

# Golden Rule

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The **Golden Rule** or **law of reciprocity** is the principle of treating others as one would wish to be treated oneself. It is a maxim of altruism seen in many human religions and human cultures.<sup>[1][2]</sup> The maxim may appear as either a positive or negative injunction governing conduct:

- One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself (positive or directive form).<sup>[1]</sup>
- One should *not* treat others in ways that one would *not* like to be treated (negative or prohibitive form).<sup>[1]</sup>
- What you wish upon others, you wish upon yourself (empathic or responsive form).<sup>[1]</sup>

The Golden Rule differs from the maxim of reciprocity captured in *do ut des*—"I give so that you will give in return"—and is rather a unilateral moral commitment to the well-being of the other without the expectation of anything in return.<sup>[3]</sup>

The concept occurs in some form in nearly every religion<sup>[4][5]</sup> and ethical tradition.<sup>[6]</sup> It can also be explained from the perspectives of psychology, philosophy, sociology, and economics. Psychologically, it involves a person empathizing with others. Philosophically, it involves a person perceiving their neighbor also as "I" or "self".<sup>[7]</sup> Sociologically, 'love your neighbor as yourself' is applicable between individuals, between groups, and also between individuals and groups. In economics, Richard Swift, referring to ideas from David Graeber, suggests that "without some kind of reciprocity society would no longer be able to exist."<sup>[8]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Etymology
- 2 Antiquity
  - 2.1 Ancient Egypt
  - 2.2 Ancient Near East
  - 2.3 Ancient China
  - 2.4 Ancient India
    - 2.4.1 Sanskrit tradition
    - 2.4.2 Tamil tradition
  - 2.5 Ancient Greece
  - 2.6 Ancient Persia
  - 2.7 Ancient Rome
- 3 Religious context
  - 3.1 Abrahamic religions
    - 3.1.1 Judaism
    - 3.1.2 Christianity
    - 3.1.3 Islam
    - 3.1.4 Bahá'í Faith
  - 3.2 Indian religions
    - 3.2.1 Hinduism
    - 3.2.2 Buddhism
    - 3.2.3 Jainism

- 3.2.4 Sikhism
  - 3.3 East Asian religions
    - 3.3.1 Confucianism
    - 3.3.2 Taoism
    - 3.3.3 Mohism
  - 3.4 Iranian Religions
    - 3.4.1 Zoroastrianism
  - 3.5 New Religious Movements
    - 3.5.1 Wicca
    - 3.5.2 Scientology
- 4 Secular context
  - 4.1 Global ethic
    - 4.1.1 Humanism
    - 4.1.2 Existentialism
- 5 Other contexts
  - 5.1 Human rights
  - 5.2 Economics
  - 5.3 Psychology
  - 5.4 Children's stories
- 6 Criticism of the Golden Rule
  - 6.1 Differences in values or interests
  - 6.2 Differences in situations
  - 6.3 Cannot be a sole guide to action
  - 6.4 Responses to criticisms
- 7 Scientific research
- 8 See also
- 9 References
- 10 External links

## Etymology

The *term* "Golden Rule", or "Golden law" began to be used widely in the early 17th century in Britain; the earliest known usage is that of Charles Gibbon in 1604.<sup>[1][9]</sup>

## Antiquity

### Ancient Egypt

Possibly the earliest affirmation of the maxim of reciprocity, reflecting the ancient Egyptian goddess Ma'at, appears in the story of The Eloquent Peasant, which dates to the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040 – c. 1650 BC):

"Now this is the command: Do to the doer to make him do."<sup>[10][11]</sup> This proverb embodies the *do ut des* principle.<sup>[12]</sup> A Late Period (c. 664 BC – 323 BC) papyrus contains an early negative affirmation of the Golden Rule: "That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another."<sup>[13]</sup>

### Ancient Near East

The Golden Rule appears in the following Biblical verse: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." (Leviticus 19:18)

## Ancient China

The Golden Rule existed among all the major philosophical schools of ancient China: Mohism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Examples of the concept include:

