

Several other readings in this anthology deal with the golden rule (the Bible, Gensler and Tokmenko, Hare, Nagel, and Ricoeur) or related ideals like love, sympathy, or beneficence (Frankena, Habermas, Hume, King, and Nietzsche). You may want to compare what Hertzler says about cultural universals with what is said by the other two social scientists in this anthology (Benedict and Kohlberg).

## Notes

- 1 The "*lex talionis*" that Hertzler refers to is the "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" law of retaliation: if someone hurts you in some way, then you are to hurt the other person in the same way. In contrast, the golden rule requires that you treat X, not as X has actually treated you, but rather in accord with how you are willing that you be treated in X's place.
- 2 Hertzler may have been thinking of Nietzsche, who thought "love thy neighbor" was part of "slave morality" and thus unworthy of aristocrats. See Nietzsche's reading in this anthology.

PAUL RICOEUR

## The Golden Rule and Religion

Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher born in 1913, works in the area of phenomenological hermeneutics. "Hermeneutics" is an approach to interpreting texts. Ricoeur often analyses biblical texts, looking at them in light of narrative, symbolism, and metaphor. He is heavily influenced by the phenomenological method of continental thinkers (like Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean-Paul Sartre) who emphasize an attentiveness to experienced phenomena.

In this selection, Ricoeur interprets biblical passages about ethical conduct. He finds, surprisingly, that passages on the golden rule and on the love of enemies seem to be inconsistent. He appeals to a "rhetoric of paradox" to help relieve the tension. This leads him to re-interpret the golden rule, or at least the motivation behind it.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether Ricoeur succeeds in making compatible these two seemingly contrary biblical norms.

### The problem

If one assumes that the Golden Rule constitutes the basic moral rule about which the wisest may agree, what happens to this rule when it is put within a religious perspective, more precisely, within the perspective of the Jewish-Christian scriptures?

That the Golden Rule expresses our common morality seems to be confirmed by the place it holds in the *Sermon on the Mount* in Mt 7:12 – "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" – where the Golden Rule seems to be taken for granted as a common good of the Jewish culture; just as in the *Sermon on the Plain* in Lk 6:31 – "And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" – the Golden Rule seems to be acknowledged as the common good of Hellenistic culture.

However, it is not the mere citation of the Golden Rule which raises a problem of interpretation, but the impact on it of a context which seems to deny or disavow it. This context is governed by the commandment to love one's enemies. Now, it is this commandment, and not the Golden Rule, that

seems to provide expression, at the ethical level, of what we may call the *economy of gift*, at the religious level.

Do we not have to oppose the logic of superabundance,<sup>1</sup> which seems to flow directly from the religious economy of gift, to the logic of equivalence, which finds its perfect expression in the Golden Rule?

Two kinds of arguments support the contention that the Golden Rule is overcome by the new commandment to love one's enemies.

The first argument against the ethical primacy of the Golden Rule is an exegetical one. After having quoted the Golden Rule (Lk 6:31), Jesus, we are told, added the following harsh words which seem to deny what he has just quoted:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

Jesus continues: "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." Is this not a denial of the Golden Rule?

The second argument relies on the conceptual kinship which connects the Golden Rule with the rule of retaliation which once governed the penal sphere: "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." The common component between retaliation and the Golden Rule is the principle of *equivalence*. The *jus talionis* [rule of retaliation] already constitutes a moral improvement by comparison with sheer vengeance. Vengeance is limitless; retaliation has an element of *measure* provided by the very principle of equivalence. This equivalence, however, still concerns the contents themselves: eye and tooth. With the Golden Rule a new improvement obtains: the reciprocity is anticipated instead of being merely reactive. Furthermore, the rule is addressed to intentions, dispositions, feelings: what you would hate being done to you. However, in spite of this improvement, the Golden Rule remains within the same logic of equivalence, this very logic that the commandment to love one's enemies shatters: nothing is expected in return, no equivalence. The enemy becomes the touchstone of the new ethics; love is boundless, in the same way as vengeance, at the opposite end of the trajectory, was limitless!

