Topic: While I do not wish others to impose on me, I also wish not to impose on others." (Analects 5:12).
Is there any difference between the positive and the negative formulations of the golden rule? If so, are the differences significant in Confucian thought?

There are many versions of the *golden rule*. However for this essay we will assume that the *positive golden rule* states: "Do unto others as you will have them do unto you"; and the *negative golden rule* states: "While I do not wish others to impose on me, I also wish not to impose on others"[1]. Even though I will try to deal with the basic *concepts* behind the positive and negative golden rules, I have still stated them as definite concrete statements above, because sometimes we need to analyse 'concrete' statements rather than concepts, because even two different versions of the positive golden rule can be viewed as very different.

In this essay I will firstly try to show the assumptions made by the golden rules, and also why such assumptions are necessary for any society. Then there will be a brief overview of the rules, followed by the ideas of 'stopping evil versus doing good'. Then we shall move on to analysing the negative and positive version in Confucian thought and state why both versions are a necessity in Confucianism. Lastly we shall analyse problems with both the rules.

Assumptions made by the rules

The positive golden rule makes the assumption that the person following the rule knows not only what he desires but also what the other person desires. What we want is our desires to be fulfilled and hence we must fulfil other peoples desires if we wish them to fulfil ours. As we can see, it is assumed that we can *correctly* guess what another person desires.

The negative rule assumes that we know just what the others person desires *not to happen* and hence we know exactly what to avoid when interacting with other people.

Even though the assumptions made by both the rules may not be conceived as *ideal*, they are nevertheless very important and must be made by *every* rule (concerning society) if there is to be a society (ie. some interaction between people over a considerable amount of time) at all. If we did not assume that we can (at least to a certain degree) correctly guess the other persons intentions, then we could in no way understand what they either wanted (eliminating the usefulness of the positive golden rule) or what they desired not to be (eliminating the usefulness of the negative golden rule). As a result our actions towards other people would be completely unpredictable by them, hence deterring them from even trying to *communicate* with us in the future.

An overview of the positive golden rule

Many people claim that the positive golden rule can justify a masochist becoming a sadist. On the very superficial level of analysis and understanding this might be true; that is, if a person likes pain inflicted on himself then he should 'hurt others as he will have others hurt him'[2]. However at a deeper level of understanding, if a person hurts others (hoping that others will hurt him) what he has in effect done is, he has gone against the desire of the other person (which was to be treated kindly) and as a result the other person will go against his desires, hence in effect treating him kindly! This type of interpretation/understanding also works rather well when a kind person treats another kind person kindly, resulting in kindness 'going all around'. The only problem we face with this rule is if a kind person goes against the desires of a sadist and treats how kindly, for this means that the sadist will go against the kind persons desires and inflict pain on him.

An overview of the negative golden rule

Many people claim that the negative golden rule does not provide much incentive for us to follow it. That is, if we wish others to treat us well, we cannot *do any action* that will lead others to fulfil our wish; the only thing we can be assured of is that others will not treat us badly if we do not treat them badly. As we can see, this can lead to a situation where we can, faced with what is good, leave it undone. This can have quite dramatic consequences. Take for example a case where we knew a person who was starving, and we also knew where some spare food was located; now we could either get him the food (which would be doing good) or we could ignore the situation as a result of which the person might dies. Now, *we* did not do anything bad (satisfying the negative golden rule) but we did not do the good either (hence, not satisfying the positive golden rule).

Stopping Evil versus Doing Good

The negative golden rule has commonly been associated with the quality of 'stopping evil' in society, whereas the positive golden rule has been associated with the quality of 'doing good'. I will try to illustrate how both aspects are important in any society. Take for example a group of people who kidnap children, cut their legs off and then place them on the sidewalk to beg. This group then picks up the children from the sidewalk every evening and take the money from them. If we were to 'do good' in such a situation, we would take the children to hospitals and make sure they were looked after. However, if we were to stop the evil then we would try to 'reform' the group that was the *cause* of the evil. As we can see, once without the other would leave the task incomplete, and 'society' the worse off for it!

The negative and positive golden rules in Confucian thought

Confucius has emphasised on both the negative and positive formulations of the golden rule. He seems to have recognised the importance of stopping evil *and* doing good, so that we may achieve a harmonious result. However, he seems to have focused more on the negative rule. I guess this is because he realised that unless the cause of evil were uprooted, no matter how much good we did there would always be suffering and disharmony being created. Also, after uprooting the cause of evil, if we did not 'do good' (ie. follow the positive golden rule), the effect of the evil would stay around, not only being a hindrance in the progress of society but also leaving open the possibility for more evil to be generated in the future. Hence, I believe Confucius was very clever in saying "While I do not wish others to impose on me, I also wish not to impose on others'[3], intending it for the common man, so that evil may be eradicated first. Then Confucius later states "A man of jen, wishing to establish himself, seeks also to establish others, and wishing to advance himself, also helps others to advance"[4], the key words here being 'A man of *jen*' indicating a person who embodies jen (ie. a 'superior' man) can go ahead and 'help others advance as he himself wishes to advance' -

very much like the positive golden rule. In doing this, Confucius has saved the positive rule from abuse by masochists, because a masochist is definitely not a man of jen, and hence may not follow the positive golden rule.

Problems associated with the above interpretation

One may claim that, a man who is not jen, following the negative golden rule, may try to stop good actions thinking them to be evil. Admittedly this is a problem with the above interpretation, however, at least a man who is not jen, cannot follow the positive golden rule and impose evil thinking it to be good. Hence, our interpretation still remains safe in the sense that it cannot bring about evil.

There is also a problem with regard to the virtue of modesty (as Allison would have us think), for if a jen man recognises that he is a jen man and can follow the positive golden rule, then he is claiming to know what good is; whereas if he does not claim that he is a man of jen then there is no-one who can follow the positive golden rule! However, we must change our definition of modesty here and nothing else, for surely if a man really does have certain knowledge/virtues he is not required to *lie* and say that he does not have it, just for the sake of modesty.

We can see that the major difference between the positive and negative golden rules is that, one is concerned with promoting good whereas the other is concerned with stopping evil. We have also seen that the negative formulation is appropriate for use by anyone, whereas the positive formulation is for use only by a man who embodies jen. Put together they make the 'one thread' in Confucian thought ... "The master said, 'Ts'an! There is one single thread binding my way together.'"[5] Without one the other version of the golden rule will fail achieve complete harmony, and so distinctions between the rules are important in Confucian philosophy.

References

[1] Confucius: The Analects (Penguin Classics, 1979), Analects 5:12.
[2] *Variation* of - Ivanhoe, P., "Reweaving the "one thread" of the Analects", Phil2519 Course Notes p.55.
[3] Confucius: The Analects (Penguin Classics, 1979), Analects 5:12.
[4] Confucius: The Analects (Penguin Classics, 1979), Analects 6:28.
[5] Confucius: The Analects (Penguin Classics, 1979), Analects 4:15.