

JOYCE HERTZLER

The Golden Rule and Society

Joyce Hertzler, an American social scientist who lived from 1895 to 1975, made important contributions in various areas, especially sociology of language and the relationships between society and values.

Hertzler discusses the golden rule from historical, sociological, and philosophical perspectives. Hertzler points out that the golden rule is found in almost all cultures of the world and tries to explain why the principle is so popular.

As you read the selection, keep in mind some areas of social conflict that seem important to you. Can the golden rule give a useful perspective in dealing with such conflicts?

The social need for moral principles

Ever since man has lived in groups larger and more complex than the simple reproductive unit, he has been seeking simple formulas covering his relationships with his fellows. The principles had to be readily remembered and transmitted. They also had to incorporate rules readily comprehensible to and applicable by the individual members of the group.

Among the finest and most frequently used of such formulas are the so-called "Golden Rule" and the "Law of Love," both of which were given their classical statements in Western civilization by Jesus of Nazareth. The first he stated in the words, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." The second he stated simply: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." These two ideas are very closely allied: in fact, their inherent implications are essentially the same. Both rest basically on self-love, and require behavior toward others that is in conformity with what is opined by the individual to be good or desirable for him.

Both of these social formulas have appeared in slightly modified form among people widely separated in time and space. Their efficacy, or at least their advocacy, seems to be more or less universal. The purpose of this paper is first to note the time, place, and form of some of the more significant statements as they are presented by the history of social thought, and, secondly, to analyze them, particularly the Golden Rule, from the sociologi-

cal point of view in an effort to determine some of the reasons for their frequency and persistence.

The wide popularity of the Golden Rule

A study of the proverbs of primitive peoples presents an occasional thought that comes very close to the Golden Rule in its implications. Thus the Yorubas of West Africa say, "He who injures another injures himself." While this proverb expresses social interdependence, some connotations of a golden rule nature are also evident. The Moroccan tribesmen have several: "He who has done something will have it done to him"; "He who sows good will reap peace"; and the strikingly significant statement "What you desire for yourself you should desire for others." The Ba-Congo expressed the thought of the Golden Rule in two of their proverbs. "If you see a jackal in your neighbor's garden drive it out, one may get into yours one day, and you would like the same done for you." "O man, what you do not like, do not to your fellows."

In the *Upanishads* of Indian Brahmanism, going back to the period 800-600 BC, is found this striking passage:

Let no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself; this is the sum of righteousness. A man obtains the proper rule by regarding another's case as like his own.

While Zoroaster (660-583 BC) did not state the Law of Love or the Golden Rule, neither idea is foreign to his general social philosophy. In the Zoroastrian literature that came after him there are several significant passages. One reads, "When men love and help one another to the best of their power, they derive the greatest pleasure from loving their fellow men"; another, "That nature alone is good which shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self."

Gautama (560-480 BC), the founder of Buddhism, has the idea, but does not give precise expression to it. He says in one passage,

All men tremble at the rod, all men fear death;
Putting oneself in the place of others, kill not nor cause to kill.
All men tremble at the rod, unto all men life is dear;
Doing as one would be done by, kill not nor cause to kill.

Elsewhere he stated, "One should seek for others the happiness one desires for oneself."

Confucius (551-479 BC) gives us the first specific statement of the rule in its negative form, sometimes referred to as the "Silver Rule." In the *Analects*,

he expressed it in the words: "What I do not wish men to do to me, I also wish not to do to men." In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, he puts the same thought thus: "Do not unto others what you would not they should do unto you." In the *Great Learning*, he further elaborates,

What a man dislikes in those who are over him, let him not display toward those who are under him; what he dislikes in those who are under him, let him not display toward those who are over him! This is called the standard, by which, as a measuring square, to regulate one's conduct.

Tsze-kung is said to have asked the master if there was one word which might serve as a rule of practice for all one's life, and Confucius answered, "Is not Reciprocity such a word?" In another utterance Confucius showed that he understood it in its positive and most comprehensive force.

There are four things in the moral life of man, not one of which I have been able to carry out in my life. To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To serve my sovereign as I would expect a minister under me to serve me: that I have not been able to do. To act towards my elder brother, as I would expect my younger brother to act towards me: that I have not been able to do. To be the first to behave toward friends as I would expect them to behave towards me: that I have not been able to do.