- "Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself." — Confucius<sup>[14]</sup>(c. 500 BC)
- "If people regarded other people's families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself." — Mozi (c. 400 BC)
- "Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss." — Laozi<sup>[15]</sup> (c. 500 BC)

## Ancient India

### Sanskrit tradition

In *Mahābhārata*, the ancient epic of India, comes a discourse where the wise minister Vidura advises the King *Yuddhiṣṭhira* thus, "Listening to wise scriptures, austerity, sacrifice, respectful faith, social welfare, forgiveness, purity of intent, compassion, truth and self-control — are the ten wealth of character (self). O king aim for these, may you be steadfast in these qualities. These are the basis of prosperity and rightful living. These are highest attainable things. All worlds are balanced on *dharma*, *dharma* encompasses ways to prosperity as well. O King, *dharma* is the best quality to have, wealth the medium and desire (*kāma*) the lowest. **Hence, (keeping these in mind), by self-control and by making *dharma* (right conduct) your main focus, treat others as you treat yourself.**"

*tasmād\_dharma-pradhānéna bhavitavyam yatātmanā | tathā cha sarva-bhūtēṣhu vartitavyam yathātmani ||*  
(तस्माद्धर्मप्रधानेन भवितव्यं यथात्मना। तथा च सर्वभूतेषु वर्तितव्यं यथात्मनः॥ || *Mahābhārata Shānti-Parva* 167:9)

### Tamil tradition

In the Section on Virtue, and Chapter 32 of the *Tirukkuṟaḷ* (c. 200 BC – c. 500 AD), Tiruvalluvar says: Why does a man inflict upon other creatures those sufferings, which he has found by experience are sufferings to himself ? (K. 318) Let not a man consent to do those things to another which, he knows, will cause sorrow. (K. 316) He furthermore opined that it is the determination of the spotless (virtuous) not to do evil, even in return, to those who have cherished enmity and done them evil. (K. 312) The (proper) punishment to those who have done evil (to you), is to put them to shame by showing them kindness, in return and to forget both the evil and the good done on both sides. (K. 314)

## Ancient Greece

The Golden Rule in its prohibitive (negative) form was a common principle in ancient Greek philosophy. Examples of the general concept include:

- "Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing." – Thales<sup>[16]</sup> (c. 624 BC – c. 546 BC)

- "What you do not want to happen to you, do not do it yourself either." – Sextus the Pythagorean.<sup>[17]</sup> The oldest extant reference to Sextus is by Origen in the third century of the common era.<sup>[18]</sup>
- "Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you." – Isocrates<sup>[19]</sup> (436–338 BC)

## Ancient Persia

The Pahlavi Texts of Zoroastrianism (c. 300 BC–1000 AD) were an early source for the Golden Rule: "That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself." Dadisten-I-dinik, 94,5, and "Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others." Shayast-na-Shayast 13:29<sup>[20]</sup>

## Ancient Rome

Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BC–65 AD), a practitioner of Stoicism (c. 300 BC–200 AD) expressed the Golden Rule in his essay regarding the treatment of slaves: "Treat your inferior as you would wish your superior to treat you." The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Religious context

### Abrahamic religions

#### Judaism

A rule of altruistic reciprocity was first stated positively in a well-known Torah verse (Hebrew: "ואהבת לרעך כמוך"):

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

— Leviticus 19:18

Hillel the Elder (c. 110 BCE – 10 CE),<sup>[22]</sup> used this verse as a most important message of the Torah for his teachings. Once, he was challenged by a gentile who asked to be converted under the condition that the Torah be explained to him while he stood on one foot. Hillel accepted him as a candidate for conversion to Judaism but, drawing on Leviticus 19:18 (<http://tools.wmflabs.org/bibleversefinder2/?book=Leviticus&verse=19:18&src=126>), briefed the man:

What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.

