler says the Golden Rule

nicely captures the spirit behind morality. It helps us to see the point behind specific moral rules. It concretely applies ideals like fairness, concern, and impar­tiality. It engages our reasoning, instead of imposing an answer. It motivates us and counteracts our limited sympathies. And it doesn’t assume any one specific theoretical approach to ethics. If you had to give one sentence to express what morality is about, you couldn’t do better than [the Golden Rule]. In this sense the golden rule is the summary of morality.16

The point of this article is to question this widely shared point of view. My argument contends that the Golden Rule fails to summarize what we gener­ally take morality to be on four counts. One, it fails to explain how to deal with non-reciprocation. Two, it fails to make clear that my obligations are obligations regardless of how I would wish to be treated by others. Three, it lacks any special value in explaining the right occasions for benevolence. And, four, it has no power to motivate benevolence.

2. SOME PRELIMINARIES

The Golden Rule is usually taken as a general guide to ethical action. That is, it is a principle from which all morally good actions can be deduced. However, the rule does not say: “Love your neighbor” or “Love your enemies.” It does not say: “Behave justly.” It does not say: “Seek peace and follow it.” It does not say, “Be kind to those who are in trouble or help those in need.” It does not say: “Do no harm.” It does not say, “Maximize happiness” or “maximize utility.” It says something very different from all of these familiar maxims: it tells me to “take into account what I would wish to be done to me.” As I interpret it, the Golden Rule must include the “as you would be done by.” It is this that makes the rule distinctive and must be preserved in any interpretation.

The Golden Rule may also be understood as a motive or prompt to action rather than a guide. It could serve as a motive because it moves us to see the other person as “another us,” rather than merely “an other.” In section 4 below this understanding of the role of the Golden Rule as a motive to good action is considered.

Another preliminary point is whether the Golden Rule is a single rule or two rules, one “positive” and the other “negative,” the positive version being an injunction to “do to others as you would have others do to you” and the nega­tive version being “do not do to others as you would have others not do to you.” Amongst Golden Rule proponents, some prefer a maximalist ethics based on the positive version while others prefer the more minimal ethics of the negative version. Gensler’s view is that there is no valid distinction between these two positions: every positive statement can be reframed as a negative and vice versa.17 I say this just to put it aside, not to enter into the debate, though in fact I agree with Gensler on this.

The most common objection to the rule is the objection from diverse values. It was stated, bluntly, by George Bernard Shaw: “Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may not be the same.”18 Or, more generally: their values may not be the same. The Golden Rule, such critics say, only works when there are shared values. Thus, if A values X and B values Y, and A applies the Golden Rule in determining how to act towards B, and A would wish for B to act to him so as to promote value X, the rule will require A to act towards B in a way that promotes value X and will not allow any force to the fact that B’s values include a preference for Y over X.

The crude version of this objection is what, following Gensler,19 might be called the broccoli problem. This is the claim that the rule requires us to serve broccoli to guests who dislike broccoli just because we like broccoli and we would like them to serve us broccoli if we were their guests. The more sophisticated state­ment is the claim that the Golden Rule has no place for acknowledging legitimate value differences.

The force of the objection turns on how much we think that people’s values and tastes do differ. If they differed not at all, the objection would fail. If they differed radically, then the Golden Rule would not have much application. No­tice, however, that it would still have some application. To be fully successful the objection would have to suppose that there are no common human values and tastes. One might reply that very often we do not have to worry about value differences, and if the Golden Rule worked in those sorts of cases it could still be an important ethical precept. I’m not going to discuss the soundness of the different values objection. Whether or not it is sound, clearly it is limited in its scope.20 The focal question here is: How well does the Golden Rule work when we have common values and tastes? It is on that question that I wish to focus.

3. JUSTICE AND THE GOLDEN RULE

In this section I consider the relation between that Golden Rule and justice. I con­tend that the rule conflicts with what we understand as justice on two grounds.

