I. Introduction: The common basic idea behind the different versions of what in Western civilization was termed the Golden Rule (GR) has, in part for millenaries, enjoyed high esteem in quite different cultures. Most deeply rooted it is in Judeo-Christian civilization where it can be traced back to the Old and New Testament (Tobias IV, 15 (16); Matthew VII, 12; Luke VI, 31; Paulus, Ep. rom. II, 1 and I4-16). Christian writers of different tendencies such as St. Justin, St. Augustine, Gratian, St. Bonaventura, St. Albertus Magnus, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Calvin follow suit. In antiquity rules very similar to GR were said to have been recommended by two of the legendary Seven Wise Men of ancient Greece, Thales and Pittacus, and thereupon by Aristotle. In Rome Seneca praised GR. Indian, Chinese – notably Confucianist – and later Islamic thinking point to GR-like rules as fundamental principles of morality. In postmedieval times numerous authors, such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Voltaire, Herder reappraise GR in more secular problem contexts. Locke e. g., though considering GR to be „that most unshaken rule of morality and foundation of all social virtue“2, in accordance with his empiricist epistemology nonetheless denies its self-evidence and, therefore, innateness. Other philosophers present lengthy analyses of GR, as does Thomasius, one of the leading pre-Kantian representatives of the German Enlightenment. Leibniz, rather in passing, points to a fact the importance of which was re-detected

1. Not treating ideo-historical matters in this paper but rather investigating GR from a theoretical viewpoint I content myself here to call attention to the references in Reiner’s article (1948), pp. 74 ff., which largely focuses on the history of GR.

2. Locke (1690), book 1, ch. 2, § 4, p. 68, cf. also § 7. For the other authors mentioned here, see again the references in Reiner (1948), pp. 77 ff.
only centuries later: One of the possible interpretations of GR (which at first sight promises to be the least vulnerable of all) presupposes some moral criterion and thus divests GR of its claim of being itself such a criterion.3

The prevailing esteem gives way to a sudden general sneer at GR, at least in the German speaking philosophic community and its zone of influence, after Kant’s succinct and devastating judgment on this rule.4 Everything relevant on the subject seemed to have been definitely said. The ongoing Anglo-American discussion on the subject revealed, however, that this reaction was precipitate. Yet what has been lacking, so far, is a thorough analysis of GR grounded on a formal investigation of its logical structure and essential implications. Such an analysis yields, as this paper intends to show, some more reasons bearing upon the question whether or not GR can serve as that cornerstone principle of theoretical ethics which some authors declared it, and still declare it, to be. The answer to this will — for considerably more reasons than the ones Kant recurred to — eventually be negative.

II. Let us start this investigation by distinguishing several versions of rules that usually are subsumed under the common label of GR. Generally made is the distinction between positive (= GR+) and negative (= GR-) versions. The most widespread variant is the following negative one (= GR−): “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you!” Its logical structure is that of a conditional prohibition5: “If you (= x) do not want any other person (= y) to do F to you in circumstances C (= Fyx), then you are morally

3. See Leibniz, “Nouveaus Essais sur l’entendement humain”, Livre I, chap. II, § 4. For the impact of this on the theoretical value of GR see the concluding passage of this paper.
4. See footnote 13 below.
5. Reconstructing the imperative formulation of GR-versions in deontic terms, as is done throughout this paper, does not change their ethical message, but turns them into true or false statements and thus, on the basis of the possible-worlds-semantics for deontic logic, allows deductive arguing with respect to GR. A satisfactory semantics for imperatives, on the other hand, that would also allow this does not exist yet.