— Shabbath folio:31a, Babylonian Talmud

Hillel recognized brotherly love as the fundamental principle of Jewish ethics. Rabbi Akiva agreed and suggested that the principle of love must have its foundation in Genesis chapter 1, which teaches that all men are the offspring of Adam who was made in the image of God (Sifra, *Ḳedoshim*, iv.; Yer. Ned. ix. 41c; Genesis

Rabba 24).<sup>[23]</sup> According to Jewish rabbinic literature, the first man Adam represents the *unity of mankind*. This is echoed in the modern preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>[24][25]</sup> And it is also taught, that Adam is last in order according to the evolutionary character of God's creation:<sup>[23]</sup>

Why was only a single specimen of man created first? To teach us that he who destroys a single soul destroys a whole world and that he who saves a single soul saves a whole world; furthermore, so no race or class may claim a nobler ancestry, saying, 'Our father was born first'; and, finally, to give testimony to the greatness of the Lord, who caused the wonderful diversity of mankind to emanate from one type. And why was Adam created last of all beings? To teach him humility; for if he be overbearing, let him remember that the little fly preceded him in the order of creation.<sup>[23]</sup>

The Jewish Publication Society's edition of Leviticus:

Thou shalt not hate thy brother. in thy heart; thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. 18 Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.<sup>[26]</sup>

This Torah verse represents one of several versions of the *Golden Rule*, which itself appears in various forms, positive and negative. It is the earliest written version of that concept in a positive form.<sup>[27]</sup>

At the turn of the eras, the Jewish rabbis were discussing the scope of the meaning of Leviticus 19:18 and 19:34 extensively:

The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the LORD am your God.

— Leviticus 19:34

Commentators summed up foreigners (= Samaritans), proselytes (= 'strangers who resides with you') (Rabbi Akiva, bQuid 75b) or Jews (Rabbi Gamaliel, yKet 3,1; 27a) to the scope of the meaning.

The Sage Hillel formulated an alternative form of the golden rule. When asked to sum up the entire Torah concisely, he explained, and taught the proselyte:<sup>[28]</sup>

That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn it.

— Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a, the "Great Principle"

On the verse, "Love your fellow as yourself," the classic commentator Rashi quotes from *Torat Kohanim*, an early Midrashic text regarding the famous dictum of Rabbi Akiva: "Love your fellow as yourself — Rabbi Akiva says this is a great principle of the Torah."<sup>[29]</sup>

Israel's postal service quoted from the previous Leviticus verse when it commemorated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on a 1958 postage stamp.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Christianity

According to Simon Blackburn, although the Golden Rule "can be found in some form in almost every ethical tradition", the rule is "sometimes claimed by Christianity as its own".<sup>[31]</sup> The "Golden Rule" has been attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, who used it to summarize the Torah: "Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets"<sup>[32]</sup> (Matthew 7:12 NCV (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+7%3A12&version=NCV>), see also Luke 6:31). The common English phrasing is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". A similar form appeared in a Catholic catechism around 1567 (certainly in the reprint of 1583).<sup>[33]</sup> The Golden Rule is stated positively numerous times in the Hebrew Pentateuch as well as the Prophets and Writings. Leviticus 19:18 ("Forget about the wrong things people do to you, and do not try to get even. Love your neighbor as you love yourself."; see also Great Commandment) and Leviticus 19:34 ("But treat them just as you treat your own citizens. Love foreigners as you love yourselves, because you were foreigners one time in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.").

The Old Testament Deuterocanonical books of Tobit and Sirach, accepted as part of the Scriptural canon by Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Non-Chalcedonian Churches, express a negative form of the golden rule:

"Do to no one what you yourself dislike."

— Tobit 4:15

"Recognize that your neighbor feels as you do, and keep in mind your own dislikes."

— Sirach 31:15

At the time of Hillel, an elder contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, the negative form of the golden rule was already proverbial among Second Temple Jews. When asked to sum up the entire Torah concisely, he answered:

"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."

— Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a

Two passages in the New Testament quote Jesus of Nazareth espousing the positive form of the rule:

Matthew 7:12

Do to others what you want them to do to you. This is the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.