My first contention concerns the place of reciprocity in ethics. I’ll approach it through an imaginary scenario. Consider the case of two neighbors, Flanders and Simpson. Flanders tries to live by the Golden Rule. He wants his neighbor to treat him well, and he believes that the rule requires him to treat his neighbor well just because he knows he wants to be treated well by his neighbor. But the neighbor, Simpson, is of a different disposition. Simpson is happy to take his neighbor’s help, the more the better, but he has no interest in giving anything in return. Why should he? Let Flanders be as neighborly as he wishes—that’s his problem. He, Simpson, has better things to do than worry about how to help out Flanders with his troubles.

The problem here concerns the attitude that Flanders should take towards his non-reciprocating neighbor. What does the Golden Rule now require him to do? And how does that compare with morality as understood without the aid of the rule? Clearly, the rule requires that Flanders carry on as before. Simpson’s non-reciprocation is no escape clause exempting Flanders from the requirements of the rule. Nothing in the rule mentions the response of the neighbor as even relevant to the ethics of Flanders’ behavior. And this puts the Golden Rule at odds with what I will call common sense morality. Common sense morality says that Flanders has no obligation to treat well a neighbor who will not treat him well in return. Flanders can say, “Alright, if that’s how you feel, I’ll keep my distance and offer my services to those who will appreciate them better.” He has seen that his attempts at good neighborliness are not appreciated. The point here is not that Flanders must give up on helping Simpson; it is that he may quite reasonably and ethically choose to do so. Nothing is now morally required of him.

On this view, the moral landscape involves a crucial distinction. Some things are required of a good person, as a matter of justice and cooperativeness; other things are not required, and they are matters of freely given benevolence. Benevo­lence to those in need is one thing; benevolence to those who are not in need, or who are not well-meaning, or who will not reciprocate when they can, is quite a different thing. But the Golden Rule, taken at face value, makes no allowance for any such distinction.

Let’s now suppose that the neighbor is a really nasty piece of work. Do we really think that Flanders should treat such a person as he would wish that per­son to treat him? In the extreme case, following that Golden Rule will amount to aiding and abetting evil. Once we take the story that far, it should be obvious that common sense morality has a serious point. Being nice to those who are nasty is in effect not being nice at all.

So the key question is this: If A follows the Golden Rule in his treatment of B, but B does not follow it in her treatment of A, must A continue to follow the rule in his treatment of B? If our answer is yes, then why? The Golden Rule seemingly requires doing good to those who do ill as much as it requires doing good to those who will properly value the offer to cooperate or the offer of a helping hand. It has the effect of rewarding or aiding the wrongdoer. Interpreted in this way, the rule has the effect, though not the intention, of promoting injustice.

If the answer is no—that is, if we are permitted to discriminate between ben­eficiaries on moral grounds—then the Golden Rule is not the general moral rule it appears to be. It requires a second rule, one that will show us how to draw the distinction between beneficiaries. That distinction would seem to require a justice-type criterion. Interpreted in this highly qualified way, the Golden Rule by itself would be applicable only to those situations where both parties follow the rule. This interpretation reduces the rule to a mere endorsement of mutual benevolence.

Gensler comes close to addressing this question. He distinguishes the Golden Rule from what he calls its near cousin, the Doormat Fallacy. This is the mistake of supposing that the Golden Rule requires us to always do what others want us to do. This is a mistake because the rule “lets us say no [to unreasonable requests], if we’re willing that others say no to us in similar circumstances.” The Golden Rule, he says, “works best if you love yourself and care about how you’re treated.”21 This may be true, but it doesn’t answer the objection, which is not about unreasonable requests, but about failure to reciprocate.

Some have pointed out that if the Golden Rule is a rule for A’s behavior towards B, it is also a rule for B’s behavior towards A. This is true; it is a rule for anyone. But this does not imply that A can rely on B following the rule, even if he follows it himself.

