

## Normalization, Universality, Harmony: The Three-Layer Implications of the Golden Rule

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### Abstract

The Golden Rule has long been well-known and echo across the centuries. We can find the similar expressions in many civilizations and religions. Viewing from the various interpretations of and debates on the Golden Rule, it is obvious that the discussion is carried out from three perspectives: firstly, the “law” aspect of the Golden Rule, which functions in forms of moral laws, principles and norms; secondly, the “golden” aspect of the Golden Rule, namely, how to understand its priority and universal significance in moral rules and principles; thirdly, the harmony in the relationships of self-other, individual-individual, human-object and human-nature. The different interpretations from above three perspectives of the Golden Rule in classic theories of moral philosophy facilitate us with rich theoretical resources from , but cause the dilemma, including Christian theology, Kant’s practical reason, empiricism (such as egoism, utilitarianism, sympathetic ethics) and analytic ethics. From the perspectives of practical philosophy, virtue ethics and the Confucian “loyalty and forgiveness” thought, the harmonious relationships of norms and inherent spirit, particularity and universality, self and other, manifested in the Golden Rule could be more justifiably explained.

**Key words:** The golden rule; Normalization; Universality; Harmony

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### INTRODUCTION

The Golden Rule could be interpreted by Biblical creeds, such as “Do unto others as you would have done unto you”, “Don’t unto others as you would have them don’t unto you” or “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”; it could also be interpreted by sayings of Confucius, such as “己所不欲，勿施于人”(Ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren; Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you) and “己欲立而立人，己欲达而达人”(Ji yu li er li ren, ji yu da er da ren; A man of humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent). Actually, many similar expressions could be found in others civilizations and religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. In a nutshell, the ideas in the Golden Rule have long been well-known and echo across the centuries.

In the early 1990s, the discussion over the Global Ethics triggered a heated debate on Golden Rule. Some scholars began to search for the Golden Rule from numerous religious cultures so as to establish universal principles of ethics. However, great divergence exists on whether the Golden Rule could be utilized as the “universal ethical” principles with values of universality, whether it is able to regulate the interpersonal moral behaviors, or whether the Golden Rule contains any significance or value for the present. As a matter of fact, this divergence is tightly related to the way people interpret the Golden Rule.

One so-called “absolute” modernized thought holds that anything belonging to the past or being traditional should be abandoned, and views this as the upgrading and updating. To this thought, I could hardly show agreement. The Chinese famous scholar Ch’ien Mu once said that, “The real strong opponents of all real progresses are those who despise the past history in a revolutionary manner. The present could only be understood with the full knowledge of the past; improvement of the present could

only be done on a real understanding of the present. So valuing the knowledge of history, we not only learn from the past, but also do our duty to breeding and guiding the future” (Mu, 1994, p.2).

Viewing from the various interpretations of and debates on the Golden Rule, it is obvious that the discussion is carried out from three perspectives: firstly, the “law” aspect of the Golden Rule, which functions in forms of moral laws, principles and norms; secondly, the “golden” aspect of the Golden Rule, namely, how to understand its priority and universal significance in moral rules and principles; thirdly, the harmony in the relationships of self-other, individual-individual, human-object and human-nature.

## 1. THE NORMATIVE “LAW” ASPECT OF THE GOLDEN RULE

In the tradition of Christian culture, to “love God” and “love thy neighbour as thyself” is regarded as the most important commandments which all the Law and the Prophets depend on (Matt, 22:34-40); meanwhile, their authority and effectiveness are guaranteed by God. The form of laws of the Christian morality was inherited critically by Immanuel Kant. Even though there is no restriction of the “golden” type in Kant’s concept of “moral law”, his “moral law” also is the prioritized “order” and “law” with absolute universality. Moreover, Kant’s formula of moral law shares certain similarity with the expressions of the Golden Rule. Many subsequent ideologists thus pointed out that Kant’s “moral law” (Gesetze) was transformed from the Golden Rule, or just another expression of the Golden Rule. By comparing the moral law with the natural law, Kant said that “the laws of nature are laws according to which everything happens; those of the morality are laws according to which everything should happen (Kant, 1989, p.1). In a word, both of them are laws of objective inevitability. Without doubt, in Kant’s view, the objective inevitability of moral law is guaranteed by God, but achieved by reason. Hobbes, called the negative expression of the Golden Rule of “Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you” as the “general principle” of the “natural law”. While John Stuart Mill argued that the Golden Rule was a utilitarian law which could be mutually inclusive with the principle of “the greatest happiness for the greatest number”. In his advocated Universal Prescriptivism, R.M. Hare regarded the Golden Rule as the “Principle of Universalizability” from the moral language perspective. Therefore, he claimed his theory as the synthesis of Kantianism and Utilitarianism.

