

Out of the Kindness of Our Hearts or On the Gendered Hazards of Being Kind

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In his rich and thought provoking exposition, Steve Broidy advocates a teaching ethic of kindness because “it provides teaching with a focus consistent with many of our professed teaching aims, especially a concern to preserve and develop democracy.” As someone in whose life kindness, in both the giving and receiving capacity, has played a meaningful, if often perplexing, role, I am personally grateful to Broidy for stimulating dialogue around this matter.

Broidy’s paper is divided into three parts. First, he explains what a “teaching ethic” is. In order to explicate what a “teaching ethic” is, Broidy begins by distinguishing actual moral choices in the classroom from principled moral judgments which, based on “categorical, even universalizable rules,” are logically and practically inadequate for dealing ethically with students. Actual moral choices, Broidy contends, are a subset of value judgments, and thus, do not require publicly conclusive but, rather, “personally sufficient” evidence. Our moral choices, however, are not erratic and unstable, Broidy maintains, because they are powerfully influenced by our ethical sensibilities. Our ethical sensibilities are the “default” positions that we appeal to when we approach a moral situation when there are no countervailing factors to consider. A “teaching ethic,” according to Broidy, involves the moral sensibilities underlying a teacher’s classroom decision making and Broidy extols a particular type of teaching ethic — one that accentuates a concern for kindness.

In the second part, Broidy argues that the kind act, the paradigm which Broidy focuses on to define kindness, consists of three types of features. The Relational Features of Kindness involve a focus on particular persons and an ability to affect a change in their needs, needs which if left unaddressed would harm that person. In addition, the kind person must avoid to some extent motivational displacement in dealing with the particular person. The Emotional and Intentional Features of Kindness which Broidy points to are that the kind person intends to show respect for the particular person’s position, intends to act in such a way that the particular person’s needs are met, and that the act is voluntary and discretionary. Finally, Broidy maintains that the kind person has to have certain beliefs and knowledge. In particular, the kind person needs to understand the particular person’s situation and need, must have perspective taking abilities, and must believe that taking multiple perspectives is important when deciding how to act. Only when all these features are present can an act, according to Broidy, be called kind. In the third part of the article, Broidy argues that since democratic moral life is “one that seeks to increase the capabilities of those involved in that interaction (with others), and to expand the bases of their common interest,” teachers who adopt a “teaching ethic” concerned with kindness will promote democracy.

The first concern I have, although a minor point in that it does not detract from Broidy's analysis of kindness, is consequential for the fundamental picture of moral decision making upon which his argument is based. Although I applaud Broidy's move away from categorical or universalizable rules as the primary basis upon which ethical decisions in the classroom are made and I endorse his defense of approaches which focus on the relational, face-to-face aspect of teacher-student encounters, the alliance he claims for the teacher's moral choice and value decisions is problematic. Value decisions, as Broidy points out, only require "personally sufficient" evidence. Since different people's "personally sufficient" evidence, however, often conflict, in situations where accountability and justification are important, as they are in actual moral decisions, "personally sufficient" evidence may be inadequate. Thus, Broidy would need to clarify in greater detail what he means by "personally sufficient" evidence. Without such clarification, the first part of his argument seems to overlook that teachers are not the only ones who have to be convinced about the correctness of their classroom moral decisions. The principal, the parent, and the student often demand justification of the teacher's actions and their "personally sufficient" evidence may differ from the teacher's own.

A second point that I want to raise concerns Broidy's conceptualization of kindness which, I maintain, is too cognitive. Broidy acknowledges that his definition of kindness is "in a small part" a construct, but he does not tell us which part is his reconstruction and which part is the coherent core that he is trying to draw out. Acknowledging that some of the "Belief and Knowledge Features" are not core features of kindness, but, rather, his co-optation, would make Broidy's understanding of kindness more in line with the ordinary sense of the term which underscores such feelings as sympathy, gentleness, affection and good will — in general, a visceral feeling for the weal and woe of particular others. Although Broidy designates a category which he refers to as the "Emotional and Intentional Features of Kindness," it is not clear which of the features he explicates in this category is an emotion.

Perhaps Broidy's focus on the kind *act* rather than the kind *person*, disposes him to understate the emotional features of kindness. Indeed, Broidy's concentration on the kind act seems odd, given his interest in ethical sensitivities. One kind act does not a kind person make, nor does it adequately explain the ethical sensitivity of being kind. As a matter of fact, kindness may not even be manifested in what is conventionally conceived of as an act but, rather, is often conveyed in a comforting gesture, a consoling smile, a tender touch, a warm stare into another's eyes. A *display* of kindness may be all that the other person needs. And sometimes the greatest kindness is a non-act, a silence, doing nothing at all.

