

Ethics 101: Reciprocity

People have been arguing about how to deal with ideas of right and wrong for a very long time. Even now, reasonable people sometimes disagree about where exactly to draw the ethical line on some complex issues. After all, the world is a complicated place.

That being said, one idea has emerged over and over again in the quest to understand right and wrong from essentially every cultural, religious, and philosophical tradition: the ethic of reciprocity.

You may know it as the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do to you.” This basic mutual respect is the cornerstone of civilized behavior and the basis for cooperation and justice. It is natural law in practice.

When people who disagree choose argumentation over aggression, they are demonstrating a preference for mutual respect. Therefore, arguing against mutual respect is a performative contradiction. There is no civilized argument against the ethic of reciprocity.

Uncivilized people use aggression to get what they want. If you find yourself at odds with someone who refuses to abide by the golden rule, you cannot resort to argumentation to resolve the situation. It is in this circumstance that threat management becomes necessary and defensive force becomes justifiable.