

Essay no. 10

Introduction: a “Golden Rule,” Really?

Zigong asked: “Is there one word that can serve as a principle of conduct for life?”

Confucius answered, “It is the word *shu*, or reciprocity: Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

Reciprocity—such is the “Golden Rule” that has served as a guideline of conducts and social norms not only in Confucianism but also in many other cultures.

Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you—such is a way that sounds to enable one to live without much conflicts with others, the way of a “moral” and “righteous” man.

However, really?

Confucius told Zigong not do to others what he do not want them to do to him, but he didn’t explained how can be Zigong sure that what the others do not want him to do to them is the same as what he do not want them to do to him.

This omission urges me to raise doubts against legitimacy of his idea of reciprocity to be called a “Golden Rule.” Therefore, hereafter, I will point out underlying premises that Confucius swiftly made when he made such an instruction to his student, how such premises can be easily misused and how such premises make the Confucius principle of reciprocity become an imposing power instead of a moral one. This discussion will eventually lead to a new principle of reciprocity in a more acceptable and suitable way in todays’ society and challenge of the idea of existence of a “universal” moral principle.

Premises of the “Golden Rule of Reciprocity”

Confucius instructed his student: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”

His principle indeed sounds very decent and polite when it is carried out in conducts; however, there is two underlying premises which are much more questionable and dangerous than the words in a surface level. The two premises are as following:

- (1) You know what others do not want you to do to them.
- (2) What others do not want you to do to them is the same as what you do not want them to do to you.

Lying under these two apparent premises is one that is less obvious but is in fact inherent in the Confucius principle of reciprocity.

- (3) You know how others would like and not like to be treated.

While Confucius instructed his student, he kept in his mind to ask his students to take care of the others’ values and needs. However, he was careless in indirectly telling his students that it is possible to know how others would like and not like to be treated. Confucius’ instruction and its premises analyzed in other words is as following: others’ values and reactions to certain treatments are predictable because they are the same as mine. The so-called Golden Rule is in fact imposing one’s moral values and individual and private standards to every other person and lead people to act in a way in which everybody is expected to have a universal morality which is the same as the one who is imposing it.

Such premises is very dangerous and has flaws in themselves; however, before elaborating on the dangers and flaws of the premises themselves, I would like to first substantiate some other kinds of “principles” that can

be easily derived from the premises mentioned above. The derived principles has a more destructive danger than what Confucius said.

What Such Premises Can Lead Us To

Confucius only gave only one example of his principle of reciprocity. However, following the same line with the premises under his argument, there are two more possible statements. I will give examples for each of the two statements to raise doubts upon the appropriateness of the “Golden Rule.”

(a) Do to others what you would like them to do to you.

And (b) Others should not do what you do not want them to do to you.

A fairy tale from my childhood illustrate the consequence of one who applied (a) to his situation. In the story, a king encountered a seabird which could sing beautiful songs and immediately fell in love with this bird. He so wanted to satisfy the seabird and treated it well that he treated it with the best possible way in his kingdom. He put the bird in an elegant room and served the seabird with best foods, best entertainments, best facilities, etc. in his kingdom, just as how a king or queen is treated. However, the seabird got more and more depressed and wick. Finally the seabird died in sorrow. A simple story for children, but entails a crucial revelation that do to others what you would like them to do to you doesn't always work out as expected.

In this story, despite the fact that the king's intention is truly for the seabird's sake, the consequence of what he did to his bird is the same as strangling the bird into death. Then what he did wrong? He followed exactly what (a) says: do to others what you would like them to do to you. While doing so, he ignored that what others like is different from what he likes, as long as “others” and “he” are different beings, therefore inevitably with different values, desires, goals, etc. in each of their lives.

A controversy regarding cannibalism illustrates the application of (b) in real life problems. Cannibalism is rare—or more precisely close to extinct—in today's world; however, it is still practiced in some tropical and so-called “uncivilized” regions in Africa or central America (I do recognize that “uncivilized” is a biased word. But I use it here for now firstly for convenience, secondly for proceeding to criticized the bias entailed in the word.). While the practice is unacceptable in most of the other parts of the world where it is strictly considered as an act of murder, some tribes that practiced cannibalism do not consider it as malicious murder. In some pertaining regions, the geographical surrounding restricts their access to enough foods and for the preservation of tribal populations, they practice cannibalism and only when one is dead naturally. In some other regions, cannibalism is a part of funeral in which people consider eating of the dead is a symbolic and religious ritual for preservation of the dead's soul.

Criticism against cannibalism without any consideration of such beliefs and values behind the practice of cannibalism itself and complete opposition to cannibalism is an illustration of (b) in which the criticizer and opposing party is imposing its own system of value to the tribes that practice cannibalism and expecting that a standardized morality should be applied to all.

A belief for a universal value is dangerous. Imposing one's own value to others without any logical and reasonable justification agreed by consensus among different peoples is clearly a mental violence and a violation of people's rights to develop and preserve their own values which serve as a crucial part of ones' identities.

