

ETHICS AND PERSONHOOD

Rediscovering the Golden Rule for a Globalizing World

by
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I Questions about the Golden Rule

The question of the significance of the Golden Rule for a globalizing world appears both far-fetched and yet timely. Why should this rule of treating others as one wants to be treated by them be of global relevance?

Isn't the rule too vague to provide clear guidance for human conduct? Already Immanuel Kant and many other philosophers (such as Gert 2005 and Appiah 2006) have disparaged the Golden Rule. How should the judge put herself in the shoes of the defendant, and how should the parent take side of his child in order to make a fair judgment? Can one switch at all into the position of another person, and, even if one can, would it be right and not violating the respect of the other? If I respect the other, how can I impose my will onto the other and do to her what I would want her to do to me rather than what she wants me to do to her?

Besides the reproach of vagueness, the Golden Rule is occasionally interpreted as a vulgar-ethical maxim of retaliation (Dihle 1962) or as a "tit-for-tat strategy": "If the other treats you well, do the same and treat him well also; but if he treats you badly, treat him badly, not well!" or, in Axelrod's words, as a "strategy of starting with cooperation, and thereafter doing what the other player did on the previous move" (Axelrod 1984: viii). In still another interpretation, the Golden Rule is nothing more than a rule of prudence based on the calculation that others will treat you well if you treat them well in the first place.

Furthermore, as the critique continues, the supposedly universal validity of the Golden Rule, when placed into the global context, is challenged by an

enormous variety of cultures and religions. How can a simple rule like this claim to have meaning for all human beings? Must it not be so general that it loses its specific meaning? And if its meaning depends on its particular context, how can it be interpreted in a context of “clashing civilizations”? One might admit a limited validity of the Golden Rule within relatively clearly defined cultural and religious boundaries. But what is its meaning in a truly global context? Don’t we overstate its importance by claiming it to be a global rule?

And more questions arise. Even if the universal validity of the Golden Rule could be established, how can it be applied beyond interpersonal relations between two individuals? When more than two persons are involved, how should we account for the third parties? Does it make sense to apply the Golden Rule to collectives such as organizations and peoples and to relations between them? What could it mean for global institutions?

Before hastily dismissing these questions and yielding to their criticism, we may consider several facts and challenges. First of all, it is a historic fact that the Golden Rule dates back over 2500 years and has appeared in most of the major religious and cultural traditions of humankind. Amazingly, it can be found independently in disparate parts of the world and in various formulations (the evidence of which will be given below). Although ignored by many contemporaries, this worthwhile fact needs to be made known to the wider public.

Second, with advancing globalization, the world is becoming increasingly complex and a pressing need is emerging for a common ethical ground with worldwide acceptance. Although torn apart by deep-rooted and far-reaching conflicts, humankind has only one single planet to live on and faces an increasing number of shared challenges. Yet it cannot address them properly and survive without a common ethical ground. What is meant by that? It suggests to use John Rawls’s concept of “an overlapping consensus,” which contains a set of basic principles necessary to live together in a society characterized by moral pluralism (Rawls 1993: 133-172). The concept differs, on the one hand, from the notion of “a smallest common denominator” that can be achieved by the conflicting parties but might not suffice for living together, and, on the other hand, from a common ground that encompasses all philosophical and religious traditions and ends up becoming an ideology of repression. The overlapping consensus respects the diversity of world and religious views and includes all norms and values needed to live together. It overcomes the dangers of ethical imperialism and ethical relativism and avoids ethical skepticism as well.

Third, if a common ethical ground is urgently needed and the Golden Rule is a shared heritage of humankind, why shouldn't we draw on this valuable resource and make it fruitful for a global ethics? On the one hand, it is a universal moral principle and does not presuppose any particular assumption taken from a specific religious or philosophical worldview. On the other hand, it is promulgated and supported by those diverse religious and philosophical views. In other words, there is neither a complete separation nor a full unification of the ethical principle and the respective comprehensive worldview. Rather, the substance of the Golden Rule appears to be recognized by its own value while the broader meaning, the motivation to follow it and the enforcing rituals and social customs provided by the particular worldviews, can vary a great deal.