## The solution

What the previous arguments have underestimated is the breadth of the margin of interpretation that any rule and any text may allow. The Golden Rule, instead of being *denied*, is rather *reinterpreted*, not only according to its

potential intent, but according to the new scope which the logic of superabundance conveys to it.

Interpreted literally, the Golden Rule is a refinement of the law of retaliation, of the *jus talionis* ultimately. Its formula would be: I give *in order that* you give. The doer takes the initiative, but for the sake of receiving a reward in return.<sup>2</sup> The expectation of reciprocity keeps the Golden Rule within the iron circle of retaliation. This is what Lk 6:32 means to say: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." What perverts the reciprocity implied in the Golden Rule is its diversion for the sake of *self-interest*.

It is at this point that the economy of gift and its logic of superabundance makes the difference between the two readings of the same Golden Rule. I see the logic of superabundance rescuing true reciprocity from its caricature as denounced in Lk 6:32-5. This logic works in the following way. The economy of gift is construed around a *because: because* it has been given to you, go and do alike. Then the rule of reciprocity and even the principle of equivalence may be redeemed from their initial disgrace thanks to the substitution of the new motive of generosity for the ancient motive of self-interest.

Why should this positive interpretation be preferred? For exegetical reasons, first, but also for conceptual and systematic reasons. I shall not insist on the exegetical reasons, because it is not my own area of competence. I only observe that the *Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew is a highly structured discourse and that the Golden Rule occupies a central place in this subtle architecture: "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." The Golden Rule is not merely quoted here; it is integrated into a new ethics. This would be unthinkable if it could not be reinterpreted according to the new logic of superabundance sealed by the love of enemies. As to the citation of the Golden Rule in Lk 6:31, it is more economical in terms of composition and rhetoric to read the following verses (Lk 6:32-5) as the dismantling of a wrong interpretation.

But I prefer to insist on the conceptual and systematic argument; namely, that of reinterpreting the principle of morality in the light of the symbols which structure the religious experience of Jews and Christians. This reinterpretation is made possible thanks to the *analogy* displayed by the *because: because* it has been given to you, go and do alike. This *like* in turn generates the *imitatio Dei* [imitation of God], that we read of in the Jewish context of the *Sermon on the Mount* - "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48) - and in the more Hellenistic context of the *Sermon on the Plain* - "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36). The response is governed by this rule of analogy which brings the rule of morality within the religious perspective. This analogical link is what makes possible the reinterpretation of the Golden Rule in terms of the economy of gift.

## The conclusion: a rhetoric of paradox

I do not claim that love for enemies, held as the touchstone of the logic of superabundance, and the Golden Rule, held as the highest expression of the logic of equivalence, coincide. The one is unilateral. The other is bilateral. The one expects nothing in return. The other legitimates a certain kind of reciprocity. My contention – indeed, my main point – is that the tension between them is essential and central to genuine Christian ethics. We must take into account the *rhetoric of paradox*. As all genuine paradoxes, the new commandment reorients by disorienting. I already said how it can be done, by submitting the *in order that* to the *because* implied in the primacy of gift. The antecedent generosity of the *because* preserves the Golden Rule from the perversion latent in the prospective *in order that*. This salvific motivation constitutes the *reason of the heart* par excellence.

Now why is this reorientation so important? Because a disorientation without a reorientation would amount to an ethical void. No penal law, no justice in general could be derived from the naked commandment of the love for enemies. Which economic fairness could derive from the commandment, “Lend, expecting nothing in return”?

In this sense the commandment of love for enemies is not ethical but supra-ethical. In order that the supra-ethical does not turn to the a-moral, it must reinterpret the principle of morality summarized in the Golden Rule. By so doing, the new commandment elevates the principle of morality above itself.

Such, to my mind, is the basic reason why the new commandment could not eliminate the Golden Rule and should not be substituted for it. The so-called Christian ethics – or, I should prefer to say, the common ethics in a religious perspective – relies to my mind on this *tension* between unilateral love and bilateral justice. The practical consequences of this common ethics are innumerable and perfectly feasible. The incorporation of a motive of compassion and generosity in all our codes, penal codes and codes of social justice, constitutes a reasonable task, although difficult and endless. The Golden Rule is put in this concrete way in the midst of a basic conflict between self-interest and self-sacrifice. The same rule may be invoked by the exponents of both motivations.