Dangers and Limitations of Confucius' Principle of Reciprocity

The premises summarized in short is that there exists a universal moral law and one can know of this law based on one's own system of value. As I have mentioned in the previous part, it may produce unexpected harmful consequences even if the intention is positive and benevolent and also it may be exploited by one to commit violence against the others by imposing a single standard of value. The most destructive and the worse way of applying this premise is perhaps imperialism which underlying logic is that the Africans also want to be “civilized” as the imperialist powers and it is the “white men's burden” to “civilized” those who want to be “civilized”.

Of course, when Confucius instructed his student the principle of reciprocity, neither did he intend to commit violence, nor did he had a malicious or self-benefiting motive for doing so. In fact, he is trying to let his student be moral and serving the benefits and needs of others when treating others. Also, his principle of reciprocity is meaningful in that it seeks to establish a moral principle in relationships among persons. The word “reciprocity” already implies that there must be two parties interacting with each other. So, instead of an one-sided and didactic moral code, he proposed an interactive and reciprocal solution to morality.

However, the limitation of his proposal is that it eliminates the possibility of existence of different values and morality. After all, this “Gold Rule” is asking people to impose one’s morality to others and after all by telling people not to do to others the way one doesn’t want to be treated, this rule is merely telling people to act upon their own values and moral codes no matter who they are treating and generalized them into a “universal” moral law.

Reinterpretation of “Reciprocity”

Instead of Confucius principle of reciprocity, another kind of reciprocity, which is more tolerant of diverse views and yet maintain a sufficient system of human morality, is needed.

Maintaining the emphasis on relationship of two parties as Confucius did, reciprocity as I reinterpreted is firmly based on existence of two “different” parties. By different, I mean being two different beings with different values, desires, ways of thinking, etc.. Because different beings occupy different space and have different souls, they have different points of view both physically and mentally. Though different, in order to preserve cycles of life, individuals form relationship with various others. Not only there exist relationship between individual beings, there are also relationship between groups of people. Intricate webs of relationships thus develop and constitute a human society.

In this relationship, numerous trials of interaction and concession and agreements occur. People with different ideas of life collide with one another and when opposing ideas or values collide, instead of stubbornly maintaining one’s own, people have to make concession and trade their ideas within the each party’s sphere of allowance. With two different parties and a genuine relation, persons of different parties begin to reach a point where the two can both tolerant of each other and let the relationship preserve. This is when “common” value or morality comes into being. True reciprocity is not about practicing the morality of one’s own, but about seeking for the common sphere of different morality that is acceptable by different beings through genuine interaction which must accompanies concession.

There are three things I would like to note about this reinterpreted concept of reciprocity:

Firstly, formation of common morality through reciprocity is different from dialectical operation in that instead of synthesis of two different opposing ideas, it is based on the two different beings that must preserve throughout the interaction, but a common sphere of values is found and agreed and thus become common morality. Human interaction is more of a process that seeks for common morality, not a practice of a universal morality that can be defined with a single standard.

Secondly, one has to acknowledge the importance of existence of a different being while practicing reciprocal morality. If everybody is the same, “I” can no longer be defined because “I” must be the same with everyone else. In other words, difference defines being. Difference may cause to gaps, controversies and even conflicts. However, they provide a chance for more intimate interactions where people can seek for the common sphere.

Last but not least, the common moral principle found through interactions of different beings is not a constant one, but a highly dynamic one. Moral principle does not refer to the one that is only between persons; it should be applied to a bigger relationship, a society. Because interactions is always occurring in different levels and new common values found in individual level of interactions may influence the point of view of a bigger group of people and when different groups of people interact, they need to adjust their common value according to change in the point of view of one group.

Some may object to this idea of reciprocity with the accusation that it allows relativism and can lead to the conclusion that there is no definite morality, thus every idea can be justified to be right. However, it is important to note that the recognition of possibility of different values as being right doesn’t mean that every idea, value, moral principle will be recognized as right. The interaction for reciprocity is based on relationship, therefore relationship must

be maintained in order for the interaction and the seeking of common moral value to be found. Any idea, value, moral principle that destroy the relationship can never be recognized the common moral value. That is why intentional murder can never be right in any society in any era and one form of cannibalism that intentionally kills and eats healthy persons cannot and shouldn't be exempted from condemnation of immorality. They completely breaks down the relationship not only because they go over the limit of allowance of the others' values but also has the potential to completely break down the legitimate existence of others' being and their entire values.

Conclusion: Only “Common” Moral Principle

Zigong asked for a principle of conduct for life. Confucius answered with the principle of reciprocity. It became the so-called “Golden Rule”, the “universal” moral principle.

But I ask: does a universal moral principle exist in the first place? How are we to define this “universal” moral principle?

And I answer: the idea of existence of universal moral principle has led to more troubles than “moral” conducts and peaceful interactions. There only be “common” moral principle but no “universal” moral principle. Instead of not doing to others what you do not want them to do to you we have to what others like and not like first.

Such idea and approach to morality is especially crucial in today's multicultural society where so many values collide and to make sure that a moral principle which ought to serve the benefit of mankind doesn't actually harm it—under the name of “universality”.