

THE GOLDEN RULE

JEFFREY WATTLES



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New York Oxford
Oxford University Press
1996

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Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogota Bombay
Buenos Aires Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam
Delli Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
Mexico City Nairobi Paris Singapore
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wattles, Jeffrey Hamilton
The Golden Rule / Jeffrey Wattles.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-510187-1; ISBN 0-19-511036-6 (pbk.)

I. Golden rule—Comparative studies. I. Title.

BL85.W5 1996

170'.44—dc20 95-49824

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Preface

How is one to move beyond shock and cynicism when one confronts the evidence of moral decline in society? What reaction comes more easily than to blame them? We may be driven to act on the tendency to separate humankind into two camps—the ones who are the problem and those of us with higher standards—but such is not the ultimate solution. I believe that we can all learn to relate more humanely and reach out more effectively by discovering the golden rule in its full implications.

The need even for morally active people to discover the golden rule is greater than I realized over a decade ago when I began my research. I used to assume that nearly everyone was raised so that when they heard the phrase "the golden rule" they could supply a principle worded, approximately, "Do to others as you want others to do to you." I also assumed that nearly everyone who heard that principle spelled out had a roughly accurate initial grasp of its meaning. And I assumed that those who thought highly of the principle would occasionally spend time thinking about how to apply it. I have not made a scientific survey and would not hazard an estimate in percentage terms, but my experiences talking about the rule with individuals and groups during the past several years incline me to doubt these assumptions.

A volunteer soliciting contributions for an environmental group I once guessed that the golden rule was "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." A reporter misquoted the rule: "Do to others as will be done to you." Given a correct formulation, two students debated at length with their professor that the rule meant the same as the motto "Get even." A pastor's wife doubted that the rule was biblical. Philosophers often distort the rule and dismiss it, while others who prefer a charitable interpretation find no reply.

This book is intended both for beginners and scholars in the fields of philosophy and religion, but students of psychology and cultural history will profit from it as well. Presupposing a course or two in philosophy

religion, in these chapters I present the heritage of many cultures and academic disciplines in order to develop a many-sided yet, I trust, coherent concept of the golden rule. This approach takes a middle way between highlighting difference at the expense of universal concerns and reading a single concept of the rule into every tradition. The present is enriched through a review of the past, while the past is studied with an eye to present problems. The major section of the book, "Histories of the Golden Rule," treats of Confucianism, ancient Greek culture, classical Jewish thought, the New Testament, medieval and Reformation theology, early modern philosophy, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American history, and contemporary psychology, philosophy, and religious thought. It concludes with a proposal for a new ethics centered on the golden rule.

My experience of working on this book was initially an exercise of piety. Next it turned into an effort to construct the appearance and reality of an academic specialty. Then it became an affair of self-redefinition. The book culminates as a gift, an invitation to come and see what I have found.

The rule began to be brightly real to me a few years ago, not during a time for study, nor as a result of any deliberate experiment to put the rule into practice, but through the experience of taking over all the kitchen tasks for the family during a two-week period when my wife, Hagiko, needed to concentrate on her literary studies. One day, as our then eight-year-old son handed me his dishes, for a moment I seemed to sense a slight, unspoken, unconsciously derogatory attitude: "Here. You are the one who takes care of this sort of thing." In that moment I realized that I had related to my wife in such a way.

In my intellectual and personal adventure, I sought and I found, but I did not find by seeking, and now I know why it is said that you only understand the golden rule by living it.

Stow, Ohio
March 1996

J. H. W.

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book originated in a 1985 Stanford University seminar on the golden rule in which I was privileged to assist David S. Nivison. His work on the Confucian golden rule inspired me, and his friendship and scholarly experience have been most helpful. I could not name all the authors and friends who have contributed to this work, nor have I been able to profit sufficiently from the perspectives they have offered. Nevertheless, I want to mention additional help I received regarding the Confucian tradition from John Berthrong, Antonio Cua, Julia Ching, Herbert Fingarette, Craig Ihara, Kwang-Sae Lee, Barry Steben, Lee Rainey, Tang Yi-jie, James Ware, and Yang Xiao-jie. With respect to the chapter on ancient Greek philosophy, I am especially indebted to Mitchell H. Miller, Jr. In addition, I wish to acknowledge help received from Jonathan Barnes, Julia Barkowiak, James Dickoff, Albrecht Dihle, Daniel Dombrowski, Norman Fischer, Daniel Guerrière, Patricia James, and Diane Yeager. Torsti Aärelä commented on the chapter on Judaism; David A. Fraser and David Odell-Scott commented on the New Testament chapter. John V. Apczynski and George L. Murphy commented on the chapter on medieval and Reformation thought. Robert P. Swierenga commented on the chapter concerning American history; and Robert Davis and Philip A. Rolnick helped in the area of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology. C. Daniel Batson's thorough remarks on the chapter devoted to psychology prompted a major revision; and Bret Lathwell helped me sharpen social science perspectives. Regarding the golden rule in contemporary ethics, my ongoing dialogue with Harry J. Gensler S.J. has led to a fine friendship and continued enlightenment. I am grateful for careful comments by Bruce Alton, Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Donald Evans, Louis Pojman, and William Lad Sessions, all of whom read parts of an earlier draft. In addition, I owe much to conversations with Ronald M. Green, R. M. Hare, George R. Lucas, Jr., John Morreall, Onora O'Neill, Manuel Velasquez, and Carol White. Joseph T. O'Connell and Julian Woods helped with Hinduism, Abraham I. Khan with Islam, Robert L.

Haynes with African-American perspectives, and Sioux Harvey with American Indian traditions.

I acknowledge the fine opportunity I was granted to share my discoveries as a visiting scholar at three schools in the North Carolina Independent College Association. A second series of presentations were supported, in part, by the Ohio Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities. I am grateful to the students who attended my Kent State University seminar on the golden rule, as well as to fellow panelists Richard Berg and Antonio Gualtieri, who participated in the 1994 session on the golden rule and the law of love sponsored by the Canadian Council for the Study of Religion.

Portions of chapter 2 are reprinted, with changes, from "Plato's Brush with the Golden Rule," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 69-85, by permission of the publisher, © 1987 by Religious Ethics, Inc. Portions of chapter 10 originally appeared, in a slightly different form, in "Levels of Meaning in the Golden Rule," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 106-29. © by Religious Ethics, Inc.

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A contemporary scholar owes much to librarians and bibliographic services, and I want to acknowledge the help I received from Gladys Smiley Bell and Michael Cole of Kent State University Library and librarians at the University of Toronto and Santa Clara University.

It has been a genuine privilege to work with the people at Oxford University Press, including my executive editor, Cynthia Read, associate editor, Peter Ohlin, manuscript editor, Henry Krawitz, and production editor, Rob Dilworth. I am also grateful to the freelance copy editor, Maura High, and to an anonymous reviewer. Their patience and helpfulness have been extraordinary.

Lastly, I owe a great debt of gratitude to my parents, George Wattles and Louise Howard, who initiated me into the golden rule. Family life with Hagiko Ichihara Wattles and our son, Benjamin Ichihara Wattles, has been a sustaining delight.

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