Do to others what you would want them to do to you.

A similar passage, a parallel to the Great Commandment, is Luke 10:25-28

<sup>25</sup>And one day an authority on the law stood up to put Jesus to the test. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to receive eternal life?"

<sup>26</sup>What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you understand it?" <sup>27</sup>He answered, " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Love him with all your strength and with all your mind.' (Deuteronomy 6:5) And, 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' " <sup>28</sup>"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do that, and you will live."

The passage in the book of Luke then continues with Jesus answering the question, "Who is my neighbor?", by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, indicating that "your neighbor" is anyone in need.<sup>[34]</sup> This extends to all, including those who are generally considered hostile.

Jesus' teaching goes beyond the negative formulation of not doing what one would not like done to themselves, to the positive formulation of actively doing good to another that, if the situations were reversed, one would desire that the other would do for them. This formulation, as indicated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, emphasizes the needs for positive action that brings benefit to another, not simply restraining oneself from negative activities that hurt another. Taken as a rule of judgment, both formulations of the golden rule, the negative and positive, are equally applicable.<sup>[35]</sup>

In one passage of the New Testament Paul the Apostle refers to the golden rule:

Galatians 5:14

<sup>14</sup>For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

## Islam

The Golden Rule is implicitly expressed in some verses of the Quran, and is explicitly declared in the sayings of Muhammad. A common transliteration is: *Aheb li akheek ma tuhibu li nafsik*. This can be translated as "Wish for your brother, what you wish for yourself" or "Love for your brother what you love for yourself".

From the Quran: the first verse recommends the positive form of the rule, and the subsequent verses condemn not abiding the negative form of the Golden Rule:

"...and you should forgive And overlook: Do you not like God to forgive you? And Allah is The Merciful Forgiving."

— Quran (Surah 24, "The Light", v. 22)

"Woe to those... who, when they have to receive by measure from men, they demand exact full measure, but when they have to give by measure or weight to men, give less than due"

— Quran (Surah 83, "The Dealers in Fraud", vv. 1–4)

"...orphans and the needy, give them something and speak kindly to them. And those who are concerned about the welfare of their own children after their death, should have fear of God [Treat other people's Orphans justly] and guide them properly."

— Quran (Surah 4, "The Women", vv. 8-9)

"O you who believe! Spend [benevolently] of the good things that you have earned... and do not even think of spending [in alms] worthless things that you yourselves would be reluctant to accept."

— Quran (Surah 2, "The Calf", v. 267)

From the hadith, the collected oral and written accounts of Muhammad and his teachings during his lifetime:

A Bedouin came to the prophet, grabbed the stirrup of his camel and said: O the messenger of God! Teach me something to go to heaven with it. Prophet said: "As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don't do to them. Now let the stirrup go! [This maxim is enough for you; go and act in accordance with it!]"

— Kitab al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 146

"None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."

— An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith 13 (p. 56)<sup>[36]</sup>

"Seek for mankind that of which you are desirous for yourself, that you may be a believer."

— Sukhanan-i-Muhammad (Teheran, 1938)<sup>[37]</sup>

"That which you want for yourself, seek for mankind."<sup>[37]</sup>

"The most righteous person is the one who consents for other people what he consents for himself, and who dislikes for them what he dislikes for himself."<sup>[37]</sup>

Ali ibn Abi Talib (4th Caliph in Sunni Islam, and first Imam in Shia Islam) says:

"O' my child, make yourself the measure (for dealings) between you and others. Thus, you should desire for others what you desire for yourself and hate for others what you hate for yourself. Do not oppress as you do not like to be oppressed. Do good to others as you would like good to be done to you. Regard bad for yourself whatever you regard bad for others. Accept that (treatment) from others which you would like others to accept from you... Do not say to others what you do not like to be said to you."

— Nahjul Balaghah, Letter 31<sup>[38]</sup>

Other hadiths containing the golden rule are:

Anas related that Muhammad said: "None of you is truly a Muslim until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself". (Reported in Sahih Muslim and Sahih Bukhari).