Curiously, more than a few commentators think of the Golden Rule as a “rule of reciprocity.”22 Marcus Singer, for example, interprets the rule as a rule of reciprocity in this way:

anyone who applies to another a standard of which he would complain if it were applied to himself has no moral grounds for his complaint. He is being both immoral and illogical. It follows, then, that the Golden Rule formulates a fundamental requirement of justice, that everyone’s conduct must be judged by the same standards, and that no one has, in general, any warranted claim to a special or privileged position. It is therefore at the basis of the Principle of Justice, that what is right or wrong for one person must be right or wrong for any similar person in similar circumstances.23

All this is true, but anyone who fails to grasp that “what is right or wrong for one person must be right or wrong for any similar person in similar circumstances” is lacking an understanding of justice, and teaching them the Golden Rule will be of no assistance in correcting that lack. The rule, if interpreted as Singer interprets it, merely says: Behave justly. Archbishop Whately was right about this: the Golden Rule is “far from being designed to impart to men the first notions of justice. On the contrary, it presupposes that knowledge; and if we had no such notions, we could not properly apply the rule.”24

Singer admits that “the Golden Rule by itself does not unambiguously and definitely determine just what these ‘standards or principles’ should be,” but, he thinks, “it does something towards determining this, and it is not necessary that it do everything.”25 As far as I can see, the rule does nothing to determine what the content of the standards is. In Singer’s approach, interpersonal ethical standards have been brought in to make sense of the rule. But having brought in these standards what need is there for the rule? The standards, not the rule, are what define how we should act.

Reciprocity involves a two-way exchange from which both parties benefit. Today, I give and you benefit; tomorrow, you give and I benefit; and we each understand that over time things work out with a rough equality, so that we think of it as a fair and just arrangement. In an ethic of reciprocity, we understand that if one of us defaults from the arrangement, the other is released from his or her required contribution. The Golden Rule, very strikingly, presents itself as indif­ferent to the moral significance of defaulting on a cooperative agreement.

Given the importance of justice and given the ethical prestige of the Golden Rule it is natural to want to reconcile the two. Jeffrey Reiman is one who has at­tempted to do this. According to Reiman,

Treating others as you would have others treat you means treating others with mutual respect, because adopting the Golden Rule as one’s guiding principle implies that one counts one’s rights to impose one’s desires on others as no greater than their right to impose their desires on one.26

But “treating others with mutual respect” is not something a single person can do. I can treat others with respect, but nothing I can do alone will count as treat­ing others with mutual respect. Reiman is reinterpreting the Golden Rule beyond recognition.

This brings me to my second main contention. The Golden Rule conflicts with our common understanding of justice in another way. Consider the following scenario. I owe you $100. I try to follow Golden Rule ethics. I ask myself: How would I wish to be treated by you if you owed me $100? I find that I don’t care whether you pay me the money and I’d be quite happy if you didn’t repay me. I conclude that, following the golden Rule, I don’t need to repay you the $100 that I owe you.

In common-sense ethics one should pay what one owes just because it is what one owes. If I don’t try to pay what I owe when I have the means to do so, I am behaving unjustly and displaying the vice of injustice. In common-sense ethics I have a right to waive the payment of what is owed to me, but not to waive the payment of what I owe to another. In Golden Rule ethics both kinds of payment may be waived. Of course, the point here applies to much more than monetary debts. It applies to any obligations.

Gensler, defending the Golden Rule by subjecting it to qualifications, contends that the rule works but only if we don’t have “flawed desires.” Flawed desires, he says, can arise in three ways: they can be immoral (like wanting others to cooper­ate with you in doing evil), they can be psychologically unhealthy (like wanting everyone to hurt you), and they can be based on false information.27 But none of these seem to apply to me in this story. My not caring whether you repay me the money you owe me may be none of these things. It could arise from a carefree attitude to material possessions, for example. I might wish to live as free as a bird, not laying up treasures on earth, etc. Or it may be that I am a generous person who puts others’ interests ahead of my own. Either of these impulses is morally fine and involves no flawed desires.

