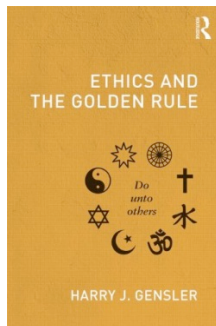


## Searching for Gold



*Ethics and the Golden Rule*

By Harry J. Gensler

Published March 21, 2013

By Routledge

256 Pages

ISBN: 978-0415806879

Review by Leland R. Beaumont

What did you think when you were first told “Do unto others as you would have them to do unto you”? Did you dismiss it as quaint religious allegory? Did you think of it as a childhood platitude? Did you poke fun at it wondering how to treat a criminal, a cruel person, or a toddler? Or perhaps you embraced it as profound advice on how to treat others.

Harry Gensler understands the Golden Rule. On December 6, 1968 he heard R.M. Hare give a talk on the Golden Rule (GR) and immediately became a GR junkie. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Golden Rule in 1977. He recently devoted a sabbatical from his position as Professor of Philosophy at John Carroll University to write this book on the Golden Rule. The logical discipline of a philosophy professor combines with the passion fueling a life-long fascination with GR to provide this easy to read yet rigorous and authoritative treatment of the topic. To make the book accessible and appealing to readers ranging from the most casual to the most skeptical, he provides two alternative introductory chapters. Chapter 1 is the simpler introduction, and Chapter 2 provides a longer and more technical alternative.

The Golden Rule presents a paradox. Although GR principles are endorsed by each of the major religions; it is easy to give examples where applying GR literally leads to ridiculous outcomes. The introductory chapters directly address this paradox. The heart of GR is *switching places*. Also, GR is actually a theorem derived from two more basic consistency principles: *impartiality* and *conscientious* adherence to your own moral beliefs. These ideas are combined to create a precise new phrasing of GR:

**“Treat others only as you consent to being treated in the same situation.”**

With this understanding, GR is transformed from a vague platitude into a precise consistency test. Several fallacies used to dispute GR are identified, analyzed, and dismissed in the first two chapters. He defends GR against 27 further objections in the final chapter.

To help us apply GR he introduces the mnemonic device “Kita”:

- **Know:** “How would my action affect others?”
- **Imagine:** “What would it be like to have this done to me in the same situation?”
- **Test for Consistency:** “Am I now willing that if I were in the same situation then this be done to me?”
- **Act** toward others only as you’re willing to be treated in the same situation.

This analysis is applied to examples throughout the book.

The role of GR in the world’s major religions, including atheism and interfaith activities, is examined in Chapter 3. A Socratic Dialogue probes the wisdom of the GR in Chapter 4, and in Chapter 5 a remarkably detailed chronology traces GR’s role from assisting prehistoric hunters, to opposing slavery and racism, through frequent appeals by religious and political activists, and its application in modern institutions.

Part 3 of the book puts GR into practice. The chapter on Moral Education provides useful advice on teaching and applying GR to our everyday lives. It addresses GR and moral development, provides a method for developing rational moral thinking, and includes practical suggestions for integrating GR teaching into existing programs. The question “Why is GR not succeeding?” is then addressed. Other chapters explore the philosophies of Egoism, Hobbes, and Darwin in the context of GR, and demonstrate the power of GR in overcoming racism and other forms of groupism. The contribution of GR to Applied Ethics for addressing issues in business, healthcare, civil discussion, and other areas is introduced. The scope of GR is clarified as applying to *sentient* beings by *competent, rational* agents, and this understanding is used to answer specific questions on the extent of our GR duties. Four areas of special GR urgency—areas where GR can be used now to solve significant problems—are identified as: groupism, family life, treatment of animals, and the environment.

Although the author regards GR very favorably, when asked the question: “Is GR the supreme moral axiom from which all duties can be deduced?” he answers negatively. He positions GR as a consistency principle; it is a guide in selecting and applying moral rules. GR is a *theorem*, not an *axiom*. By asking us to switch places, GR provides a counterbalance to humans’ self-centered nature. Because GR is counter to human nature, it can be difficult to live by.

The book melds an in-depth technical analysis of the Golden Rule with practical advice on how we can learn it, teach it, and strive to live by it every day. I enjoyed reading this book, and I imagine you will too. Living by the Golden Rule can improve well-being. It is a wise thing to do.