Let me close by quoting a wonderful verse from the *Sermon on the Plain* which conflates, so to say, the lack of measure proper to love and the sense of measure characteristic of justice: “give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Lk 6:38) The lack of measure is the good measure. Such is the poetic transposition of the rhetoric of paradox: superabundance becomes the hidden truth of

equivalence. The Golden Rule is repeated. But repetition means transfiguration.

## Study questions

- 1 How does the command to love one’s enemies (which expresses the “economy of the gift”) seem to conflict with the golden rule? Construct an example that illustrates the conflict.
- 2 Explain the “exegetical” and the “conceptual kinship” arguments.
- 3 How does Ricoeur reinterpret the golden rule in light of the “logic of superabundance”? How does he justify this reinterpretation?
- 4 How does the “rhetoric of paradox” deal with the tension that Ricoeur claims remains between the golden rule and the command to love one’s enemies?
- 5 What does he mean by his claim that the command to love one’s enemies is “supra-ethical”? How would we actually go about applying a supra-ethical principle to our everyday ethical decisions?

## For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from Paul Ricoeur’s “The Golden Rule,” in *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 392–7. For a detailed description of Ricoeur’s phenomenological hermeneutics, see his three volume *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–8), translated by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer. For his ethical writings, see his *Oneself As Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), translated by K. Blamey – especially studies 7–9; *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), translated by E. Kohak; and *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), translated by E. Buchanan. Other sources include *The Narrative Path: The Later Works of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), edited by P. Kemp and D. Rasmussen; *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 1991), edited by D. Wood; and Charles Reagan’s *Paul Ricoeur: His Life and Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Harry Gensler’s *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses the golden rule in Chapter 7.

Several other readings in this anthology deal with the golden rule (the Bible, Gensler and Tokmenko, Hare, Hertzler, and Nagel) or related ideas like love, sympathy, or beneficence (Frankena, Habermas, Hume, King, and Nietzsche). Lewis also gives a theological account of ethics. Sartre gives a notion of absolute freedom that Ricoeur rejects.

## Notes

- 1 Ricoeur's "logic of superabundance" is the idea that we should treat others with overflowing generosity – as God has treated us – not just as we *consent* to being treated or are (minimally) *willing* to be treated ourselves.
- 2 The self-interest interpretation of the golden rule to which Ricoeur refers was common in ancient Greece: we ought to treat others well (as we want to be treated) because then others will treat us well. Ricoeur argues for a transformation of the rule: because God has first loved us abundantly, we are inspired to love others (to treat them as we want to be treated) in a selfless manner.

## FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

### Master and Slave Morality

Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher and philologist who lived from 1844 to 1900, wrote voluminously on socio-cultural issues. He is widely recognized as an astute critic of many of the main currents of nineteenth-century thinking. Using trenchant prose and powerful wit, he savagely attacked ideals of piety, progress, compassion, and scientific rigor. His criticisms have had a profound impact on continental thinkers, such as Heidegger, Adorno, Foucault, and Derrida.

Nietzsche claims that Christianity gave rise to a bourgeois civilization that inculcated unquestioning conformism and resentment against the powerful. Inspired by Darwinian theories of evolution, he argues that nature endows us – as it does animals – with a will to power that, if unimpeded by repression, drives us to individualist displays of strength and even cruelty. He urges the development of a noble morality that allows such urges to assert themselves as we regain our authentic lives.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether Nietzsche is merely giving an interesting – and possibly ironic – criticism of some of the cultural norms of his society, or whether he is in fact proposing a normative view of how all humans ought to act.

### The will to power

[257] Every elevation of the type "man" has been the work of an aristocratic society – a society believing in gradations of rank and differences of worth among human beings, and requiring slavery in some form. Let us acknowledge how every higher civilization has originated! Men with a natural nature, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, still in possession of unbroken strength of will and desire for power, threw themselves upon weaker, more moral, more peaceful races. The noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychological power – they were more *complete* men (which implies "more complete beasts").

[259] To refrain mutually from injury, from violence, from exploitation, and put one's will on a par with that of others: this may result in good