Fourth, given the multiple misconceptions of and objections to the Golden Rule, serious efforts appear to be necessary to elaborate the multifaceted dimensions of this rule and to clarify its deeper meaning. Moreover, it is appropriate to elucidate its limitations as well. The Golden Rule is not the only candidate to substantiate the overlapping consensus in the global context. Fortunately, there are also other approaches such as human rights, human capabilities, and the principles of reciprocity and sustainability, which can provide guidance for a global ethics (and which will be discussed later on).

II The Golden Rule as a Basic Moral Formula of Humankind

The Golden Rule aims to answer the question as to how one should behave toward one's fellow humans: Treat the others as you want to be treated by them. In one version or another, this rule has appeared in nearly all cultures and religions and spread widely.

The Golden Rule in its negative version can be found already in ancient Greece. *Thales* of Milet, around 600 BC, asks: "How can we conduct the best and most righteous life? By refraining from doing what we blame in others" (Hoche 1978: 371). And *Pittakos*, a contemporary of *Thales*'s, gives the advice: "Don't do yourself that others make you angry at!" (Hoche 1978: 372). A little later, in the fifth century BC, the oldest Greek historian *Herodotus* writes: "For what I reproach the neighbor, I won't do to the best of my ability" (Hoche 1978: 372).

In the biblical tradition, the Golden Rule is documented in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Father *Tobit*, before his death, gives

the following advice to his son Tobias: “What you hate, do not do to anyone” (Tobit 4:15). And in the book *Jesus Sirach* (31:15) it says: “Judge your neighbor’s feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful.” Moreover, the Talmud reports a famous anecdote about Rabbi *Hillel* (20 BC). When interrogated by a pert young man whether he can summarize the entire content of the Torah in such short words that one could hear his teaching while standing on one leg, he smiled and said: “Don’t do to anybody what you detest yourself. That is the entire law. Everything else is only commentary on it” (Jeremias 1958: 1688; cf. Dihle 1962: 8).

In the New Testament, the rule appears as *Jesus’s* demand in a positive formulation: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31). The Latin version based on the Vulgata text of the above-mentioned passage in Tobit spread in an extraordinarily wide manner from the early Christian tradition and the Middle Ages up to Immanuel Kant (cf. Reiner 1974: 378). It says: “Quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris.”

According to *Muhammad* (570-632), the widely traveled merchant and later founder of Islam, the faithful is obligated to treat all human beings as the faithful wishes to be treated by them and to spurn the actions toward others, which he spurns done toward himself (Hein 1958: 1688). For instance, the Holy Prophet of Islam says: “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself” (Number 13 of “Imam Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths”). And Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose words are considered as valuable as the Prophet’s by all Shiites and a majority of Sunnis, also says (in the 31st letter of *Nahj-ul-Balaghah*):¹

My dear son, so far as your behavior with other human beings is concerned, let your “self” act as scales to judge its goodness or wickedness. Do unto others as you wish others to do unto you. Whatever you like for yourself, like for others, and whatever you dislike to happen to you, spare others from such happenings. Do not oppress and tyrannize anybody because you surely do not like to be oppressed and tyrannized. Be kind and sympathetic to others as you certainly desire others to treat you kindly and sympathetically. If you find objectionable and loathsome habits in others, abstain from developing those traits of character in yourself. If you are satisfied or feel happy in receiving a certain kind of behavior from others, you may behave with others in exactly the same way. Do not speak about them in the same way that you do not like others to speak about you. Do not speak on a subject about which you know little or nothing, and if you

¹ I am grateful to Nasser Elahi for these two references.

at all want to speak on anything or about anyone of whom you are fully aware, then avoid scandal, libel and aspersion as you do not like yourself to be scandalized and scorned in the same manner.

The Golden Rule is also well-known in many other cultures and religions. In the *Confucian* literature it is said: “While I do not wish others to impose on me, I wish not to impose on others either.” *Taoism* teaches: “Consider your neighbor’s happiness and suffering as your own happiness and suffering and strive to increase his well-being as your own.” (Schmidt 1972, 57). *Hinduism* demands: “Do not do to your neighbor what you don’t want to endure from him.” *Buddhism* advises: “Show to others the same love, kindness, and compassion that you wish to be shown to you.” (Schmidt 1972: 57). *Jainism*, particularly known by its demand of *ahimsa*, non-violence toward living beings, admonishes: “In joy and happiness as in suffering and misery we should treat all beings exactly as we treat ourselves.” (Schmidt 1972: 57). Guru Angad recommends to the *Sikhs*: “Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself” (Hein 1958: 1688). And in *Parsism*, a doctrine based on Zarathustra, it is said: “Light and noble is only who does not inflict on others what is not good for himself” (Schmidt 1972: 57).