Whoever wishes to be delivered from the fire and to enter paradise should treat other people as they wish to be treated themselves. (Reported by Sahih Muslim).

Do unto all men as you would wish to have done unto you; and reject for others what you would reject for yourself. (Reported by Abu Dawud)

## **Bahá'í Faith**

The Writings of the Bahá'í Faith while encouraging everyone to treat others as they would treat themselves, go further by introducing the concept of preferring others before oneself:

O SON OF MAN! Deny not My servant should he ask anything from thee, for his face is My face; be then abashed before Me.

— Bahá'u'lláh<sup>[39]</sup>

Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself.

— Bahá'u'lláh<sup>[40][41]</sup>

And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself.

— Bahá'u'lláh<sup>[42][43]</sup>

Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee, and say not that which thou doest not.

— Bahá'u'lláh<sup>[44][45][46]</sup>

## Indian religions

### Hinduism

One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one's own self. This, in brief, is the rule of dharma. Other behavior is due to selfish desires.

— Brihaspati, Mahabharata (Anusasana Parva, Section CXIII, Verse 8)<sup>[47]</sup>

By making *dharma* (right conduct) your main focus, treat others as you treat yourself<sup>[48]</sup>

Also,

श्रूयतां धर्मसर्वस्वं श्रुत्वा चाप्यवधार्यताम्।  
आत्मनः प्रतिकूलानि परेषां न समाचरेत्॥

If the entire Dharma can be said in a few words, then it is — that which is unfavorable to us, do not do that to others.

— Padmapuraana, shrushti 19/357–358

### Buddhism

Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, c. 623 – c. 543 BC)<sup>[49][50]</sup> made this principle one of the cornerstones of his ethics in the 6th century BC. It occurs in many places and in many forms throughout the Tripitaka.

Comparing oneself to others in such terms as "Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I," he should neither kill nor cause others to kill.

— Sutta Nipata 705

One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter.

— Dhammapada 10. Violence

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

— Udanavarga 5:18

Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Jainism

The Golden Rule is paramount in the Jainist philosophy and can be seen in the doctrines of Ahimsa and Karma. As part of the prohibition of causing any living beings to suffer, Jainism forbids inflicting upon others what is harmful to oneself.

The following quotation from the Acaranga Sutra sums up the philosophy of Jainism:

Nothing which breathes, which exists, which lives, or which has essence or potential of life, should be destroyed or ruled over, or subjugated, or harmed, or denied of its essence or potential.

In support of this Truth, I ask you a question – "*Is sorrow or pain desirable to you ?*" If you say "*yes it is*", it would be a lie. If you say, "*No, It is not*" you will be expressing the truth. **Just as sorrow or pain is not desirable to you, so it is to all which breathe, exist, live or have any essence of life.** To you and all, it is undesirable, and painful, and repugnant.<sup>[52]</sup>

A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.

— Sutrakritanga, 1.11.33

In happiness and suffering, in joy and grief, we should regard all creatures as we regard our own self.

— Lord Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara

Saman Suttam of Jinendra Varni<sup>[53]</sup> gives further insight into this precept:-

Just as pain is not agreeable to you, it is so with others. Knowing this principle of equality treat other with respect and compassion.

— Suman Suttam, *verse 150*

Killing a living being is killing one's own self; showing compassion to a living being is showing compassion to oneself. He who desires his own good, should avoid causing any harm to a living being.

— Suman Suttam, *verse 151*

## Sikhism

Precious like jewels are the minds of all. To hurt them is not at all good. If thou desirest thy Beloved, then hurt thou not anyone's heart.