In Exodus, which takes us back to at least 750 BC in the history of the Hebrews, we have a rule admonishing helpfulness to enemies, and in Leviticus, written during the Babylonian Exile (586-538 BC), we have the first statement of the Law of Love, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

The idea is also found among the ancient Greeks. Plato (428-347 BC) several times in the *Republic* lays down rules of essentially the same purport. In the *Laws* (Book XI, p. 913, Jowett translation) he states "... do to others as I would that they should do to me." Isocrates, a contemporary of Plato, stated: "Do not do to others that at which you would be angry if you suffered it from others." According to Diogenes Laertius when the question was put to Aristotle (384-322 BC) as to how we ought to behave to our friends, the answer he gave was, "Exactly as we would wish our friends to behave to us." In the famous passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he discusses "self-love" and the "good man," without specifically stating the Golden Rule, Aristotle nevertheless gives a pointed exposition of it.

The Judaistic sources of the period just preceding the Christian era also provide examples. They show that the Golden Rule had been authoritatively

proclaimed in Israel long before Jesus' time. In the Talmud (Palestinian), in the instructions given by Tobit to his son Tobias, after admonishing him to love his brethren, the father says: "What is displeasing to thyself, that do not unto any other." Hillel, the great doctor of Hebrew law at Jerusalem during the time of King Herod, is responsible for the following occurrence. When a heathen who wished to become a Jew asked him for a short summary of the Law regarding the relation of a man to his neighbor, he said: "Whatsoever thou wouldst that men should not do to thee, do not do that to them. This is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary." Hillel, incidentally, was the grandfather of Gamaliel, the instructor of Paul of Tarsus.

The recorded statements of the Golden Rule next in historical order are those of Jesus (5 BC-28 AD). The one given in Matthew 7:12, and stated at the beginning of this paper, is the best known and the one cited almost to the exclusion of all others. It is the first positive phrasing of the rule. Luke gives a slightly different version: "As ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also to them likewise." The Law of Love - "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" - is given in three different places in the Gospels. Paul (1-67 AD), the apostle and interpreter of Jesus, had several statements of the Law of Love, but none of the Golden Rule. In two well-known passages he points out that he who observes the rule "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" fulfills the Law. The Latin fathers make frequent reference to the Golden Rule using the version "Whatsoever *good things* ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto him." Augustine is said to be responsible for the saying that "Do as thou wouldst be done by" is a sentence which all nations under heaven are agreed upon.

Several of the Roman thinkers of the first and second centuries AD state the Golden Rule in one form or another. There is every reason for believing that their statements were independent of any Christian influence. Seneca, the Stoic (3-65 AD), states the principle several times. In the forty-seventh *Epistle to Lucilius* we find it thus: "This is then, the sum and substance of my advice: Treat your inferior as you would be treated by your superiors." In *On Anger* he says, "Let us put ourselves in the place of him with whom we are angry: at present an over-weaning conceit of our own fortune makes us prone to anger and we are quite willing to do to others what we cannot endure should be done to ourselves." Epictetus, another Roman stoic, active around 90 AD, in his *Fragments* writes, "What you avoid suffering, do not attempt to make others suffer. You avoid slavery: take care that others are not your slaves."

The thought also appears in the seventeenth century. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1657) mentions it in several of his works. He declares that moral regulations, which he calls "immutable and eternal laws of nature," may all be summarized in the simple formula, "Do not that to another which thou wouldst not have done to thyself." Again, "When any one questions whether what he plans to do to another will be done in accordance with the law of

nature or not, let him imagine himself in the other man's place." Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94) comments on the latter rule: "For in this way, when self-love and passions, which strongly bow down one scale of the balance, are transformed to the other scale, it will be easy to see which way the balance turns." Pufendorf also mentions that the Inca, Manco Capac, the founder of the empire of Peru, laid down this rule for his citizens: "Do not to another what you would not yourself experience."

More recently we have the famous categorical imperative of Immanuel Kant, "Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law," and the related statement, "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of another, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only," both closely allied to the Golden Rule. John Stuart Mill also has the significant statement, "To do as you would be done by, and to love your neighbor as yourself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality."

These later European statements may all have been suggested by the statements in the New Testament attributed to Jesus. The significant thing about them is that various philosophers found the principle indispensable.

Why the Golden Rule is so popular

One of sociology's major concerns is social order. No society or group can exist if social order is not established and maintained. Without it there is discord, disruptive conflict, and chaos; without it there can be none of that individual freedom, self-determination, and self-realization that most men crave. Such order, however, rests upon the formation of effective social control devices of various kinds.

As one examines the rules of social behavior among the various cultures, one is struck by their diversity. The age, the environment, the cultural level, and the historical experience of the given people seem to dictate specific forms. What is required or accepted here may be wrong there; and what is right now may be wrong tomorrow. That this viewpoint is correct in most phases of human behavior goes without saying. But a similar cultural study shows also occasional uniformities in the principles of social order. We find certain supposed fundamentals quite generally adhered to by peoples removed from each other in space, time, and cultural level - universals which persist and which the changing scene does not invalidate.