Although documented and highly respected in most of humankind’s cultures and religions since the 18th century, the Golden Rule has lost its importance in the philosophical discussion of the West, one reason being that the rule can be interpreted in multiple ways. According to Reiner (1974: 353), another important reason was Kant’s pejorative judgement disqualifying the rule as “trivial” and useless for strict basic philosophical thought. Only thanks to the work of Hans Reiner (1948) in Germany and Richard M. Hare (1963) and Marcus G. Singer (1963: 2001) in the Anglo-Saxon world, has the gold of the Golden Rule been rediscovered. A thorough analytical examination showed that “this rule comprehends a multitude of aspects that are of fundamental importance for practical moral motivation and guidance as well as for ethical theory” (Reiner 1974: 353). There is no important difference between its positive and negative formulations (Singer 2001: 616; Plaks 2005: 3632), and the Golden Rule, with its focus on conduct, differs from the biblical demand “to love your neighbor as you love yourself” (verses in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament), which includes intentions as well.²

² Further objections to the Golden Rule are discussed in Singer 2001. More literature on the Golden Rule can be found in Rost 1986, Wattles 1996, RGG 1958 and 2000, and Plaks 2005.

III What are the Structural Elements of the Golden Rule?

The Golden Rule is based on a two-person model, in which person A (the active participant) makes a decision and takes an action that affects person B (the passive participant). The person who acts and the person who is affected are not the same; there is an interpersonal relationship between subject and object, treating and being treated, active doing and passive enduring. It is characterized by the fact that it does not concern merely the intention but the action of the person in question. The actor has a discretionary space of freedom that includes various options and is free to act, not just behaving in a behavioristic sense. Furthermore, it is assumed that the person called for action is in a situation of uncertainty, asking herself what to do. She knows or at least suspects that she should neither simply follow her own self-interest nor be led by a morality of retaliation or by unquestioned social customs. These negative constraints, though, do not suffice to tell the decision maker what to do in a positive way.

The Golden Rule, therefore, proposes a thought experiment of reversing roles. In her imagination, the decision maker should put herself in the position of the person to be affected by her action, ask herself how she wants to be treated, and then act consistently, regardless of being the active or the passive participant. Hence the Golden Rule is characterized as “*the rule of reciprocity*.”³

The reversal of roles exhibits three characteristics. *First*, the evaluating decision maker should go into and feel empathy for the situation of the person to be affected, thus internally executing a genuine reversal, although only to the extent that it concerns the essential features of the new role, not the subject of the role itself. Presumably, the decision maker is cognizant of those features. The Golden Rule, therefore, does not require, as is occasionally though wrongly claimed, that all roles and positions be equalized; rather it accounts for their potential variety. The mother should put herself in the situation of the child, not a small adult person, the judge in the role of the defendant subject to the laws. Because of its call to feel empathy with the other, the Golden Rule is at times named “*the rule of empathy*.”

³ It might be recalled that John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) suggests a similar thought experiment by imagining a decision making situation for establishing justice principles for the basic structure of society, in which the decision makers should put themselves in positions with certain characteristics without knowing (due to the so-called “veil of ignorance”) if they actually end up being in those positions. By doing so, he intends to set up a moral point of view of impartiality. In the case of the Golden Rule, though, the thought experiment is not anonymous but personal.

A *second* characteristic of the imaginative reversal of roles postulated by the Golden Rule consists in that the evaluating person in her decision making situation of uncertainty draws on another volition of herself about which, in contrast to the decision she faces now, no doubt exists (Reiner 1974: 354). She implicitly makes a moral judgment on the rightness or wrongness of the action expected from the other. What sets the standard is not the volition of the other but the own volition in the role of the other. Consequently, the Golden Rule does not say: Treat the other as he wants to be treated; or as your role model or your idol requires to treat others; or, generally speaking, as society demands it. Rather, the rule demands: "Treat the other as you want to be treated by the other!" Because the decision maker's autonomous moral judgment is called for, the Golden Rule is appropriately characterized as "*the rule of autonomy*."