It is undeniable that these ideologists observed the normative nature of the Golden Rule, a rational cognition of that the moral life possesses the principles to judge the good, evil, right, wrong, fair and unfair. However,

they tend to draw on the features of norms, principles, and coerciveness of morality, to view the construction of certain norms, principles and laws as the kernel of all moral issues, and to mistake the normative form of morality as the essence of morality. This makes all moral issues seemingly as the authoritative and effective issues of norms, thus turning into the Normative Ethics. The Normative Ethics stresses lopsidedly the external coercive forms of morality, such as the normativeness and lawfulness, etc., treats the “norms” as the essence of morality, or even views morality as “behavioral norms” or “the synthesis of various behavioral norms”, thus neglecting easy morality’s multi-layers including personal virtues, social values, the cultural spirit of human beings and the lofty ideals of human life, etc.. What is more problematic is that it neglects the inherent moral virtues and spirits of norms. The spiritual connotation of morality embedded in the Golden Rule could only be observed in the relationships of self-other, individual-individual, human-object and human-nature.

Of course, the Golden Rule is the principled norm with the moral normalization and inherent virtue spirit as a dialectical unity. Without inherent virtue spirit, norms could only be a vacant shell; virtue spirit without norms could be illusory, shapeless and unpredictable. The normalization of the Golden Rule lies in these aspects: it provides guiding principles for morality judgment; it is in simple and plain forms, easy for study and inheritance; the coerciveness of norms reveals itself firstly in its requirement on “self” and “ego” rather than others; it provides a from-near-to-far and from-self-to-others model to practice morality. The inherent virtue spirit of the Golden Rule rests upon the equality and fairness in social moral responsibility, as well as types of virtue spirit like mutual consideration, tolerance and benevolence in the interpersonal relationships.

## 2. THE PRIORITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF “GOLD” IN THE GOLDEN RULE

It is generally believed that only moral laws with universal effects can be called the Golden Rule, and it is the universality that makes the Golden Rule the first among the various moral norms, rules and laws. In Christian Theology, the Golden Rule is the law issued God, and “to love thy neighbour as thyself” is the absolute moral order God makes to mankind. Therefore it is universally effective to all human beings with the universality being guaranteed by God. However, with “to love God” as the doctrinal premise of “to love thy neighbour as thyself”, it’s a problem how to treat of those who do not believe in the God or Jesus. Kant’s “moral law” is an absolutely universal order, and “It is not borrowed from experience, first, because of its universality, since it applies to all rational beings generally... Thus this principle must arise

from pure reason” (Kant, 1989, p.44). The empiricism also seeks for universal moral laws, and they build the Golden Rule with universal values on certain human nature of innate constancy, either the evil nature, or the good nature, or even the universal subjective ability of mankind, such as sympathy. The analytic ethics, however, discovered the “Principle of Universalizability” from the characteristics of moral language.

In these classical ethics theories, the universal feature of the Golden Rule is extracted, and was used to prove the “Gold” position of the Golden Rule. However, the excessive pursuit of universality distracts their understanding of the universality of the Golden Rule into an abstract and absolute trend, at last transforming into Universalism. In moral theories, Universalism manifests itself in the search for the highest goodness and the ultimate and universal moral laws, outside the concrete, lively, and empirical life of practice. Therefore, Universalism comprehends the significance and position of the Golden Rule by illuminating the “divinity” or “absolute universality”, namely, God’s absolutely universal orders, or in the form of abstract universal principles which is beyond individuals. This mode of understanding senses the universal values of the Golden Rule, but there is the danger of theoretical abstractness and emptiness, and practical hegemony and power. Just as Hegel once said, “Here we at once come back to the lack of content. For the sole form of this principle is nothing more or less than agreement with itself, universality; the formal principle of legislation in this internal solitude comes to no determination, or this is abstraction only” (Hegel, 1928, p.592). Consequently, this type of moral laws could be implanted into any content, and could be used by anyone who attempts to justify their behaviors. Actually, universality and particularity are not mutually opposite; rather they are mutually independent on each other in practical activities. We have to understand this before we can seize the authentic cultural and social-practical significance embedded in the Golden Rule.