Significant among such more or less universal social rules is the Golden Rule. Sociology's interest in it rests primarily upon its efficacy as an agent in social control, and upon the sociological and social psychological principles involved in its operation. The Golden Rule has grown out of the experience of diverse groups. It, like other precepts or maxims, is a product of gener-

ations and centuries of careful observation and analysis of the relations of the individual and the group. Its widespread advocacy in different eras and among various peoples points to inherent elements that have given it considerable success as a social rule, elements that rest not only upon certain uniformities of human nature, but also of the individual-group relation.

The first feature of the Golden Rule is that, unlike the great mass of social control devices, it is not a dictatorial social influence intimidating, coercing, or subtly shaping behavior from without, as do the mores, law, public opinion, or other institutionalized pressures. The Golden Rule operates from within the individual, and results in the voluntary limitation of behavior. It is control that is subjective, self-initiatory, and self-coercive, but which redounds to social benefit, due to the uniqueness of its psychology.

The second aspect of the Golden Rule is that it does not require any great individual intelligence. It uses the clever psychological principle of starting with the individual actor, who, on the basis of his own experience and reflection, or with the aid of imagination, has fairly definite feelings about what is good nor not for him as he contemplates the possible behavior of other people. Jesus very definitely in the Rule of Love makes self-love the basis and this is implicit in his statement of the Golden Rule. This famous rule then starts from the individual's own desires regarding his welfare.

Thirdly, again on the basis of his own experience, the individual accepts the other fellow as one more or less like himself, and transfers, or perhaps expands, in his imagination, his own motives or desires to this other fellow. Thus the guide of the individual's action toward another is not his supposition of what his fellow's desire may be, but his own desire transferred in imagination to him. You do the same good for another that you might reasonably desire for yourself if you were in his place, or you refrain from committing an act to the other fellow that, if perpetrated upon you, would be hateful or unpleasant to you. The rule thus also rests on the fact that man can, in terms of his own experience, visualize and appreciate his neighbor's predicament, and that he can act or refrain from acting to him as he would have his neighbor act or refrain from acting toward him.

In the fourth place, there is a difference in the sociological implications of the negative and positive statements of the rule. The negative statement, as for example that of Confucius, or Hillel, or Epictetus, is not likely to lead to beneficent attitudes. It merely establishes order. It assumes that the possible actor has been injured by others in the past, or has been the victim of aggression. He then merely transfers the "don't-hurt-me" attitude to the other fellow. Spooner summarizes the matter well when he states,

It would appear then, that the maxim (speaking of the negative statement) obtained a wide acceptance among the best and most enlightened intellects of the ancient world; but it was for them a

restraining principle, a guide of what they ought not do rather than of what they ought.

There is no implication, however, in the Golden Rule that is retaliation. There can be no retaliation until there has been action. The *lex talionis*,¹ another ancient but faulty maxim, is addressed to the sufferer of an action. The application of the Golden Rule precedes the act. It is rather an admonition to engage in conduct that is good for the other fellow, as you see it, or the avoidance of behavior that will be bad for him.

The positive statement, as for example, that of Jesus, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them," is broader and more inclusive in its scope, and social or even altruistic in its tendencies. The positive rule puts the social behavior of the individual on a conscious and rational plane. It takes him beyond his own immediate selfish good, and commits him to an eminently satisfactory general social policy. I desire health, and knowing that this depends upon healthful conditions of living, I do all in my power to make such conditions available for others. I want safety on the highways; I drive carefully and sanely, and become an active exponent of road safety. In brief, the positive statement tends to the shaping of an ever improving social order. The negative statement leads to a functional equilibrium and maintains existing social control.

The positively stated Golden Rule conforms perfectly with that great and widely accepted criterion of social value, namely, that the objective of social life is the fullest possible life for the individual. If the individual is striving for facility of thought, opportunity for the free exercise of workmanship, the emancipation of creative intelligence, the freedom of aesthetic expression, and the opportunities for the expansion of spirit for himself, he will provide these facilities for others in the corporate life of man. Furthermore, the positive Golden Rule stimulates those inner forces and capacities that must be cultivated if there is to be a high type of culture.

The positively stated Golden Rule presents greater difficulties of realization than the negative. It demands more of the individual and requires the play of the higher elements of human nature to carry it out. The negative statements, to be placed in successful operation, need only "won't power" which is a common attribute of people.