Due to this second feature of the reversal of roles, the Golden Rule fundamentally differs from the principles of retaliation and tit-for-tat. The first demands to "pay back" wrongdoing with wrongdoing (for instance, in a certain proportion, as in "an eye for an eye") and the second requires one to reward good deeds with good deeds and punish bad deeds with bad ones. As one can see, the difference with the Golden Rule lies in that here the actual conduct of the other person and not my own volition becomes the standard for my action. Moreover, the Golden Rule differs from the norm of reciprocity proposed by L.C. Becker because it "concerns more than exchanges" and "proposes a criterion for initiatives one might take: Do to others only what you would have them do to you" (Becker 1990: 81).

The *third* feature of the reversal of roles concerns "the openness to action" that is influenced by experiences and oriented toward the future. This feature means that the Golden Rule neither dictates specific prescriptions nor provides prefabricated recipes for action but, more generally, stimulates moral imagination and allows for multiple ethically acceptable options. The openness to action should not be misunderstood in a purely formal way. It rather helps perceive substantive options generated by the reversal of roles. In putting oneself into the shoes of the other, one does not have to limit oneself to *the present*. One can also refer to something one *has experienced oneself in the past* or one *is expecting for the future*. The Golden Rule then means: "Treat the other as you wanted to be treated when you were in the same situation in which your face-to-face partner happens to be now!" "Act out of gratitude for what was done to you!" Or "act in such a way that the other, for instance your child, does not have to endure the same bad experience through which you had to go yourself!" In projecting

the role reversal to the future, the actor of today should be guided by the way he wants to be affected tomorrow.

This may happen for reasons of prudence, with the intent that the good I do to the other will turn out to be to my advantage in the future as well. My present action is then a means to serve (also) my own interest. In this way the Golden Rule becomes a rule of prudence; hence the pejorative judgment of the Golden Rule by Kant. However, this does not necessarily speak against the Golden Rule. Prudence does not need to be immoral nor exclude other reasons for ethical action. As Reiner, Singer, and Hare have convincingly argued, it would be a serious misunderstanding to interpret the Golden Rule *only* as a rule of prudence.

To sum up, the Golden Rule, in fact, includes four rules: (1) The rule of empathy requires a thought experiment: Put yourself (A) in the position of the person (B) who will be affected by your decision and action! (2) The rule of autonomy demands that you should ask yourself (your conscience) how you in that position (B) want to be affected by such a decision and action (from A). (3) The rule of reciprocity requires returning to your original position (A) thus to decide and act accordingly and consistently. (4) The rule of prudence suggests acting in your own enlightened interest and treating your fellow now as you want to be treated by him or her in the future.

IV Discussion of Applications and Limitations

In his work *Business and Economic Ethics* (2006), Arthur Rich distinguishes three basic relations in which the ethical question arises: the conduct of the person toward herself (the individual aspect), the conduct of the person toward other persons (the personal aspect), and the conduct of the person toward nature (the ecological aspect). Obviously, the Golden Rule first and foremost concerns the personal basic relation that is the relation between the I/we and the you (in singular and plural) while disregarding obligations toward oneself and actions related to nature. This focus, therefore, defines by and large the potential and limitations of the Golden Rule.

It is not necessary to discuss the Rule's application to personal relations extensively because in many situations it is straightforward. Think of the customer who does not want to be cheated, the employee who wants to be respected, the student who expects to be evaluated fairly, the elderly person

in need who gets neglected or the spouse who receives little quality time from her husband.

But what about the individual and the ecological aspects? As Kant already observed critically and correctly, the Golden Rule disregards the obligations toward oneself. To apply it to the relation between I and self apparently does not make sense by demanding, for example, to deal with your health in such a way as you want it to be dealt with in your own position. As for the ecological aspect, absent in most versions of the Golden Rule, it is hardly applicable either, as seen by the statement: “Treat Lake Michigan in such a way as you in its position want to be treated by the lake!”

Nonetheless, an extension of the Golden Rule to all beings can be found in Jainism: “In joy and happiness as in sorrow and misery we should treat all beings as ourselves!” And Arthur Schopenhauer, in opposition to Kant, attributes paramount importance to the Golden Rule by including in its positive and negative formulations all obligations of law and charity and even humankind’s relationship to nature. According to him, the Golden Rule is nothing else but a description or premise of the simplest and purest principle of action required unanimously by all moral systems: “Do not harm anybody, rather help all beings as much as you can!” “Neminem laede, imo omnes, quantum potes, iuva!” (Schopenhauer 1977: 198).