— Guru Arjan Dev Ji 259, Guru Granth Sahib

## East Asian religions

### Confucianism

己所不欲，勿施於人。

*"What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."*

子貢問曰："有一言而可以終身行之者乎"？子曰："其恕乎！己所不欲、勿施於人。"  
*Zi gong (a disciple of Confucius) asked: "Is there any one word that could guide a person throughout life?"*

*The Master replied: "How about 'shu' [reciprocity]: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself?"*

--Confucius, *Analects* XV.24, tr. David Hinton (another translation is in the online Chinese Text Project)<sup>[54]</sup>

The same idea is also presented in V.12 and VI.30 of the *Analects* (c. 500 BC), which can be found in the online Chinese Text Project. It should be noted, however, that the phraseology differs from the Christian version of the Golden Rule. It does not presume to do anything unto others, but merely to avoid doing what would be harmful. It does not preclude doing good deeds and taking moral positions, but there is slim possibility for a Confucian missionary outlook, such as one can justify with the Christian Golden Rule.

### Taoism

The sage has no interest of his own, but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful.

— Tao Teh Ching, Chapter 49

Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

— T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien

### Mohism

If people regarded other people's states in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own state to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people's cities in the same way that they regard their own, who

then would incite their own city to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. If people regarded other people's families in the same way that they regard their own, who then would incite their own family to attack that of another? For one would do for others as one would do for oneself. And so if states and cities do not attack one another and families do not wreak havoc upon and steal from one another, would this be a harm to the world or a benefit? Of course one must say it is a benefit to the world.

— Mozi, c. 400 BC

[55]

Mozi regarded the golden rule as a corollary to the cardinal virtue of impartiality, and encouraged egalitarianism and selflessness in relationships.

## **Iranian Religions**

### **Zoroastrianism**

## **New Religious Movements**

### **Wicca**

Here ye these words and heed them well, the words of Dea, thy Mother Goddess, "I command thee thus, O children of the Earth, that that which ye deem harmful unto thyself, the very same shall ye be forbidden from doing unto another, for violence and hatred give rise to the same. My command is thus, that ye shall return all violence and hatred with peacefulness and love, for my Law is love unto all things. Only through love shall ye have peace; yea and verily, only peace and love will cure the world, and subdue all evil."

— The Book of Ways, Devotional Wicca

### **Scientology**

The Way to Happiness expresses the Golden Rule both in its negative/prohibitive form and in its positive form. The negative/prohibitive form is expressed in Precept 19 as:

19. Try not to do things to others that you would not like them to do to you.

— The Way to Happiness, Precept 19<sup>[56][57]</sup>

The positive form is expressed in Precept 20 as:

20. Try to treat others as you would want them to treat you.

## Secular context

### Global ethic

The "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic"<sup>[60]</sup> from the Parliament of the World's Religions<sup>[61][62]</sup> (1993) proclaimed the Golden Rule ("We must treat others as we wish others to treat us") as the common principle for many religions.<sup>[63]</sup> The Initial Declaration was signed by 143 leaders from all of the world's major faiths, including Baha'i Faith, Brahmanism, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Indigenous, Interfaith, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native American, Neo-Pagan, Sikhism, Taoism, Theosophist, Unitarian Universalist and Zoroastrian.<sup>[63][64]</sup> In the folklore of several cultures the Golden Rule is depicted by the allegory of the long spoons.

### Humanism

Many different sources claim the Golden Rule as a humanist principle.<sup>[65][66]</sup>

Trying to live according to the Golden Rule means trying to empathise with other people, including those who may be very different from us. Empathy is at the root of kindness, compassion, understanding and respect – qualities that we all appreciate being shown, whoever we are, whatever we think and wherever we come from. And although it isn't possible to know what it really feels like to be a different person or live in different circumstances and have different life experiences, it isn't difficult for most of us to imagine what would cause us suffering and to try to avoid causing suffering to others. For this reason many people find the Golden Rule's corollary – "do not treat people in a way you would not wish to be treated yourself" – more pragmatic.<sup>[65]</sup>

