

## Essay no. 40

Essay topic 4:

Confucius asks us: "To what extent may this formulation of the Golden Rule (Do not do unto others what you don't want others to do to you) which can also be found in other cultures throughout history, be considered as a universal moral principle?"

In order to answer his question we must first clarify if there can be something of a universal moral principle. To discover this we're taking a trip through western philosophy to discover this.

### **Is a universal moral principle possible?**

In Western thought the Golden Rule can be closely associated to Kant's moral philosophy. Kant called the Golden Rule the Categorical imperative and linked it to a philosophy around the concept of duty. He believed we should think of universal principles and abide to them in any given case, a deontological code as it is often referred to.

A problem arises. First of all should we never deviate from these moral duties? There must be situations in which these duties sell us short. For example if you have the duty to tell the truth (which would be the opposite of the duty to tell lies) and you are in Nazi-occupied France during the second World War and a German officer asks you if someone you know is sheltering enemies (mostly Jews) of the state, should you tell them the truth, knowing that horrible things might happen to those who offered shelter as well as to the sheltered solely because of an act of altruism towards a member of a discriminated minority and racism towards Jews? Or shouldn't you 'ingloriously' lie and deviate from your moral duty?

Or when doctors, who before they start their jobs have to take an oath never to harm a patient, are faced with an incurably ill patient, who wants to take his final breath with dignity and therefore requests euthanasia, should they still stand by their moral duty to prolong the patient's life knowing that doing so will only bring about more suffering or should he grant his patient the permission not to have to die in his most dilapidated state.

Of course these are quite extreme examples. But aren't a lot of people often involved in extreme situations? I think we can safely assume that Kant's deontological philosophy linked to the Categorical imperative is not an immaculate moral code. It is too extreme and wants to have a basis for morality similar to mathematics. This can't possibly work because mathematical principles only refer to other mathematical principles, while moral principles have to be applicable to the world of human acts and where human beings come into play a lot of rationality fades away.

But does that mean that there can't be something of a universal moral principle? That's what we're going to explore.

Is what we should do (morally) exactly the same as what we have to do (in reality)? The empiricist philosopher David Hume asked a similar question centuries ago and came up with the notion of the

is/ought-gap. He thereby meant that we can only advise people on what they ought to do, because we can't empirically know that murder or theft is wrong and therefore we can't say people have to obey to not killing people. We can on the other hand see that murder brings about a lot of misery and that a society in which murder is tolerated the citizens aren't exactly safe. Therefore we can recommend people what they're supposed to do, but we can't objectively say that certain acts are right or wrong. This might be seen as a solution to Kant's problem. Instead of desperately trying to create an objective basis for morality we should accept that it is subjective and in that light we can consider this principle to be a great one.

So can the Golden Rule be a universal moral principle? No, because moral 'knowledge' is always subjective and it being a universal moral principle implies some kind of truth-value to this proposition and because of the is/ought-gap we can't escape a moral principle's subjectivity.

But another remark regarding the universal aspect of this moral principle. If you were able to kill a dictator and save a lot of lives shouldn't you do it? One can argue no because Lenin also slaughtered a lot of people after he killed the Tsar and therefore just became a replacement for the former dictator. But one could argue yes firstly because if Hitler would have been killed in one of the many assassination attempts the war could have been shortened by, perhaps, years, but secondly you could argue that the people you are trying to kill in these examples aren't respecting the Golden Rule, so why shouldn't they be killed by the principle, that murder in some cases is tolerable, they then uphold?

And the fact that there are murderers, thieves, etc. proves that the Golden Rule isn't lived after by every human being.

Another, perhaps more satirical, example, is that according to this universal moral principle it would be morally right for a suicidal person, or someone who'd want to be killed, to kill other people. The same applies for a sadomasochist, would he have the right to hurt other people, because he enjoys pain? So should we then, by abiding to this moral code, in some cases allow murders to happen? Should we reckon a suicide bombing to be morally right?

That would be ludicrous.

### **The origins of the Golden Rule**

But it is apparent that this 'universal' moral principle exists in an awful lot of societies. How did that come about?

