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The Golden Rule Thieves: Tracing "Bicycle Thieves" through a Confucian Lens

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Abstract

One's own wishes for oneself not to be treated by others, commonly known as the Golden Rule, has been a fundamental moral cornerstone in both Christian and Confucian traditions for millennia. However, in Vittorio De Sica's neorealist masterpiece "Bicycle Thieves," this rule is seemingly violated by the protagonist Antonio, who resorts to stealing a bicycle despite his aversion to being a victim of such an act. This paper examines how the moral illusion of universal justice and the diminishing interpersonal care within the film's narrative contribute to the theft, thereby undermining the Golden Rule. By analyzing the film from Confucian perspective, this study highlights the significance of relative justice grounded in embodied empathy and interpersonal care in modern moral dilemmas, suggesting the need for a renewed commitment to the Golden Rule in contemporary society.

Keywords: Golden Rule, Bicycle Thieves, universal justice, interpersonal care

1.1. Introduction

Directed by Vittorio De Sica, classic film 'Bicycle Thieves' depicts the desperate actions of the protagonist, Antonio, who, faced with the loss of his bicycle, ultimately resorts to stealing one in a moment of profound desperation. Notably, Antonio's initial response to the loss is characterized by an exhaustive search rather than immediate theft, suggesting his fundamental decency and reluctance to engage in such behavior. Thus, his subsequent decision to steal is a tragic manifestation of the circumstances that have pushed him to the brink of morality. This portrayal invites academic scrutiny into the underlying causes of such tragedies and

prompts reflection on the mechanisms that might restrain individuals from violating the Golden Rule in similar dire situations.

In the ensuing discourse, I will embark upon a philosophical exploration of the tragedy portrayed in "Bicycle Thieves," tracing its roots to Golden Rule from two distinct yet interconnected perspectives: that of universal justice and interpersonal care. Through analysis of the moral illusions that obfuscate universal principles and the erosion of interpersonal care within the narrative, particularly as experienced by the protagonist, Antonio,

and his accomplice, Bruno, I will argue that a relative conception of justice, grounded in the Confucian concept of *shu* (恕), or empathy-driven interpersonal care, is imperative in addressing the moral dilemmas that culminate in such tragedies. By scrutinizing Antonio's transformation from a benevolent individual to a thief, this study sheds light on the intricate nuances of moral decision-making and underscores the imperative for a nuanced comprehension of justice that is deeply rooted in empathy and human interconnectedness.

1.2. Justified theft rooted in illusion of universal justice

The succinct narrative of "Bicycle Thieves" belies a complex and convoluted odyssey undertaken by Antonio in his relentless pursuit of his stolen bicycle. This pursuit can be discerned as unfolding through three distinct yet interconnected stages. Initially, Antonio and Bruno venture to the Piazza Vittorio market, where they encounter a bicycle frame resembling Antonio's own, only to be thwarted by the vendor's refusal to disclose the serial number. Bruno's subsequent call to the police, however, reveals that the serial number does not match, casting doubt on their initial assumption. In the second stage, Antonio's vigilance leads him to observe the thief engaging in conversation with an elder at the Porta Portese market, yet his inability to apprehend the thief and lack of conclusive evidence prevent him from implicating the elder as an accomplice, allowing the latter to evade justice. Finally, in a poignant encounter within his own neighborhood, Antonio confronts the thief directly, only to find himself at the mercy of hostile neighbors who accuse him of theft in the absence of incontrovertible proof. Thus, Antonio's tragic tale serves as a reminder of the limitations imposed by the absence of universal, incontrovertible proof in the pursuit of justice, underscoring the philosophical complexities inherent in moral decision-making and the pursuit of truth.

