



The Deep Beauty of the Golden Rule

R.M. MacIver (1952) • Presented by Douglas Olena • Life Together • Zoom

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The Quandary of Philosophical Ethics

- ❖ Why is it impossible to suggest universal goals of happiness, good, or God(s)?
- ❖ Incommensurability of definitions and practices
- ❖ The inability of any appeal to reason
- ❖ The unreasonableness of legislating or enforcing a moral code

Philosophical Appeals

- ❖ Subjectivism / Egoism
- ❖ Social Contract
- ❖ Divine Command
- ❖ Duty / Deontology
- ❖ Utilitarianism / Consequentialism
- ❖ Virtue / Goodness
- ❖ What about relativism?

Appeals to Sovereignty

- ❖ Divine Command — Scriptures / Revelation authoritative
- ❖ Conscience — My inner voice
- ❖ Personal Sovereignty — I decide
- ❖ Tribal Sovereignty — We decide
- ❖ Social Contract — Tacit approval of my agreement with the State

Appeals to Sovereignty

- ❖ All appeals to Sovereignty boil down to “Who is in charge of my life.”
- ❖ On the other hand, I have to account for everything I do, everything I say.

The Quandary of Philosophical Ethics

- ❖ “How can ethics lay down final principles of behavior that are not your values against mine, your group’s values against my group’s?” 210
- ❖ MacIver suggests that just because our values are different or even in opposition, does not mean that we should abandon them. For to do so would be tantamount to abandonment of our selves.

The Quandary of Philosophical Ethics

- ❖ “It is that the relativity of values between you and me, between your group and my group, your sect and my sect, makes futile nearly all learned disquisitions about the first principles of ethics?” 211

The Quandary of Philosophical Ethics

- ❖ Philosophy begins with reasoning about the nature of things. How can reasoning decide between my values and yours?
- ❖ Values do not claim truth in any scientific sense; instead they claim validity, rightness. They do not declare what is so but what *should* be so.
- ❖ To what court of appeals do we go when our values conflict?
- ❖ The lack of any court is the final fact about final values.

One Universal Rule

- ❖ Does this all mean that a universal ethical principle, applicable alike to me and you, even where our values diverge, is impossible; that there is no rule to go by, based on reason itself, in this world of irreconcilable valuations?
- ❖ There is one universal rule that applies to all, irrespective of ideology, science or religion: The golden rule. 211

One Universal Rule

- ❖ *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*
- ❖ “This is the only rule that stands by itself in the light of its own reason, the only rule that can stand by itself in the naked, warring universe, in the face of contending values of men and groups.” 211
- ❖ At its core the Golden Rule requires two things:
 - ❖ Empathy
 - ❖ Reciprocity

Apply to Whom?

- ❖ Who does this apply to?
 - ❖ Individuals
 - ❖ Leaders / followers
 - ❖ Corporations
 - ❖ Nations

Why the Golden Rule?

- ❖ “The greatest evils have not been committed by the pleasure lovers, self seekers or the merely amoral but by those who were driven by their values or ideologies.” 213
- ❖ What historical examples do we have of the principle noted above?
- ❖ What example do we have in our age that this is so?

Why the Golden Rule?

- ❖ The golden rule prescribes a mode of behaving, not a goal of action. On the level of goals, of final values there is irreconcilable conflict.
- ❖ The deep beauty of the golden rule is that instead of attacking the will in other men, it offers them a new dimension.
- ❖ It teaches us to trade contexts and imagine ourselves in the other's place. 212

Why the Golden Rule?

- ❖ The golden rule does not take sides or contend with contending values. It contains no dogma.
- ❖ The exercise of power over an other cuts off the one exercising the power from the community of commonness in mankind.
- ❖ So when one does evil to one's neighbor one is doing evil to one's self.
- ❖ Conversely doing good to one's neighbor rebounds to one's self. 212

Why the Golden Rule?

- ❖ “It is the only principle that allows every man to follow his own intrinsic values while nevertheless it transforms the chaos of warring codes into a reasonably well-ordered universe.” 213

What Doesn't the Golden Rule Do?

- ❖ It does not solve for us our ethical problems but offers only a way of approach.
- ❖ It does not prescribe our treatment of others but only the spirit in which we should treat them.
- ❖ It has no simple mechanical application and often enough is hard to apply.... 214

Who is Right?

- ❖ We believe that our values are correct.
- ❖ But does that correctness in the guise of wisdom seek to compel others to adopt our values? Can we force others to be free?
- ❖ That just proves the disvalue of ideological solutions to the problem of generating rules.
- ❖ The golden rule does not answer the question of “who is right.” It cares nothing for that issue. It rather invites us to evaluate our behavior.