

# The Golden Rule Thieves: Tragedy Tracing of "Bicycle Thieves" from Confucian Perspective

Zhang Wentao

**Abstract:** One's own wishes for oneself not to be treated by others should instruct how one treats others. This idea has played a key role in Christian morality and Confucian morality for thousands of years. It was called the "Golden Rule" for its continuity and significance. However, the Golden Rule is stolen in the neorealist film "Bicycle Thieves" set in the 20th century owing to moral illusion of universality and diminishing interpersonal care. Considering this specific case's feature as a typical example of contemporary morality dilemma, there is potential value for further discussion about the "Golden Rule" in modern times.

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

Directed by Vittorio De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves* shows a desperate father Antonio chooses to steal the bicycle, which is a behavior he wishes not to happen to himself. Considering the endless search instead of stealing instantly after losing his bicycle, Antonio is not a villain but a kind man originally. It is a tragedy to witness the downplay of morality, so we need to reflect on what causes the tragedy and restrain Golden Rule thieves.

In what follows I will trace the tragedy back to the Confucian Golden Rule from two perspectives — universal justice and interpersonal care. Respectively I will analyze the moral illusion of universality and diminishing interpersonal care in "Bicycle Thieves" under the thieves, Antonio, and Bruno's perspective. Then I shall argue that relative justice in our moral practice should be achieved on the ground of shu (恕) as bodily interpersonal care in case of the tragedy in "Bicycle Thieves".

## I. Justified thieves from the moral illusion of universality

Although the overall plot of "Bicycle Thieves" is simple, the specific process is quite twisted. There are at least three stages that can account for Antonio's search process. Firstly, Antonio goes to the Piazza Vittorio market with Bruno and finds a bicycle frame that is similar to his own, but the vendor refuses to show the serial number. So Bruno calls the police but finds the serial number unmatched on his bike. Secondly, Antonio notices the thief talking with an elder at the Porta Portese market, but fails to catch the thief and has no evidence to prove the elder's accomplice's suspicion, letting him slip away. Finally, Antonio encounters the thief in the neighborhood but the hostile neighbors blame Antonio instead of the thief since there is no solid evidence to prove the poor guy is the thief. Unfortunately, Antonio misses all three opportunities to retrieve his bicycle owing to the absence of universal proof.

Thus, the Golden Rule “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire<sup>1</sup>” has become “Do not impose on others when there is adverse evidence that can prove your intervention.” In other words, any criminal lack of universal proof is justified. Derived from universality, the moral illusion appears and induces Antonio to break the Golden Rule.

Therefore, the moral power of the Golden Rule does not come from universal authority but comes from relative justice, which needs to be perceived from the deep within. And indulging in the moral illusion of universality will cause disorder eventually. Just as Confucius said, “Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by punishment and law, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of shame and honor<sup>2</sup>.” So relative justice that focuses on the inner kind mind(良心) instead of external evidence needs to be emphasized to constrain the absurd justified thieves and awake the Golden Rule. And I’ll further explain heart from the etymology of shu(恕) in the next part.

## II. Guilty Antonio with diminishing interpersonal care

The heartwarming relationship between Antonio and Bruno is indeed impressive, but the interpersonal care is diminishing around Antonio gradually. In the beginning, he receives Maria’s full support and assistance from his friends. However, happy moments with his wife pause and party time with friends ends owing to his frustrated emotion after losing the bike. Then the police leave him twice owing to there being no solid evidence, not to mention helping him collect evidence. When Antonio finds the thief in his neighborhood, the thief’s neighbors all criticize Antonio. Even his son Bruno nearly cut off the relationship with him after being slapped. Gradually, people surrounding Antonio diminish and he receives less and less interpersonal care. Finally, he orders Bruno to take the trolley back home, leaving himself alone, and begins to steal the bicycle when there is no one around. With diminishing interpersonal care, Antonio becomes a guilty bicycle thief and Golden Rule thief. Then Antonio is caught instantly. Fortunately, the bicycle's owner notices Bruno in tears and shows compassion, releasing Antonio. On their way home, Bruno takes Antonio’s hand, giving him interpersonal love again, and leaves hope for the family.