It should be said that the Golden Rule is the moral principle with the universality and particularity in social practice as a dialectical unity. Blind overemphasis on the abstract universality of the Golden Rule will lead to Kant’s the “hollow” formal principle, while overemphasis on the cultural particularity or even individual specialty will lead to relativism. The Golden Rule is not an abstract formula based on formal and speculative logic, and its universality is not simply the abstract universality, but universal morality revealed in concrete social practices, full of life and cultural features. Meanwhile, the “gold” position of the Golden Rule originates from its stress on the from-near-to-far and from-self-to-others model; this model is based on reality and conforms to general laws governing learning, cognition and practice, making people feel particular close and therefore winning wide acceptance.

### 3. THE HARMONY IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF “SELF-OTHER” IN THE GOLDEN RULE

From the numerous cultural expressions of the Golden Rule, it is obvious that the Golden Rule is mainly about how to handle the “oneself-others” relationships. Moral issues are actually issues of relationship, especially the relationship between “oneself” and “others”. “Any relationship of myself-others and myself-objects that occurs out my self-awareness is moral relationship” (Jiao, 1991, p.11). The “to love thy neighbour as thyself” in Christian theology is about the “love” relationship of self and others, self and objects, to love others as yourself. To questions on how can “self” loves “others”, and the ways to love “self” and “others”, the answers from this theological theory are: “to love God’s creature as you love God”, and “self” and “others” achieve harmony of love through God. This understanding was very significant in certain period of time, but in face of the atheistic challenges in modern times and practical problems of harmonious coexistence of diverse religious cultures in the world, its limitations becomes increasingly obvious. Kant argued that it was hard to communicate for the empirical “self” and “others” who are different from each other, and that the empirical “love” could never be used as moral laws. He proposed to solve the problems of moral relationships between “self” and “others” by universal reason, which would be similar for anybody. This indeed can solve the estrangement problems rising out of differences between “self” and “others”, but at the same time, it dissolves both “self” and “others”, transforming them into “rational beings” without difference. The egoist and utilitarianism observed the specialty of empirical feelings, and they also anticipated the possible malignant consequences due to “self” and “others” separation. Therefore the harmonious “self and others” relationship contained in the Golden Rule could only be interpreted by them as the win-win relationship of interests based on “self”. Sympathy ethics realizes the impossibility to find morality out of instrumental rationality, and so they interpret moral behaviors by the consensus of emotion, believing that the likelihood of “self and others relationship” described in the Golden Rule lies in the interpersonal “sympathy”. While “sympathy” is often viewed as something coming out of imagination, “in addition to place myself in others’ position through imagination, I can not know the feelings of others” (Smith, 1998, p.5).

With the independent individuals and “absolute self” as the precondition and starting point, many theories turned to be individualistic. They could not explain the harmony and access among “self and others”, “individual and individual” and “human and nature” described in the Golden Rule, which forces them to design various external

powers of integration to unify these abstract individuals. On the one hand, this type of external powers, “God” designed for example, can hardly justify themselves theoretically, and have to rely on some dictatorial means for their establishment, resulting in the hidden danger of disintegration of the “unity”; on the other hand, these individuals, integrated under the external power, always take the unity as a tool and individual as purpose, thus reducing the possible formation of a real community and making it a sheer “fabrication”. However, just as Marx had pointed out, “Human beings do not abstractly inhabiting outside the world, but they are their world, their state and society” (Marx & Engels, 1956, p.452). we have to understand the sociohistorical practices of mankind, after which we can understand the likelihood in achieving “Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you” and “the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.” in the Golden Rule.