The problem described here arises from my failure to see that what I wish for is quite irrelevant to whether I should pay others what I owe them. And if that is so, then the Golden Rule, even in Gensler’s modified version, seems to be a failure. Of course, the point applies to any sort of debt, not just monetary debts. Obligations have objectivity; the Golden Rule does not recognize this objectivity.

4. BENEVOLENCE AND THE GOLDEN RULE

My argument so far has been that the Golden Rule conflicts with our generally-accepted sense of justice in two ways: it has the effect of aiding and abetting the wrongdoer; and it fails to recognize that how one wishes to be treated is irrelevant to whether one should meet one’s obligations.

I now consider the credibility of the Golden Rule as a rule of benevolence, putting aside any questions of justice. Here I contend for two claims: that the rule lacks any special value in explaining the right occasions for benevolence, and that it can have no role in reforming people who lack benevolence. I contend that Gensler is mistaken on both counts when he says that the rule “motivates us and counteracts our limited sympathies.”28

By “benevolence” what I mean is this: any action or disposition in which seeking the good of the other person is the primary goal and motivation of one’s action. Benevolence encompasses generosity, kindness, compassion, sympathy, friendliness, altruism, magnanimity, goodwill, helpfulness, hospitality, and some kinds of charity, philanthropy, and caring.

Does the Golden Rule offer any insight into the practice of benevolence? Taken as a guide to benevolent action, the Golden Rule asks us to consult our own wishes and thus to see what light this sheds on how we might help others. Let’s assume here that the problem of differing values and tastes does not arise. How then can the rule help? I wish to act helpfully; I consult what I would count as helpful if it were done to me; I then transfer this to the case in hand; I then do what I would have done to me. The story makes sense, up to a point. But why go by this roundabout route? Is it being assumed that we can’t see what the other person needs by just focusing on his or her situation? What is added by consid­ering the case of what I would want done to me? My case is, surely, just another case. I could just as well consult the case of some third person, asking myself what would be best for them, and then apply that to the case in hand. Nothing suggests to me that one can see that someone is in need only by applying the Golden Rule.

On my view, one can be misguidedly benevolent, and would-be benevolence can go horribly wrong. There are some obvious common-sense ethical limits on what counts as benevolence. One should not be benevolent to aggressors or wrong-doers. One should not be generous with other people’s money or goods. One should meet one’s obligations before attempting to be benevolent. If we think of the Golden Rule as a statement of our highest ethical priority, and read it as a rule of benevolence, we will miss out on these restrictions on our benevolent impulses. The only restriction that the rule would impose is that we do as we would be done by.

What, then, of the Golden Rule as a source of moral motivation? The idea here is that I can see what the other person needs, but I can’t bring myself to do what is needed, but if I reflect on how I would wish to be treated, I can then summon up the motivation. My wish to be treated well will generate in me a wish to treat others well.

Here is my fourth contention: adherence to the Golden Rule cannot change a person’s motivation to make them more benevolent. Suppose I am a selfish person. I do wish very keenly that others would treat me well. But how does my recognition of this lead me to wanting to treat them well? My problem is that I only really care about myself. How will that be changed by reflection on the rule?

There are two ways in which a selfish person might be persuaded to become less selfish. One is through the realization that selfishness is self-harming. On this view, becoming less selfish is seen as a pathway to greater personal happiness or satisfaction. But the Golden Rule says nothing of this sort. It promises no such benefits to the person who follows the rule.

A second way is through the realization that other people are worthier than the selfish person had assumed. The selfish person, we can suppose, is not entirely selfish. He or she realizes that other people are worthy to some degree. Given this, it might be possible for him or her to be shown how others are more worthy than they had supposed. But the Golden Rule does not attempt to show this.

