

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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ON THE GOLDEN RULE

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* In Matthew: 7.12. Jesus says: "All things whatsoever you would have men do unto you, do you ever so to them."

As most of us rephrase this when we use this in our daily lives, we say, Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And when we say this, we think we are summing up moral philosophy in a nutshell. This is all you need to guide the conduct of your lives.

I am going to try to show you that this is not so -- that the golden rule by itself is vacuous, i.e., empty of meaning; that by itself it does not tell you how to behave towards others or how to conduct your own life. I must add that it does contain one true moral insight, namely that any sound rule of conduct or moral precept must be universal -- applicable to all human beings everywhere.

This is the only truth in Immanuel Kant's famous categorical imperative (which is otherwise as vacuous as the golden rule).

So act that the maxim of your conduct can become a universal law of nature. In other words, what you are morally to do in your conduct toward others is what they are morally obliged to do in their conduct toward you. But this truth does not tell you what either you or anybody else is morally obliged to do. It merely says that all true moral obligations, in either direction -- you toward others or others toward you -- must be the same.

Before I go any further and try to solve this problem for you, I must tell you that the golden rule, which we find Jesus stating in the gospel according to St. Matthew, is to be found also in most of the great religions of the world.

Judaism's Talmud: What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow men" (i.e., what is injurious to you, because it violates your rights is injurious to others also because it violates their rights; so that if you expect them to be just in their conduct toward you, be just in your conduct toward them).

Islam: "No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother what he desires for himself" (i.e., right desires are the same for all, for you as well as for others, and all right desires are for what is really good for human beings, which is the same for all).

Hinduism: "One should never do to another that which one would regard as injurious to one's self" (i.e., the same as before -- injustice) (i.e., which is injuring others) is the same whether it is injustice toward you or toward others, and no one should be unjust.

The fundamental terms of moral philosophy are good and evil, right or wrong. Which is primary, which is secondary? I think the answer to that question is that good and evil are primary, and right and wrong are secondary.

Good and evil are the subject of our desires and aversions. Right and wrong apply to our conduct towards others. In Christian moral theology, we find two precepts of natural moral law. The first precept is: Seek the Good. The second precept is: Harm no one (i.e., do not do anything that deprives others of real goods or interferes with their attaining what is really good for them).

As thus understood, the second precept is obviously dependent on the first and derivative from it; for if we do not know what is really good for us, we cannot avoid harming others.

The first principle of moral philosophy -- its categorical imperative -- is: You ought to seek everything that is really good for you and nothing else. Only when you know what is really good (e.g., truth is really good for human beings to know) can you draw any conclusions, such as seek the truth.

Now let us face the most difficult of all problems in moral philosophy. To do this, let us suppose that you understand the difference between what is really good for all human beings and what is only apparently good to some individuals but not to others.

Then you will be able to discover what you ought to seek for yourself.

That will also tell you what others ought to seek for themselves.

But how will that tell you why you ought to do unto others what you expect them to do unto you?

How is the second precept of natural moral law derived from the first precept: how does your seeking the good lead you to obey the injunction: harm no one; i.e., do not injure them by depriving them of what is really good for them?

Let me restate this problem another way. Unless you understand the problem, you will not be able to understand the solution.

The problem is the age-old problem that everyone recognizes -- the problem of whether selfishness and altruism come in conflict, or are inseparable from one another (i.e., no one can be truly selfish without also being altruistic)?

To make this clear, let us consider what are traditionally called the four cardinal virtues: fortitude or courage, temperance, justice, and prudence.

Of these, temperance and courage are entirely self-regarding virtues; and justice is entirely other-regarding.

Now if one can be temperate and courageous without also being just, then one can seek the good and at the same time harm or injure others, that is, be unjust toward them.

And if that is the case, the golden rule is out: you do not have to do unto others what you would have them do unto you. You want them to be just to you because that helps you to attain what is really good for you; but you can seek what is really good for you, without being just toward them if you can get away with it.

This problem arises in our seminars when we discuss the ring of Gyges in Plato's Republic.

If, with the ring of Gyges, you can be unjust to others and get away with it, why not do so? What's in it for you to be just to others, if you can seek your own good without being just toward them?

In that little word *if* lies the whole problem.

If it is not possible to seek your own good without being just to others, then you must act toward others as you would have them act toward you.

In short, the solution lies in a question that Aristotle answers in one way and all other moral philosophers answer in the opposite way.

The question is: are these moral virtues existentially separate virtues (so that you can have any one of the three without having the other two); or are they only three analytically distinct aspects of moral virtue, so that if you have moral virtue, you will have justice along with temperance and courage.

Aristotle's answer depends on the role of prudence in relation to temperance, courage, and justice.

Prudence consists in choosing the right means for the reason, the right end. Thus, there is no prudent thief or murderer, for his reason for being crafty is wrong.

He should be called clever rather than prudent, because the means he chooses for getting away with it, is not a choice for the right reason.

There is only one right end for all human beings, which is happiness conceived as a whole life enriched by the possession of everything that is really good for human beings.

Hence, if prudence is involved in justice as well as in temperance and courage, then they are all dispositions to choose means for the same reason (i.e., for the same ultimate end, happiness).

Therefore, one cannot be temperate or courageous without being just (which is another way of saying that one cannot act for one's own happiness without also acting for the happiness of others).

Hence, there is no conflict between selfishness and altruism. The other-regarding aspect of virtue (altruism) is inseparable from the self-regarding aspects of virtue (selfishness).

I hope you understand this. It makes Aristotle's Ethics the only sound moral philosophy in the Western Tradition -- and perhaps in other traditions as well. It is also the only way to make sense of the Golden Rule.

* Sermon given by Dr. Adler at Christ Church on August, 1991 in Aspen, Colorado.

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