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Stay Golden, Rule

I live in an apartment building with many other loud, gross, tired and unfriendly college students just like myself. The managers of the building, though they appear to be working in the best interest of all of their residents, sometimes grow tired of receiving and stacking up UPS boxes in the front office and resort to putting resident's packages outside their doorway in the hall. If someone were to walk down the hall and take someone's package, the chances of him or her getting caught are extremely low and there would never be any consequence. (Free care packages from Grandma for everyone!) In fact I've been quite surprised that none of my packages have ever been stolen. Why, if no consequences were to arise from stealing someone's package, do we refrain from doing so? It's simple: the residents in my apartment complex treat their neighbors the way they would want, and expect to be treated. Having a package stolen is disappointing, and none of us want to be disappointed. In this paper I will explain how The Golden Rule, something most of us learned at a young age, can be framed as a normative moral theory and how it can be redeemed from obvious arguments against it. The argument will proceed in this order: background information on the practice of The Golden Rule, obvious counterarguments, an approach that condemns these counterarguments as shallow and arbitrary, and reasons why The Golden Rule provides an effective, though not objective, moral theory for reasonable people with any sort of wants and desires.

Though framed in different phrasing and spoken in different languages, The Golden Rule is often presented as so: (You ought to) treat others in a way that you would want to

be treated. Most people have come into contact with the rule often in their lives and perhaps it's been presented as the go-to normative moral rule when in a sticky situation. Why didn't you steal Timmy's pencil in 3rd grade? Your highly developed 3rd grade super-ego reminded you that if Timmy stole your pencil you would probably be upset. The rule is effective because it appeals to things that all humans have: emotions, wants, reactions as well as the ability to sympathize with others. What makes this a "normative" moral theory is the "ought" included. A hypothetical imperative (non-normative) is framed in a way such that "If you want A, you should do B". A categorical imperative (normative) is framed so that "You ought to do B". The GR (Golden Rule) does not include an "A" or an "if", but suggests that you ought to act in a way as a matter of truth. Thus, "You ought to treat others in a way that you would want to be treated" is a normative statement that appeals to emotions and the fact that every human being has some sort of wants. So far the GR seems rational and effective.

Most people that seem normal and reasonable can agree that their wants include things like the following: being respected, being trusted, not being inflicted with pain, not being lied to etc. There should be no problem with the rule with these sorts of people because they can agree on basic expectations of how they should be treated. Exceptions to the rule include people that have abnormal wants and situations that would call for contradictory commands. In these cases the rule provides obviously unacceptable moral commands as well as contradictory ones. Consider a person that wants to commit suicide but does not want to take his own life for religious purposes. This person wants others to take his own life. According to the rule, rationally it makes sense for this person to take other's lives because he *ought* to treat others how he wants to be treated. This is obviously

an unacceptable moral command, but I will later explain a reasonable way around it. Next, consider that you are in a village where food and resources are sparse and there is only food left enough for one person, and if you do not eat this food you will die. You want the others in your village to let you have the food so that you will live. Because this is how you want to be treated, the rule requires you to give the food up so that someone else can live. The others, who are also bound by the rule, are required to give you the food because that's how they would want to be treated. The Golden Rule in this instance requires that you take the food and give the food away at the same time. This is contradictory and demotes the Golden Rule to nothing more than a situation "sometimes-theory" that would require different criterion for when it applies and does not. But there is no need to rule out the GR completely quite yet.

An argument that the above obvious counterarguments don't tell the whole story:

Is it possible that the counterexamples provided refer to a first-order definition of the word "want" when the rule truly applies to a second-order definition of the word? In the first example, the person does want others to kill him, but more importantly he or she *wants* others to do what he wants. So the person only has to treat others in a way in which he or she *wants* to be treated, which is how he wants to be treated. The first order "want" is that he wants others to kill him. The second order "want" is that he wants others to do what he (first-order) wants. In this sense, the GR does not require the person to kill other people because he wants other people to kill him; it requires him to respect the first-order wants of others (whatever they may be) because that is what he (second-order) wants and expects them to do for him. This argument may seem silly or convoluted so I will include a specific example from a philosophy text to verify/explicate.

In James and Stuart Rachels' text, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, a specific topic on Cultural Relativism is met. Cultural Relativism includes that moral theories vary amongst different cultures, which may or may not prove that no universal moral truths exist. This does not matter so much for the sake of my own argument. Rachels and Rachels remark on the difference between ancient Greek and Callatians' treatment of their dead. "The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead"(17) appears to be a difference in moral codes between different cultures. It might be conceded that because they have differing moral codes and neither can be proved right or wrong, there is no universal moral code. Rachels and Rachels go on to make a distinction between "value" and "custom". The value, respecting the dead, is consistent for both the Greeks and Callatians but what truly differs is the custom (eating the dead, and not eating the dead). Though both cultures agree on the first-order value of respecting their dead, what they do not agree on is how to go about conducting this value. Thus there is still hope for a universal moral code, or at least the value of respecting the dead. As Rachels and Rachels say, "Often, what seemed at first to be a big difference turns out to be no difference at all"(21).

This applies to the GR because the distinction between value and custom is structurally the same as what I have defined as "first-order wants" and "second-order wants". Though two parties in my example may disagree on first-order wants: the desire to be hurt or killed and the desire not to be hurt or killed, they can agree on the second-order want: the desire to have their first-order desire respected. Human beings that have emotions, wants and reactions have a common second-order want, so what seems to be differences in wants are no so different after all.

The distinction between first and second order wants remains effective with the second example of a contradictory moral command required by the GR. Your own first-order want is to eat the food in order to live, but this is arbitrary. Your second-order want is for the rest of the village to respect the fact that you want to eat the food. The others' first-order want is also to eat the food and their second-order want is also for you to respect that they want to eat the food. Both parties are required to respect each other's second-order wants, but the way in which they carry out their respect can differ. One person may show their respect by conceding the final meal because they are indifferent towards life in general, and another may carry out their respect by eating the food, because this is what the other's want. The distinction between value and custom provided by the Rachels and Rachels' text applies at an individual level in this instance.

Why The Golden Rule is an effective normative moral theory/conclusion:

I do not mean to propose the GR as an objective moral theory. This would hold that it is *true* that all people ought to treat others how they want to be treated. Because I cannot find scientific evidence of this statement, it will remain a proposal. The GR, if accepted by all, can be extremely effective because of each person's ability to place his or herself in the place of another and sympathize. The presence of emotions and wants in all people ensures that all people can relate second-order wants (the desire to have their first-order wants respected). The GR does not require an enforcer, such as God, but holds each person accountable. This allows the rule to extend to all people instead of a portion that believes in the presence of a moral enforcer. The Golden Rule may have at first appeared obvious, at second appeared obviously false, and now may seem clear because of the clarification of an underlying distinction between first and second order wants implied but not made explicit.