The Golden Rule, in the fifth place, is not particularistic, nor does it apply only in a common interest group. It is universal in its application. We human beings tend to be only fair and just to "our own kind of folks." But if we act in accord with the positive Golden Rule we unavoidably have to consider every fellow with whom contact is made or likely to be made. Any principle or condition of inequality, status, or class alignment is inconsistent with it.

It has sometimes been contended that the Golden Rule is an "under dog" philosophy.² Even the most superficial analysis, however, shows this to be

erroneous. Primitives have it among their tribal maxims, and class lines are less closely drawn among them than among civilized peoples. Among historical advocates, Amen-em-apt was an Egyptian nobleman; Gautama was a prince; Lao-tze was a scholar; Confucius was an officer of state and a philosopher-teacher; Hillel was a great churchman and scholar; Jesus, to be sure, was of lowly origin; Seneca was the tutor and adviser of Nero, and probably the second wealthiest man of Rome; Marcus Aurelius was a Roman emperor; and Alfred was an English king. All of these presented the Golden Rule, not from the view of any class, but as a universal behavior policy.

From the general operative point of view, the Golden Rule has the advantage of controlling the individual without stirring up his antagonism and opposition through too much outer restraint. Its compulsion comes from within the individual. It is one of the highest types of control, because it grows out of self-control. It promotes justice and order rather than attempting by coercion to prevent or repress injustice and disorder. It is perhaps the best single rule for social behavior that has ever been enunciated.

Study questions

- 1 What are Jesus's formulations of the law of love and the golden rule? Give cases where these principles were endorsed outside of Christianity.
- 2 How does Hertzler see the role of moral principles in society?
- 3 What five features does the golden rule have? Pick one of the features and explain it in greater detail.
- 4 Can you think of other positive features of the golden rule? Can you see any problems with the rule?
- 5 Explain what Hertzler means by saying "the golden rule has the advantage of controlling the individual without stirring up his antagonism and opposition through too much outer restraint."

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from Joyce Oramel Hertzler's "On Golden Rules," in the *International Journal of Ethics* 44 (1934): 418-36. Hertzler's most influential work was *A Sociology of Language* (New York: Random House, 1965). Jeffrey Wattles's *The Golden Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) has a longer discussion of the historical and religious aspects of the rule. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses the golden rule in Chapter 7.

Several other readings in this anthology deal with the golden rule (the Bible, Gensler and Tokmenko, Hare, Nagel, and Ricoeur) or related ideals like love, sympathy, or beneficence (Frankena, Habermas, Hume, King, and Nietzsche). You may want to compare what Hertzler says about cultural universals with what is said by the other two social scientists in this anthology (Benedict and Kohlberg).

Notes

- 1 The "*lex talionis*" that Hertzler refers to is the "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" law of retaliation: if someone hurts you in some way, then you are to hurt the other person in the same way. In contrast, the golden rule requires that you treat X, not as X has actually treated you, but rather in accord with how you are willing that you be treated in X's place.
- 2 Hertzler may have been thinking of Nietzsche, who thought "love thy neighbor" was part of "slave morality" and thus unworthy of aristocrats. See Nietzsche's reading in this anthology.

PAUL RICOEUR

The Golden Rule and Religion

Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher born in 1913, works in the area of phenomenological hermeneutics. "Hermeneutics" is an approach to interpreting texts. Ricoeur often analyses biblical texts, looking at them in light of narrative, symbolism, and metaphor. He is heavily influenced by the phenomenological method of continental thinkers (like Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean-Paul Sartre) who emphasize an attentiveness to experienced phenomena.

In this selection, Ricoeur interprets biblical passages about ethical conduct. He finds, surprisingly, that passages on the golden rule and on the love of enemies seem to be inconsistent. He appeals to a "rhetoric of paradox" to help relieve the tension. This leads him to re-interpret the golden rule, or at least the motivation behind it.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether Ricoeur succeeds in making compatible these two seemingly contrary biblical norms.

The problem

If one assumes that the Golden Rule constitutes the basic moral rule about which the wisest may agree, what happens to this rule when it is put within a religious perspective, more precisely, within the perspective of the Jewish-Christian scriptures?

That the Golden Rule expresses our common morality seems to be confirmed by the place it holds in the *Sermon on the Mount* in Mt 7:12 – "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" – where the Golden Rule seems to be taken for granted as a common good of the Jewish culture; just as in the *Sermon on the Plain* in Lk 6:31 – "And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" – the Golden Rule seems to be acknowledged as the common good of Hellenistic culture.

However, it is not the mere citation of the Golden Rule which raises a problem of interpretation, but the impact on it of a context which seems to deny or disavow it. This context is governed by the commandment to love one's enemies. Now, it is this commandment, and not the Golden Rule, that