— Maria MacLachlan, Think Humanism<sup>[67]</sup>

Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you. *[is]* (...) the single greatest, simplest, and most important moral axiom humanity has ever invented, one which reappears in the writings of almost every culture and religion throughout history, the one we know as the Golden Rule. Moral directives do not need to be complex or obscure to be worthwhile, and in fact, it is precisely this rule's simplicity which makes it great. It is easy to come up with, easy to understand, and easy to apply, and these three things are the hallmarks of a strong and healthy moral system. The idea behind it is readily graspable: before performing an action which might harm another person, try to imagine yourself in their position, and consider whether you would want to be the recipient of that action. If you would not want to be in such a position, the other person probably would not either, and so you should not do it. It is the basic and fundamental human trait of empathy, the ability to vicariously experience how another is feeling, that makes this possible, and it is the principle of empathy by which we should live our lives.

— Adam Lee, Ebon Musings, "A decalogue for the modern world"<sup>[68]</sup>

In the view of Greg M. Epstein, a Humanist chaplain at Harvard University, "'do unto others' ... is a concept that essentially no religion misses entirely. *But not a single one of these versions of the golden rule requires a God*".<sup>[69]</sup> At least the Biblical accounts, however, portray the obligation to love one's neighbor as oneself as a corollary of a more basic obligation to love God with one's entire being.<sup>[70]</sup>

## **Existentialism**

When we say that man chooses for himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be. To choose between this or that is at the same time to affirm the value of that which is chosen; for we are unable ever to choose the worse. What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 291–292<sup>[71]</sup>

## **Other contexts**

### **Human rights**

According to Marc H. Bornstein, and William E. Paden, the Golden Rule is arguably the most essential basis for the modern concept of human rights, in which each individual has a right to just treatment, and a reciprocal responsibility to ensure justice for others.<sup>[72]</sup>

However Leo Damrosch argued that the notion that the Golden Rule pertains to "rights" per se is a contemporary interpretation and has nothing to do with its origin. The development of human "rights" is a modern political ideal that began as a philosophical concept promulgated through the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau in 18th century France, among others. His writings influenced Thomas Jefferson, who then incorporated Rousseau's reference to "inalienable rights" into the United States Declaration of Independence in 1776. Damrosch argued that to confuse the Golden Rule with human rights is to apply contemporary thinking to ancient concepts.<sup>[73]</sup>

### **Economics**

Richard Swift, referring to ideas from David Graeber, suggests that "without some kind of reciprocity society would no longer be able to exist."<sup>[74]</sup> His article, *Pathways & possibilities*, has a subsection called "A reciprocal economy"<sup>[74]</sup> which refers to Graeber's concept of "baseline communism": Swift writes: "If we treated each other .... strictly on the basis of profit and loss, life would be intolerable. So why shouldn't we make the principle of generous reciprocity, so present in everyday interactions, the basis of economic life rather than the current model of competing egoism?"<sup>[74]</sup>

### **Psychology**

If the negative/prohibitive form of the Golden Rule would stand *alone*, it would simply serve as a proactive motivation *against* wrong action. But the Golden Rule *in general* actually serves as a motivation *toward* proactive action. As Frank Crane put it, "The Golden Rule is of no use to you whatsoever unless you realize that it's your move!"<sup>[75]</sup>

## Children's stories

Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) includes a character named Mrs Do-As-You-Would-Be-Done-By (and another, Mrs Be-Done-By-As-You-Did).<sup>[76]</sup>

## Criticism of the Golden Rule

Philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant<sup>[77]</sup> and Friedrich Nietzsche,<sup>[78]</sup> have objected to the rule on a variety of grounds. The most serious among these is its application. How does one know how others want to be treated? The obvious way is to ask them, but this cannot be done if one assumes they have not reached a particular and relevant understanding.