One might try to argue that acting benevolently will, as a matter of fact, pay off even for a selfish person. In one place Gensler considers the objection that following the Golden Rule is foolish, since adherents of the rule can be taken advantage of. His reply to this is that “People mostly treat us as we treat them. So it pays to treat others well.”29 This, if true, might seem to motivate even a selfish person to act benevolently. But it is open to the obvious counter-argument that it is not always true, and therefore we should treat well those who do in fact treat us well but not those who treat us badly. A moderately rational but selfish person would quickly make this calculation and see it as the smarter policy.

As we saw, Parfit contends that “By requiring us to imagine ourselves in other people’s positions, the Golden Rule may provide what is psychologically the most effective way of making us more impartial, and morally motivating us.”30 For him, then, the value of the rule is, in part, that it motivates moral behavior. The motivation comes from “imagining ourselves in other people’s positions.” What is unclear in this is how the rule requires such imagining. All it requires is that we think about how we would have others do to us. This is directed at one’s own wishes, not at the other’s position.

The pathways by which the Golden Rule might help improve our disposi­tions or our conduct are not at all clear. But is any such rule necessary or helpful? Benevolent people, I suggest, do not usually go through any such processing of their actions or their motives. They can see clearly enough that help is needed—it is often obvious. And they find in themselves the motivation to help the other person, without any appeal to how they would wish to be treated. In saying this I am not trying to describe any rare or special cases; I am not talking about saints and heroes. This is how many people are much of the time. We are not paragons of benevolence, but we are also not such rational egoists or emotionally self-centered or borderline psychopaths as to be in need of some extra guidance or motivation for simply helping out others to some degree when help is needed. Recognizing that help is needed is necessary to seeing the need for helpfulness. But recognizing that you would want to be helped adds nothing to recognizing that anyone would want to be helped.

I conclude that the Golden Rule does not offer any special insight into what benevolence is in practice, nor can it make us less self-centered if we are lacking a naturally benevolent disposition.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the Golden Rule, taken as a general guide to moral action, suffers from four faults. One, it fails to explain how to deal with non-reciprocation. If we make it a general policy to follow the rule would-be wrongdoers would seem to get equal treatment with those who would do what is good and right. Two, it fails to make clear that my obligations are obligations regardless of how I would wish to be treated by others. Justice requires that I pay my debts, even if I would overlook the debts that others have to me, but the rule seemingly won’t allow this. These are problems in the relation between the Golden Rule and justice as commonly understood. Three, the Golden Rule seems to add nothing to our understanding of the proper occasions for benevolence, and so is not a good guide to benevolent action. Four, there is no plausible story about how a person lacking in benevolent dispositions would be motivated by the rule to become benevolent. To sum up, the Golden Rule, taken as a general rule for ethical behavior, is a failure. Moral­ity, at least as it is commonly understood, is conceptually independent of what a person would have done to them.

The popularity of the Golden Rule is a puzzle. Admirers of the rule generally think of it both as excellent morality and as common morality. Lewis, for example, as we saw, thinks of it as a “summing up of what everyone, at bottom, had always known to be right.”31 Reiman, as we also saw, claims similarly that “the Golden Rule is a nearly universally accepted test of morality.”32 My arguments proceed by contending that the rule is quite at odds with “common sense morality.” In claiming this I have not tried to defend what I take to be the commitments of common sense. If I am wrong about these, I may be wrong about the morality of the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule may be interpreted in a way that makes it subordinate to common morality. The reinterpreted version would go as follows: “Do to others those acts of justice and benevolence as you would have done to you.” This would relieve the rule of the burden of articulating common morality. Its widespread appeal would be more readily intelligible. Whether it makes better sense as an interpretation of the rule is another matter.33

ENDNOTES

1. Harry J. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), vii.

2. See J. O. Hertzler, “On Golden Rules,” *International Journal of* *Ethics* 44, (1934): 418–36, see 420–23. For more recent scholarly work, see Jeffrey Wattles, *The Golden Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton eds. *The Golden Rule: The Ethics of Reciprocity in World Religions* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008); and Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, eds. *The Golden Rule: Analytical Perspectives* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009). Gensler (*Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 76–107) offers a collection of illustrations of the influence of the Golden Rule in history.

3. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. A. P. Martinich (Peterborough, ON: Broadway Literary Press, 2002), 118.

4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Dent, 1961), 28.

5. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. M Warnock (London: Collins, 1962), 268.

6. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 500.

7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: A revised and amplified edition, with a new introduc­tion, of the three books Broadcast* talks, Christian Behaviour, and Beyond Personality (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 82.

8. Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis of Ethics* (New York: Random House, 1965), 107.

9. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Ri*ghts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 131.

10. Jeffrey Reiman, *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 148–49.

11. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World’s Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 23f.

12. Wattles, *The Golden Rule*, 188.

13. Michael Shermer, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 25.

14. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 406.

15. Derek Parfit, *On What Matters, Volume One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 330.

16. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 330. I take Gensler’s account of the Golden Rule and his qualified defence of it as the best current discussion of the topic. Most of those who praise the Rule do so with little or no argument to back up their approval.

17. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 163–71.

18. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman. A Comedy and a Philosophy* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Co, 1903), 226.

19. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 2–4.

20. The case for seeing human values as largely common is a strong one. For an over­view of the issue, see O. S. Curry, D. A. Mullins and H. Whitehouse, “Is it Good to Cooper­ate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-cooperation in 60 Societies,” *Current Anthropology* 60, no. 1 (2019): 47–69. What they call “morality-as-cooperation,” involving seven specific forms of cooperative behaviour—“helping kin, helping your group, reciprocating, being brave, deferring to superiors, dividing disputed resources, and respecting prior posses­sion”—is supported in the ethnographic records of 60 societies.

21. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 5–6.

22. Hertzler (“On Golden Rules,” 434) says that the positive version of the rule “is a complete and indiscriminate principle of reciprocity.” William Scott Green, “Parsing Reciprocity: Questions for the Golden Rule,” in Neusner and Chilton, (*The Golden Rule*, 1–8, see 2), says: “the Golden Rule is an abstract mandate to use an ethic of reciprocity as a fundamental guide to the way we consider, conceive, carry out, and assess our actions towards other people [. . .] it prescribes reciprocity as the foundational conceptual frame­work and context of consistency for shaping and evaluating our actions towards others”.

23. Marcus Singer, “The Golden Rule,” *Philosophy* 38 (1963): 293–314, see 302.

24. Richard Whately, *Introductory Lessons on Morals, and Christian Evidences* (Cam­bridge, MA: John Bartlett, 1857), 27.

25. Singer, “The Golden Rule,” 313.

26. Reiman, *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy*, 195.

27. Gensler, *Ethics and the Golden Rule*, 21.

28. Ibid., 173.

29. Ibid., 5–6.

30. Parfit, *On What Matters*, 330. Parfit’s main purpose is to show how the Golden Rule compares with Kant’s Formula of Universal Law. His main contention is that “Kant’s contempt for the Golden Rule is not justified” (18). These concerns are not those of the present article.

31. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 82.

32. Reiman, *Justice and Modern Moral Philosophy*, 148.

33. The author wishes to thank the following for helpful comments during the ges­tation of this article: Adam Andreotta, Hugh Breakey, Ray Driehuis, John Dunnill, Ian Gibson, Bernard Harrison, Genevieve Hawks, Joe Naimo, Anne Schwenkenbecher, John H. Smith, Nick Tapper, Robin Tapper, Lachlan Umbers, with special thanks to the late Bob Ewin. None of these is responsible for my failure to understand the Golden Rule.

International Journal of Applied Philosophy 36:2. pp. 251–261

doi: 10.5840/ijap2023717191