The narrative trajectory of the film intricately unfurls through the lens of Antonio's desperate odyssey to reclaim his stolen bicycle, illuminating the labyrinthine terrain of moral ambiguity. The recurrent theme of failed endeavors to retrieve the bicycle, each impeded by the elusive nature of definitive evidence, underscores the inherent constraints of a justice system that is anchored solely in the pursuit of universal proof (Reinikainen, 2005). This paradigm, which subverts the Golden Rule through an overreliance on external validation, ultimately forces Antonio to confront a moral dilemma that compels him to transgress the very principle he holds dear, thereby striking the delicate balance between the individual's moral compass and the societal constructs that shape it.

Hence, the Golden Rule, which originally enjoined, "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire (*Analects* 15.24)," has been perverted into a conditional imperative: "Do not impose on others solely in the absence of adverse evidence that could substantiate your intervention (Duxbury, 2008)." This transformation effectively condones criminality in the absence of universal proof, revealing a moral illusion that arises from a misguided emphasis on universality. This illusion, in turn, exerts a pernicious influence on Antonio, compelling him to violate the Golden rule he ought to uphold, thereby highlighting the complex interplay between moral ideals, societal constructs, and the individual's moral agency.

Thus, the moral potency of the Golden Rule transcends mere universal authority and is rooted in the realm of relative justice,

which necessitates a profound introspective understanding. The indulgence in the moral illusion of universality, however, inevitably sows the seeds of disorder. As Confucius sagely observed, "Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves (*Analects* 2.3)." Hence, the emphasis must shift towards a conception of relative justice that centers on the cultivation of an inner sense of moral rectitude, or "*liangxin*" (良心), rather than relying solely on external evidence. In the subsequent section, I will delve into the etymological origins of the Confucian concept of "*shu*" (恕), further elucidating the essence of the heart in this context.

1.3. Guilty Antonio with diminishing interpersonal care

The bond shared between Antonio and Bruno stands as a testament to the strength of human connection, yet it serves as a reflection of the gradual erosion of interpersonal care that mirrors the waning applicability of the Golden Rule. Initially, Antonio finds solace and support in the unwavering assistance of Maria and his friends; however, the joyful moments shared with his wife and camaraderie with his peers come to a halt as his frustration and despair deepen following the loss of his bicycle. The police, too, abandon him on two separate occasions due to the absence of concrete evidence, failing to offer him any assistance in gathering said evidence. As Antonio's encounter with the thief within his own neighborhood unfolds, he is met with hostility and accusation from the thief's neighbors, while even his son, Bruno, threatens to sever their relationship after being slapped. The gradual withering of Antonio's social circle and the dwindling of interpersonal care he receives propel him towards a moral precipice, ultimately compelling him to violate the Golden Rule by stealing a bicycle in solitude. However, the compassionate intervention of the bicycle's owner, who notices Bruno's tears and releases Antonio, offers a glimmer of hope. As Bruno takes Antonio's hand on their journey home, reestablishing the bond of interpersonal love, the narrative leaves the audience with a sense of optimism for the future of the family.

Upon reflection on the aforementioned narrative, it becomes evident that the culpability of Antonio stems from the disappearance of the "others" within the original formulation of the Golden Rule, thereby rendering the "self" isolated and devoid of the contextual framework necessary for the rule's application. In this vacuum, the subjective "you" is liberated from moral constraints, as the objective "others" have been effectively negated at the subjective level due to the absence of interpersonal care. This phenomenon, whereby the Golden Rule is "stolen," ushers in a disordered reality devoid of "others."

The Golden Rule transcends the realm of a mere universal rule and assumes a distinctly human dimension, rooted in the bodily dimension of interpersonal care. It embodies a path that is grounded in the depths of human hearts, a way that is inherently human and designed for the well-being of human communities. At the heart of the Confucian Golden Rule lies the concept of "*shu*" (恕), which, etymologically speaking, can be understood as the act of "following" (如) the "heart" (心) of each individual. Notably, the "heart" in this context transcends the realm of psychology, serving as an integral aspect of the physiological body (身體).