A particularly cognitive element of kindness which Broidy takes pains to emphasize is the "multiple perspective" feature. An act is not kind, according to Broidy, if the agent did not consider the multiple perspectives involved. Broidy, I think, points correctly to an important insight about kindness, that is, that sometimes what may seem to be unkind from one perspective is the kindest act of all when all relevant perspectives are taken into consideration. Yet a person is ordinarily

regarded as kind even if s/he does not take or cannot take “multiple perspectives.” A young child, for example, is considered kind when s/he brings a thirsty animal a drink, even when there are other thirsty animals around that s/he did not consider.

Finally, the strong emphasis on the “multiple perspective” requirement also leads me to believe that Broidy assumes that all kind acts are also morally correct ones, or more succinctly, that kindness is always good, always desirable. Yet doing a kind act is not synonymous with doing a morally correct act. It is not logically incoherent to say that one did a kind act but it was not morally right, or was not, ethically, the best thing to do. Moreover, I think this assumption about the desirability of kindness obscures an important dimension which is missing in Broidy’s analysis and which I refer to as the hazards of kindness. One of these hazards that I want to focus on concerns the consequences that kindness can have for particular social groups in contemporary Western society. What Broidy’s analysis lacks, I argue, is consideration of the social/political context in which kind acts occur.

I could call on the works of Barbara Houston, Claudia Card, or Sandra Bartky, among others, to make my point here but, instead, I will relate a story.¹

Little Malka, the oldest of three sisters living in a small Polish village in the 1930’s, was always taught to be kind and gentle. She wasn’t explicitly taught these virtues but, rather, absorbed them from observing her compassionate mother who, for example, often baked extra loaves of bread to distribute to needy families in the village. Little Malka and her sisters were so kind that they couldn’t hurt a fly — literally. When a large waterbug crawled into their living room after a spring rain, Malka and her sisters nudged it gently into a glass and returned it to the garden. But life wasn’t always so kind to Malka. Years later, the man she married, whom she thought was kind and gentle, began exploiting her kindness. “Would you like dinner, honey?” would get an abrupt negative response as her husband would plop himself down on the sofa in front of the T.V. with a beer. Tears would well up in Malka’s eyes but she would think, “He’s tired, he needs to relax.” After 40 years, the abuse increased and physical violence sometimes accompanied the verbal deprecation. Yet Malka, continued to excuse him, “He’s like that because of the concentration camps. He doesn’t mean to be cruel.”

For some people, kindness can be harmful. Moreover, because kindness is considered a desirable characteristic, and especially because for certain social groups being kind is equated with being a good person, the harm that kindness may cause can be obscured and the need to abstain from kindness may become inconceivable. Yet kindness taken out of its social/political context, like care or trust or love, should never be championed. When this is the case, kindness may camouflage inequalities and, thus, rather than promote and maintain democracy, may thwart its development.

I want it to be clear. I concur wholeheartedly with Broidy and Henry James that kindness as an ethic is extremely important. Robert Coles² notes that when Henry James was asked by his nephew what to do with his life, James responded, “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind.

And the third is to be kind.” However, I maintain, that kindness must be promoted with caution because advocating kindness to members of certain social groups, like my mother, Malka, is not to be kind, at all.

1. Barbara Houston, “Prolegomena to Future Caring,” in *Who Cares? Theory, Research, and Educational Implications of the Ethics of Care*, ed. Mary M. Brabeck (Praeger: New York, 1987): 84-100; Barbara Houston, “Rescuing Womanly Virtues: Some Dangers of Moral Reclamation,” in *Science, Morality and Feminist Theory*, eds., Marsha Hanen and Kai Nielsen, suppl. vol. 13 *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1987): 237-62; Barbara Houston, “Caring and Exploitation,” *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 115-19; Claudia Card, “Caring and Evil,” *Hypatia* 5, no. 1 (1990): 101-8; and Sandra Lee Bartky, “Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds: Deference and Disaffection in Women’s Emotional Labor,” in Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge: New York, 1990), 99-119. See also Annette Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” *Ethics* 96 (January 1986): 231-60.

2. Robert Coles, *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (New York: Random House, 1997).