

PRINCIPLE OF REVERSIBILITY (A VERSION OF THE GOLDEN RULE)

The principle of reversibility is an injunction to put oneself in another's place before taking action, asking oneself 'How would you like to have that done to you?'. Baier (1966) and others have claimed that this principle is/basic that all the prescriptions and proscriptions we need follow from it. However, it has been shown to be plagued by ambiguity (~~Myers 1986~~)^{so} In fact Myers (1986) has shown that it is open to at least four interpretations:

1. Do what you want done in return (reversibility₁).
2. Do what you would want done if you were in the other's place (rev.₂).
3. Do what you would want if you were the other (rev. ₃).
4. Do what a fair-minded individual would want done in the other's place (rev.₄).

"Reversibility₁ is so locked into the egocentric and egoistic perspective that it seems to be a premoral way of thinking" (p. 20). Reversibility₂ is an advance over egoistic thinking, but it is still egoistic. Only rev.₃ and rev.₄ ask us to consider the other's plight and require a leap in imagination. But rev.₄ contains the vague concept of fair-mindedness, so it is of dubious practical value. And rev.₃ (the "empathetic version of the principle") has its own difficulties, mainly the inability to imagine, in all cases, what it is like to be the other. Myers concludes that one's choice of the construal of the principle should be viewed as a contextual decision. (Defect: A principle should be universal, for which it must make room for specific information ("initial conditions", etc.).)