Consequently, the abandonment of the humanistic essence of the Confucian Golden Rule, as exemplified by the isolated yet kind-hearted Antonio's tragic decision to violate the Golden Rule, underscores the imperative for the establishment of a bodily interpersonal care context (Wang, 1999). Such a context would serve to uphold the Golden Rule and prevent the recurrence of Antonio's tragic fate.

1.4. The "Golden Rule meeting" between Bicycle Thieves and Confucius

A potential counter argument may posit that, given the modern Western setting of "Bicycle Thieves," the relevance of the Confucian Golden Rule, rooted in ancient Eastern philosophy, may seem misplaced within the Western context. However, my interpretation is grounded in at least three compelling rationales that justify its applicability.

Firstly, the film's universal appeal and capacity to resonate with audiences across diverse cultural and philosophical backgrounds underscores the infinite possibilities for philosophical inquiry into its meaning. Consequently, it is not only natural but also enriching for individuals such as myself, who are steeped in Confucian thought, to employ this philosophical lens in analyzing the Italian film "Bicycle Thieves." Indeed, the collision of global ideas during such interpretations has the potential to yield surprising revelations that transcend cultural boundaries.

Secondly, the fundamental principles that underlie the Golden Rule transcend the divide between East and West, manifesting similarities at a basic level. Confucius' assertion that "It's Man who is capable of broadening the Way. It is not the Way that is capable of broadening Man (*Analects* 15.29)." underscores the indispensability of interpersonal care within the Golden Rule. Similarly, the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, which emphasizes the primacy of "existence precedes essence" and the necessity of action in shaping one's choices, also underscores the centrality of human practice. Both perspectives converge in their recognition that the Golden Rule, or any moral code, is devoid of meaning without the active participation and practice of human beings. The erosion of interpersonal care surrounding Antonio serves as an illustration of the consequences that ensue when the Confucian Golden Rule is neglected or violated.

Thirdly, the Confucian Golden Rule retains its relevance and applicability in contemporary contexts, despite the increasing prominence of moral universality in various aspects of our social lives. While the utilitarian perspective advocates for treating everyone as a singular, measurable unit in pursuit of the greatest overall happiness, such an approach risks dehumanizing individuals by reducing them to mere abstractions. This, in turn, can lead to absurdities in the application of justice. In contrast, the Golden Rule shines a beacon of moral and humanitarian light, deeply rooted in the hearts of all individuals, where morality and humanity converge. Thus, the prevalence of universal morality in modern life does not signify the demise of humanitarian principles such as the Golden Rule, but rather underscores the importance of maintaining a nuanced understanding of moral decision-making that integrates both universal and humanitarian considerations.

By cultivating a renewed context of interpersonal care, we can reinvigorate the transformative potential of the Golden Rule, thereby averting tragedies akin to that experienced by Antonio and fostering a society that is imbued with empathy and justice.

1.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the absurd tragedy of "Golden Rule Thieves" in "Bicycle Thieves" serves as a poignant reminder of the imperative to reevaluate relative justice, rooted in bodily interpersonal care. Amidst the rapid advancements in universal technology and the growing trend of interpersonal isolation, it is imperative that we awaken the subjective dimension of "shu" (恕, or kind mind, beyond the realm of universal evidence). By recognizing the existence of others and actively engaging in interpersonal interactions, as exemplified by Bruno's compassionate gesture of taking Antonio's hand in the film's conclusion, we can foster a more empathetic and just society.

In the face of the daunting challenges posed by a rapidly evolving world, it becomes paramount to rediscover the transformative power of empathy and human connection, thereby reigniting the enduring message of compassion and understanding embodied in the Golden Rule. Through this endeavor, we can cultivate a more humane society, where the Golden Rule serves as a vibrant and enduring guiding principle, guiding our actions and informing our moral decision-making.

I am deeply grateful to director Vittorio De Sica for sharing a profound narrative that has resonated deeply with me. I sincerely hope that my philosophical and academic interpretation of this work will, in some form, be received by him in the realm of virtual reality in the future.

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