Reviewing the plots above, what makes Antonio guilty is that the “others” in the original Golden Rule have disappeared and left the “self” alone, destroying the application context of the Golden Rule. The subjective “you” can do anything you want because the objective “others” has become nonexistent at the subjective level owing to the absence of interpersonal care surrounding “you”. In this way, the Golden Rule is stolen and a different world without “others” emerges, which will bring new order or disorder.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Analects*, 15:24

<sup>2</sup> *Analect*, 2:3

It is the bodily interpersonal care making the Golden Rule a human way rather than a universal rule. It is a way grounded in human hearts, a way of human beings and for human communities. As the essence of the Confucian Golden Rule, shu(恕) can be interpreted etymologically as the “to follow”(如) of each individual’s “hearts”(心). And “hearts”(心) is not primarily a psychological concept but a part of the physiological body(身體). After abandoning the humanistic nature of the

Confucian Golden Rule, no wonder kind but isolated Antonio chooses to break the Golden Rule. So a bodily interpersonal care context needs to be set up, which will sustain the Golden Rule and prevent Antonio’s tragedy.

### III. The "Golden Rule meeting" between Bicycle Thieves and Confucius

I’ve anticipated a counterargument that the background of "Bicycle Thieves" is the modern Western world: why Confucian Golden Rule from the ancient East is involved in Western context? There are at least three aspects that can account for my interpretation.

Firstly, there are infinite possible philosophical comparisons for the film’s meaning since the film can be appreciated by people all over the world. So it’s quite normal that Chinese like me use Confucian intuition to analyze the film from Italy. And brand new surprises can emerge during the clash of various ideas in the interpretation.

Secondly, the essential principle can have similarities at a basic level beyond the gap between East and West. In terms of the indispensability of interpersonal care in the Golden Rule, Confucius would say, "It’s human beings that make the way great, and not the way that makes human beings great<sup>3</sup>." While existentialist Sartre emphasizes "existence precedes essence" and the necessity of action to make choices. They both cherish human practice, namely "the Golden Rule, way or essence" will be meaningless without the existence of humans and its practice. I have mentioned in part two that the fall of the Golden Rule resulted from diminishing interpersonal care around Antonio.

Thirdly, the Confucian Golden Rule can still fit in contemporary situations. It’s true that moral universality is shown in more and more fields of our social lives. It can be indicated from the utilitarian idea -- everyone should be treated as one, and as one only to count the amount of greatest happiness. But it is wrong to consider "one" as a measurable unit of utility or abstract number exclusively. Since it strangles living and bodily humans and will result in absurd justice mentioned in part one. The Golden Rule shines a golden light and it is deeply rooted in everyone’s heart, where morality and humanity meet together. Hence, the use of universal morality in our modern life does not prove that humanitarian morality such as the Golden

---

<sup>3</sup> *Analects*, 15:29

Rule is dying.

To sum up, relative justice based on bodily interpersonal care needs to be reconsidered by tracing back to the absurd tragedy of Golden Rule Thieves in "Bicycle Thieves". Considering the rapid development of universal technology and isolating interpersonal relationship trends nowadays, we need to awaken subjective shu(恕) or kind mind besides objective evidence like the bicycle's owner who releases Antonio; we need to notice the existence of the others and then immerse ourselves in the interaction like Bruno takes Antonio's hand in the end. We need to activate our hearts to find these living moral examples. And keep in action with hope like Antonio, and then you will rouse the Golden Rule living in our minds for thousands of years. Appreciating director Vittorio De Sica has shared a profound story with me and I do hope my interpretation will be received by him in the virtual reality in the future.

### Reference

- 1.Wang, Q. J. (1999). The Golden Rule and Interpersonal Care: From a Confucian Perspective. *Philosophy East and West*, 49(4), 415–438. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1399946>
- 2.Confucius: The Analects, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1979) 2:3; 15:24; 15:29.

作者：张文涛，澳门大学教育学院，本科生