The Golden Rule is about the equality in moral responsibilities, fraternity, and mutual assistance between “self” and “others” in social practices. Both “self” and “others” are individuals existing in relations, rather than two abstract and isolated entities; the commonality of these two entities is based on social practices. Or you can say that individual to be in relations is real “individual”. Marx said, “The essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual, but is the sum of all social relations” (Marx & Engels, 1960, p.7). The Golden Rule maintains that “Do unto others as you would have done unto you”, but it does not mean the “equity” and “equivalence” in the real treatment of “self” and “others”; rather, this statement of “how others would have done unto you” is hypothesis with methodological significance. Of course, this hypothesis can not be a product of sheer imagination, nor the result of the special subjective feeling, demands or desire; it is the requirement of moral responsibility the subject feels and realizes in his life of social practice. Only this type of social moral responsibility lays equal and fair requirement on each individual. At the same time, the Golden Rule emphasizes virtues, such as “benevolence”, hoping that people could “love others as self” and “wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent.”

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## CONCLUSION

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The different interpretations from above three perspectives of the Golden Rule in classic theories of moral philosophy facilitate us with rich theoretical resources from , including Christian theology, Kant’s practical reason, empiricism (such as egoism, utilitarianism, sympathetic

ethics) and analytic ethics. There are unique thoughts, background of practice and horizon, with reasonable factors worthy of reference and study. Because of taking a road of normative ethics, universalism or individualism, emphasizing partially some characteristics, and being on a way to extreme, these theories cause the dilemma in their understanding of the Golden Rule. To solve those problems, another all-eliminating thought is proposed, a thought of particularism without norms, without principles, or even without individuals and self. However, this simple either-or rebellious idea does not shake off the logics of metaphysics, and it is unlikely to provide us with positive and meaningful comments and suggestions in solve those problems. To find a way out, we must explore a new path. The revitalization and development of practical philosophy, virtue ethics and Confucian traditions in the contemporary era occur against the backdrop of criticism on modern metaphysics. These theories are consistent in inner logic, which is to surpass the thinking model of modern metaphysics in order to seek the harmony in person-to-person and human-and-nature relations, which enlarges our horizon in the understanding of the Golden Rule. From the perspectives of practical philosophy, virtue ethics and the Confucian “loyalty and forgiveness” thought, the harmonious relationships of norms and inherent spirit, particularity and universality, self and other, human and nature, manifested in the Golden Rule could be more justifiably explained.

In a word, based on social and historical practice, the Golden Rule can be viewed as principled norms with virtues of equality, justice, benevolence, fraternity and tolerance as its content and spirit; it demonstrates universal moral spirit in practice, and is full of specific cultural features. Of course, the Golden Rule is not a panacea, absolute solution or only standard answer to all social problems, but a “road” sign guiding us to know ourselves, learn to behave ourselves and get well along with each other; this “road” needs the different exploration of the whole mankind. “It is unlikely for the Golden Rule, which came into being more than two thousand years, to give us complete guidance on today’s specific behaviors; but it never fails to guide us. Words and deeds of ancient sages often enlighten us, and we get certain guidance through analogy. Incomplete the guidance might be, we could make full use of our creativity and judgment to find our own answers, so as to handle “our own situations”, purely because of its incompleteness (Liu, 2006, p.50).

Today, “our own situations” seem to be even more complex and severe, and the harmonious coexistence between self and others, human and nature becomes even more urgent. The harmonious society lays its foundation on the moral practice of people, and focuses on the handling of individual-individual and human-nature relationships. For this purpose, the inheritance, development, publicity, education of the Golden Rule

can facilitate the building of a harmonious society with significant ideas and thoughts. In the context of expanding person-to-person contacts and globalization, every country will face not just the issues of harmonious development within itself and its people; it has to face the fusion and conflicts among countries, nationalities and cultures, as well as numerous global problems. The idea of global ethics emerges against this backdrop. In the process of exploring the global ethics, the traditional Golden Rule draws people's attention, wins a very high rate of popularity, and gains a very high position as the foundation of the global ethics. Now, the core issue is on how to understand it, how to interpret it, how to grasp its essence and apply it in contemporary era. It is a major cultural issue which needs more and more people coming from different nationalities and cultures to discuss for further.

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