### Differences in values or interests

Shaw's comment about differing tastes suggests that if your values are not shared with others, the way you want to be treated will not be the way they want to be treated. Hence, the Golden Rule of "do unto others" is "dangerous in the wrong hands,"<sup>[79]</sup> according to philosopher Iain King, because "some fanatics have no aversion to death: the Golden Rule might inspire them to kill others in suicide missions."<sup>[80]</sup>

### Differences in situations

Immanuel Kant famously criticized the golden rule for not being sensitive to differences of situation, noting that a prisoner duly convicted of a crime could appeal to the golden rule while asking the judge to release him, pointing out that the judge would not want anyone else to send him to prison, so he should not do so to others.<sup>[77]</sup> Kant's *Categorical Imperative*, introduced in *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, is often confused with the Golden Rule.

### Cannot be a sole guide to action

In his book *How to Make Good Decisions and Be Right All the Time*, philosopher Iain King has argued that " (although) the idea of mirroring your treatment of others with their treatment of you is very widespread indeed... most ancient wisdoms express this negatively – advice on what you should not do, rather than what you should."<sup>[81]</sup> He argues this creates a bias in favour of inertia which allows bad actions and states of affairs to persist. The positive formulation, meanwhile, can be "incendiary",<sup>[82]</sup> since it "can lead to cycles of tit-for-tat reciprocity," unless it is accompanied by a corrective mechanism, such as a concept of forgiveness.<sup>[82]</sup> Therefore, he concludes that there can be no viable formulation of the Golden Rule, unless it is heavily qualified by other maxims.<sup>[83]</sup>

## Responses to criticisms

Walter Terence Stace, in *The Concept of Morals* (1937), wrote:

Mr. Bernard Shaw's remark "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. Their tastes may be different" is no doubt a smart saying. But it seems to overlook the fact that "doing as you would be done by" includes taking into account your neighbor's tastes as you would that he should take yours into account. Thus the "golden rule" might still express the essence of a universal morality *even if no two men in the world had any needs or tastes in common*.<sup>[84]</sup>

Marcus George Singer observed that there are two importantly different ways of looking at the golden rule: as requiring (1) that you perform specific actions that you want others to do to you or (2) that you guide your behavior in the same general ways that you want others to.<sup>[85]</sup> Counter-examples to the golden rule typically are more forceful against the first than the second.

In his book on the golden rule, Jeffrey Wattles makes the similar observation that such objections typically arise while applying the golden rule in certain general ways (namely, ignoring differences in taste, in situation, and so forth). But if we apply the golden rule to our own method of using it, asking in effect if we would want other people to apply the golden rule in such ways, the answer would typically be no, since it is quite predictable that others' ignoring of such factors will lead to behavior which we object to. It follows that we should not do so ourselves—according to the golden rule. In this way, the golden rule may be self-correcting.<sup>[86]</sup> An article by Jouni Reinikainen develops this suggestion in greater detail.<sup>[87]</sup>

It is possible, then, that the golden rule can itself guide us in identifying which differences of situation are morally relevant. We would often want other people to ignore any prejudice against our race or nationality when deciding how to act towards us, but would also want them to not ignore our differing preferences in food, desire for aggressiveness, and so on. The **platinum rule**,<sup>[88]</sup> and perhaps other variants, might also be self-correcting in this same manner.

## Scientific research

There has been research published arguing that some 'sense' of fair play and the Golden Rule may be stated and rooted in terms of neuroscientific and neuroethical principles.<sup>[89]</sup>

## See also

- Norm of reciprocity, social norm of in-kind responses to the behavior of others
- Reciprocity (cultural anthropology), way of defining people's informal exchange of goods and labour
- Reciprocity (evolution), mechanisms for the evolution of cooperation
- Reciprocity (international relations), principle that favours, benefits, or penalties that are granted by one state to the citizens or legal entities of another, should be returned in kind
- Reciprocity (social and political philosophy), concept of reciprocity as in-kind positive or negative responses for the actions of others; relation to justice; related ideas such as gratitude, mutuality, and the Golden Rule

- Reciprocity (social psychology), in-kind positive or negative responses of individuals towards the actions of others
- Serial reciprocity, where the benefactor of a gift or service will in turn provide benefits to a third party
- Ubuntu (philosophy), an ethical philosophy originating from Southern Africa, which has been summarised as 'A person is a person through other people'

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