

Anderson* & the Golden Rule

A rejoinder by Roger Haines – 14 April 2017

The main thrust of Stephen Anderson's argument depends on the assumption that the Golden Rule in its positive form is essentially equivalent to the principle of mutual back-scratching. The claim that "some Golden Rule advocates" describe it as "reciprocal" does not justify this assumption: on inspection, not one of the wordings presented limits consideration of 'others' only to those expected to repay the favour (in contrast to the wording "do unto others as you hope they *will then* do to you", for example). So either these un-named advocates are wrong, or they mean something different¹ - just that our obligations to others are the same as theirs to us, *irrespective* of whether either side fulfils their obligations: reciprocity without an implied contract.

A second problem with his argument is that although it is true that Golden Rule does not specify "who one identifies as the intended recipient of the goodwill" (such as family/nation/race...?), the same is true of the suggested Platinum Rule. For example, the soldier's 'sacrifice' is for the benefit of "his side", rather than the whole human race; mercy and forgiveness can be encouraged within a community but withheld from outsiders; and so on. So this ambiguity cannot be used to support the claim that the Platinum Rule is superior.

There are some further apparent non-sequiturs in Anderson's article, but they are of secondary importance.^{2,3}

To improve upon Anderson's analysis, we need to start by considering: what exactly is the Golden Rule intended to be? If it is an "order to be obeyed" given by some authority, then I would agree with George Bernard Shaw, that the only Golden Rule is that there is no Golden Rule. But it is more usually treated as a distillation of wisdom, an aide-memoire for an outlook that a mature person should reach upon reflection in any case. So rather than focussing on the precise form of words, which is always likely to be open to tendentious misinterpretation, we should consider the motivating idea - which as I understand it is that *one shouldn't treat oneself as a special case*: one should behave in the way one thinks others should behave.

My objection to the usual "barrack-room lawyer" type objections to the Golden Rule ("I like tea but my brother likes coffee. Doesn't the Golden Rule mean that I should offer him tea?") is that I do not believe that anybody but a very young child or a severely autistic person would actually offer his brother tea in this case and believe that that was the right thing to do because of the Golden Rule. Normal grown-up people understand what the Golden Rule is trying to say without needing watertight literalism. Of course, one can reach the right conclusion formally, by starting with the thought that I would like other people to treat me with my individual peccadilloes taken into account, so I should treat others with their own peccadilloes taken into account.

A more realistic problem with the Golden Rule is that human preferences are more complex than simple binary states. My friend might want another alcoholic drink but I am worried about his health, and assume that at a deeper level he shares that worry, so I have a choice of responding to his overt desire or his assumed tacit desire. There is

always a grey borderline in such cases, which no kind of rule can resolve in advance, but the general approach of weighing up the various long and short interests and desires of the friend is surely the one I would hope my friend would take to me.

There are other limitations to the usual formulations of the Golden Rule. The first is that these formulations mostly apply to one-to-one interactions, so that actions or inactions with no single identifiable victim or beneficiary (such as discarding litter or donating to organised charities) are not explicitly covered. In the case of the previous paragraph, if the friend is planning to drive then other road users are potentially affected, so there is no longer just a single “other” in whose shoes one can put oneself. However, the motivating idea behind the Golden Rule still applies in these cases, and there are more general formulations available - such as “do what you think others should do”, which has some overlap with Kant’s 1st Categorical Imperative. Rawls’ “Veil of Ignorance” principle generalises the idea further to cover questions of public policy. (It says you should support those policies which you would support if you were ignorant of their effect on your personal interests).

Another omission from the Golden Rule as usually understood is our duty to ourselves. An analogous rule for this case might be “don’t do now what you would regret later” (e.g. in relation to over-indulgence), which is effectively the negative form of the Golden Rule with the *later self* being treated as the “other”.

The Golden Rule has to be stretched still further to cover our moral obligations to infants, let alone other species, neither having any comparable obligations to us – one would have to add a clause along the lines of “if we imagined they had the mental capacities to formulate comparable wishes”.