A couple of philosophers have argued that we all signed a social contract to organize a society.

Hobbes thought that we needed this contract because we are all nasty, brutish creatures who have to obey to authority, because otherwise man would not be capable of working together with fellow members of his species.

Rousseau on the other hand thought we are all innately good, but perverted by society, but also recognized that there are social rules.

Both philosophers we're wrong. Firstly because in a Sartrean vision our essence, our personality etc., only comes about after our existence. So we can't all be innately good or bad. Also because good and bad are judgments that other people create about us and this is never what we truly are.

Secondly when would we have signed such a social contract. I, for instance, can't remember such an event. But it is an interesting idea to which we will later return.

So where does the Golden Rule come from?

We will take Gramsci's concept of hegemony into account. By means of the Althusserian ideological state apparatus we are all consumed of the idea of the Golden Rule. In the Middle Ages the family was the center of the ideological state apparatus. In our present post-industrial societies morality are in general created by the mass media and education. Bourdieu states for example that panels on discussion programs are combined to propagate a certain opinion through a complex, but not always conscious, selection. The effects on the viewer are however the same. And when they do invite guests with a different opinion are limited in their time to speak.

### **Morality as defined by the economic and political order**

I would go even further and argue that morality serves the economic order. In a capitalist society for example theft is wrong and thieves often meet the Repressive State Apparatus(justice, police,...), while a famous communist, Proudhon, once remarked that "Property is theft", this can't of course be correct seeing as how theft presupposes a notion of property, yet his message fits a Marxist ideology. Capitalism has to prevent people from stealing because otherwise the whole point of consumerism, the acquisition of money and products, would be endangered, while in a communist state a consumerist culture isn't being enforced, because ownership doesn't really exist and because ,according to communists, everyone's needs are constantly being fulfilled by the state, while you could argue that consumerist culture can only exist because of the constant production of needs, hence communists don't think theft is as bad as capitalists do.

Another example is that in neoliberal orders people on benefits are considered to be frauds and cheats, who hardly deserve a benefit. Through the media this opinion becomes all the more popular. The idea behind it is that in the neoliberal order the government functions as an insurance company that does as least as possible and cuts down on any expense and certainly on the benefits of those people who will then become all the easier to exploit. Because if they don't get a benefit, they will be left stranded without an income, which means they will do every job to get some income and in the countries without a minimum wage those people will be extremely vulnerable. This will lead to similar circumstances as The New Poor Law caused in 1847 in the England. Mass employment to extremely small wages.

So we can conclude that every economic and political order indoctrinates people into their moral beliefs through the use of the ideological state apparatus.

The question is: is that fundamentally bad?

One could say yes because we might obtain a false conscious and are led into beliefs that only benefit the very rich in capitalist societies as the second example concerning the benefits proves.

One could also argue that it is quintessential for survival in a society. Because a society without shared principles descends into anarchy and the best way to organize a society is by raising people with norms and values, which is fancy talk for indoctrination, and these norms and values are the ones we use to make our day to day principles. With fundamentally different moral principles living in a society becomes more difficult. For example

But we must remain very critical towards these indoctrinations because through analyzing their discourse, as I did in the example of the benefits, we might find that selfishness of a small number of people, in

present societies Stiglitz'99%, in medieval societies the aristocracy, lies at the core of some moral principles instead of noble objectives.

### **Conclusion**

Is the Golden Rule a universal moral principle?

No: First of all because we can't objectively talk about morality, due to the is/ought-gap. Also because otherwise there wouldn't be murderers, sadomasochists would legitimately be able to hurt other people and we wouldn't be able to defend our society against totalitarian ones.

Does this mean it's a useless principle? No.

But we can't continuously feed ourselves the illusion that complex ethical principles can be combined in one phrase and the illusion that we form our ethical principles independent of the economic and political order. It's a good starting point for an ethical attitude, but it is not a universal moral principle.

Ethics is not a science, but a 3000 year old tradition in thinking about how to live. Some of its principles might fade away, but its tradition will last for as long as there will be language.