As mentioned before, the Golden Rule relates primarily to interactions between persons; here it has its strongest motivating power. This does not mean, though, that it is completely restricted to immediate relations between persons. In fact, interpersonal relations are shaped by multiple organizational and systemic conditions that belong to the realm of *social ethics*. To what extent can the Golden Rule apply to organizations and systems? In other words: can it be relevant for *social* or *institutional ethics*?

The application appears to be possible and meaningful, at least to some extent, with regard to relations between individuals and organizations. It is, however, problematic with regard to relations among organizations and institutions.

Broadly speaking, the relations between individuals and organizations can be disturbed and unbalanced in two ways. The first could be called “*the recklessness of the organization toward individuals*.” Accordingly, the pursuit of the organizational goal has top priority to which the interests of the individuals are to be subjugated without exception. For instance, the dignity and rights of employees might be violated if it is required by organizational policy, strategic planning, or information and human resource policies.

The second way of imbalance can be described as “*the exploitation of the organization by individuals.*” This means that individuals pursue the organizational goal if and only if they individually take advantage of it. To benefit from the organization as “a free rider” can include selling intellectual property of the organization to its competitors, using organizational assets for private purposes, taking exorbitant executive compensation, etc.

Can the Golden Rule be a remedy to these kinds of disturbed relationships? As in the case of interpersonal relations, it cannot produce concrete answers, but it can indicate a heuristic perspective with the following demand: “As a representative of an organization, treat its employees in such a way as you want to be treated in their position!” And: “As a member of an organization, treat it as you in the position of its representative want the organization to be treated by you!”

Is this application and extension of the Golden Rule ethically acceptable? Doesn't it open the door to a kind of loyalty for organizations that is immune against critical questions about organizational goals and strategies? This is a fair question that should not be taken lightly. It shows that the organizational and systemic contexts in which individuals interact are not value-free but subject to ethical question, too. Therefore, the fundamental question arises whether or not the Golden Rule as a basic moral formula for humankind can be meaningfully applied to human organizations and systems that pertain even to the global level?

What about the applicability to the global level?

Certainly, an immediate and direct application to organizations and systems is not possible because they are qualitatively different from interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, as human constructs, they are ultimately formed by human decisions and thus cannot escape moral responsibility. Consequently, the Golden Rule might provide ethical guidance here as well, though in an indirect manner. In fact, the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* in 1993 promulgated by the Parliament of World Religions explicitly mentions the Golden Rule by referring it to the four “directives” for a culture of non-violence, solidarity, tolerance, and equal rights and partnership between men and women, although the reference is not elaborated further.⁴

⁴ It might also be interesting to explore if and how other global declarations such as the *Interfaith Declaration of International Business Ethics* (1999) and the *Caux Roundtable Principles for Business* (1999) are influenced by the Golden Rule.

What about the other approaches, mentioned earlier, to provide ethical substance to an overlapping consensus in the global context? Can we discover any connections between the Golden Rule and human rights, human capabilities, and the principles of reciprocity and sustainability?

As elaborated earlier, the Golden Rule contains four dimensions the relevance of which can be showed also for a world in the process of globalization that is characterized by an immensely growing multitude of interconnections across national borders. First, the *rule of empathy* invites us to look behind the cold global statistics and the faces of unknown people featured in the media and arouses in us emotions of interest and care particularly for those in need and misery. As a matter of fact, expanding the circle of our empathy beyond national boundaries is somewhat easier today than at the times when humankind lived by and large compartmentalized in different parts of the world and the Golden Rule was discovered separately. Experiences of empathy are easier because globalization takes place not only at the systemic and organizational but also at the individual level. More and more people are becoming personally connected to individuals and families in other cultures and religions. An expanding empathy seems to stimulate a sense of *global solidarity* (as it could be observed, for instance, after the catastrophe of tsunami in 2005).