Now I will turn to the question as to whether the Golden Rule, even in its broadest interpretation, is *sufficient* to resolve all moral dilemmas, and here I certainly agree with Anderson that it is not - but that is not the fault of the Golden Rule! No foundation of moral values can generate moral decisions unaided by assumed knowledge - knowledge of the varieties of human nature, of the connections between actions and their consequences, of shared social assumptions & conventions, etc. etc. “Thou shalt not steal” means nothing without knowing the social conventions of ownership, “do not lie” means nothing without understanding the language being used; more subtly, “do unto others what you would have them do unto you” requires a categorisation of actions that are in some way equivalent given the differences between every unique individual. In each case the equation is, in very broad terms, [values] plus [understanding of reality] => choice of action.

Likewise, the boundaries of the field of application of a moral rule depend on assumed knowledge of the categories concerned - whether we are considering moral obligations to members of our family, our nations, our species, or to other sentient beings, we have to have an idea of what these categories are.

Once it is recognized that any hypothesis of the source of moral value can only be the starting point towards resolving any particular question of action, it should be no surprise that the same motivating idea should appear in different formulations that do not legalistically appear to have the same effect - they embody different assumptions about the typical circumstances in which they may be applied. In simple traditional

societies the negative form of the Golden Rule covers most of the cases where the community will want to “nudge” behaviour in a particular direction (though with narrowly-defined social roles, separate prohibitions for the commonest kind of infraction may be more effective). With increasing mobility and communications, dependence on the goodwill of strangers becomes more frequent, and so the positive form is more likely to be stressed. Further complexity of interaction leads to actions with multiple effects playing a significant role, and so the more generalised formulations become necessary. But the motivating idea remains the same in every case.

To illustrate this commonality, suppose the only rule recognized in a particular culture is a negative form of the Golden Rule. If I was suffering in some major way, it is reasonable to assume that I would not be happy for other people to disregard my suffering. Hence, applying the rule “don’t do things which you wouldn’t want done to you”, then I should not ignore the significant suffering of other people. This is exactly the same in eventual effect as the positive form of the rule, though it needs more thought to see it, which is why Anderson can highlight the difference, in relation to his sons’ behaviour, in the appropriateness of the different formulations as tools for particular situations.

Anderson’s “Platinum Rule” is useful in its own right, but that does not make it useful to set it up as somehow in opposition to or superseding the Golden Rule. It has already been pointed out that its boundary of application suffers from exactly the same inevitable ambiguity as the Golden Rule. Moreover, it is only the completely unwarranted restriction of the Golden Rule to the “contractually reciprocal” case that makes it appear inferior as a value to the Platinum Rule. If we assume the proper sense of the Golden Rule, in fact, the Platinum Rule can be derived from it as a particular case. *If* we approve of sacrifices made by others on our behalf, or would welcome mercy or forgiveness to ourselves, then the Golden Rule behoves us to be prepared (in similar circumstances) to make sacrifices or offer mercy or forgiveness to others.

So to conclude, on the one hand claims that the Golden Rule on its own is all you need to know are wild exaggerations, but on the other hand the idea behind the rule does indeed seem intrinsic to morality. In short, the Golden Rule is necessary, but not sufficient.

*: “The Golden Rule: Not so Golden” by Stephen Anderson [Philosophy Now, Jan ‘17]

¹: The more respectable references to reciprocity as an implied contract describe it as a plausible evolutionary *antecedent* to morality: individuals among our primate forebears scratched each others’ backs in the expectation of the favour being returned, and Homo Sapiens, it is suggested, later ‘universalised’ that to the Golden Rule. (But we don’t have to accept this hypothesis).

²: Making a virtue of suffering, whether by karmic calculation or otherwise, could justify *inflicting* suffering on those whom fate puts in our way as much as it justifies *ignoring* suffering by those whom fate has given us the opportunity to help, so this calculation fails to differentiate the positive and negative versions of the Golden Rule as it is claimed to.

³: The fact that some cultures do not find it useful to have the Golden Rule in some form as a public formulation is not the same as them lacking the ‘idea’ - there may just be a cultural

preference for more explicit, concrete rules which represent applications of the Golden Rules to specific circumstances.