

Why the “Golden Rule” is an Obstacle to the Government’s Agenda

The golden rule—“Do to others as you would have them do to you” being the most common variant I have heard—may be the most common ethical touchstone for human interactions. After all, Simon Blackburn wrote in his 2001 book, [Ethics](#), that the Golden Rule is “found in some form in almost every ethical tradition.” I doubt there is anyone I know who has not heard of it. And I have often heard it used as the gold standard for behavior, applied to individuals, groups and governments.

However, fewer seem familiar with the silver rule, which is the converse of the golden rule—“do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you”—even though it has been expressed in far more ways in various religious and ethical traditions. What it instructs us [not to do](#) has included “what you would not choose for yourself,” “what you do not want to happen to you,” what would anger if done to you by others,” “what you yourself dislike,” “that which is hateful to you,” “that which one regards as injurious to oneself,” and “that which is unfavorable to us,” among others, presenting a more thorough delineation of what not to do than the golden rule provides for what to do.

The silver rule follows the traditional definition of justice—giving each his own. It is reflected by [Adam Smith](#), in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he writes “We can often fulfill all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing.” That leaves it below the golden rule on most people’s ethical medal stands, because it seems to hold us to a higher standard. That is true when we are talking about individuals and voluntary associations but when we are talking about governments, the silver rule takes the gold.

When we are considering individuals, the golden rule need not conflict with the silver rule. You and I are each free to go beyond doing nothing harmful to others and do as much good unto them as we choose, using our own resources.

The same is true for individuals who voluntarily associated into groups. You and I together can agree to go beyond doing nothing harmful to others and do as much good unto them as we choose, using our own resources.

When we come to government, however, the golden rule, as commonly understood, conflicts with the silver rule. Say a government decision maker determines to do good, as they see it, unto others. The problem is that government has no resources of its own; only what it commandeers from citizens. Without unanimous consent (which happens how often in government, where control only requires 50%-plus-one consent for most decisions?), resources will necessarily be taken for that purpose against the will of some, and often many. That violates the supposedly less demanding silver rule. That is why Grover Cleveland could [say](#) that the U.S. government is “pledged to do equal and exact justice to all men,” without contradicting himself when he said that “though the people support the Government, Government should not support the people.”

The problem arises in such cases because focusing on the golden rule can lead people to perceive someone’s needs or wants, decide that someone should do something about it, and so volunteer the government for the task. But that leaves out a central part of the story. They could have sought to ameliorate the problem in a manner that would not violate the silver rule—doing something about it as an individual or as a voluntary association—but instead decided to employ government’s coercive power to force a substantial part of the tab for their ethical concerns onto others who don’t share their opinions or conclusions.

Another way of saying this is comes from what Adam Smith wrote just before his quote above: “The man who barely abstains from violating either the person, or the estate, or the reputation of his neighbors...does everything which his equals can with propriety force him to do, or which they can punish him for not doing.” That is, government is to be our protector against invasions from outsiders and neighbors. Laws, like the Bill of Rights, should focus on applying “thou shalt nots,” as Justice Hugo Black once put it, against violators of our rights. When it goes further, it treats some citizens as a predator rather than a protector, undermining its central purpose.

Fortunately, there is a form of the golden rule that can reconcile government with the silver rule as well as a truncated view of the golden rule that ignores where the resources must come from. It comes from the hadith, collected accounts of Muhammad and his teachings: “Prophet said: ‘[As you would have people do to you, do so to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don’t do to them.](#)’” In other words, “do only those things under the golden rule that do not violate the silver rule.

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