The second dimension of the Golden Rule, the *rule of autonomy*, can be related to human rights and human capabilities. Widely recognized internationally, human rights constitute today a global ethical framework with far-reaching moral and legal implications. They define minimal universal standards of how humans should be treated by governments, organizations, and individuals respectively. The thought experiment of reversing roles, proposed by the Golden Rule, means that each person in whose shoes (or position) one should put oneself is endowed with inalienable human rights. These rights grant personal autonomy to the persons to be affected (by either institutional arrangements or individual decisions) as those who set up those arrangements and make those decisions enjoy the same personal autonomy. With regard to human capabilities (an approach developed by Amartya Sen 1999 and Martha Nussbaum 2006), the Golden Rule implies that the persons to be affected are not only protected by minimal universal standards but also have a set of “real freedoms (or human capabilities) that people enjoy.” In other words, the capability approach (in an Aristotelian vein) suggests a rich anthropological notion of human flourishing beyond needs and rights. It thus matches the Golden Rule’s proactive characteristic, proposing “a criterion for initiatives one might take” (Becker 1990, 81). In

sum, it appears that the Golden Rule *can be related properly to human rights and human capabilities*. In their origins, they are distinct; but in substance, they are complementary.

The principle of reciprocity, as defined and argued for by L.C. Becker (1990), is a moral norm that concerns exchanges: When receiving a good from somebody else, one is morally obliged to give something back in proportion to that good. In contrast to the tit-for-tat principle, it also demands one not to reciprocate evil with evil but to resist it.⁵ This principle is meant to be of universal validity and applicable also to global exchanges such as international trade and investments, political agreements, and cultural exchange programs. Although not equivalent to the Golden Rule, can it be related to its rule of reciprocity? Both norms are grounded in a deep sense of *fairness*. Exchanges of any kind, beginning from personal interactions and up to international relations regulated by global institutions, should be fair, recognizing the goods received and contributing equivalent value to the exchange partners. (It goes without saying that the definition of goods and equivalents needs to be substantiated, which can be done, for instance, in terms of human capabilities.)

Fourth, the rule of *prudence*, also an important, but not the only dimension of the Golden Rule, points to the likely consequences of the upcoming decision. It asserts that living up to the Golden Rule is not only „the right thing to do,” but also ends up, very often, being in the enlightened self-interest of the decision maker. Thus the Golden Rule refutes a strictly egotistic as well as a strictly altruistic philosophy. This balanced view that *gives prudence a proper place in the ethical framework* greatly matters, beyond personal interactions, to relationships between collective bodies such as transnational corporations and nation states. If, for instance, the United States pursued a foreign policy of strict prudence vis-a-vis inter-

⁵ The full content of Becker’s principle of reciprocity (Becker 1990, 74) includes the following maxims:

- (1) Good received should be returned with good.
- (2) Evil received should not be returned with evil.
- (3) Evil received should be resisted.
- (4) Evil done should be made good.
- (5) Returns and restitution should be made by the ones who have received the good or done the evil, respectively.
- (6) Returns and restitution should be fitting and proportional.
- (7) Returns should be made for the good received – not merely for the good accepted or requested.
- (8) Reciprocation, as defined by 1 – 7, should be made a moral obligation.

national law, treaties, and organizations by putting its own interests on top of all others, it would violate the spirit of the Golden Rule. Rather, the Golden Rule would require U.S. foreign policy to respect those international arrangements with empathy and in the spirit of autonomy and reciprocity. It can then be assumed that the outcome of such policy is likely to serve U.S. interests as well.

Finally, the principle of *sustainability* provides an *intergenerational perspective* to the Golden Rule, demanding to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, 8). In fact, it does not seem so difficult to imagine the core meaning of its application, although many circumstances of the future are unknown in the present. Placed in the positions of one’s children and grandchildren, would one want to compromise their ability to meet their own needs by only focusing on the needs of the present generation? The Golden Rule is definitively open to the prospect of future generations, although it does not indicate how it might apply more specifically.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to shed new light on the ancient but today widely ignored Golden Rule, to clarify its misconceptions, to elaborate its structural elements, and to discuss its applications and limitations up to the context of a globalizing world. In today’s search for common ethical ground worldwide, it appears worthwhile to draw on this basic moral formula of humankind and make it fruitful in its multiple dimensions of empathy, autonomy, reciprocity, and prudence. We then may know why it is said that you only understand the Golden Rule by living it (see Wattles 1996, vi).

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