



The Abbey

KINDNESS

Is “kindness” a human construct?

Phoebe, Lower VI (Year 12)





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“No act of kindness,” Aesop reminds us, “no matter how small, is ever wasted.” As a slave and storyteller living in Greece between 620 and 564 BCE, Aesop’s perception of kindness is particularly striking given his circumstances. Harsh living, cruel tasks and no chance of an independent future are hardly prospects conducive to compassion, and yet his reminder comes at a time when Greek philosophers embarked on the process of quantifying kindness. To quantify something, however, one needs a definition and this is much disputed. Google suggests that kindness is “the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate.” However, I believe there are many problems with this definition.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Aesop’s message is the idea that kindness could thrive in times of slavery, which suggests an absence of kindness. However, the idea of kindness has always been prevalent in the world and is entwined inextricably with religion. Currently, there are more atheists in the world than ever before, but as only between 7-16% of the present world population is secular, billions of humans are certain to have held some value to kindness in connection with the divine.

In Christianity, God teaches the connection with love, whereby “love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude.” This line from 1 Corinthians views love and kindness interchangeably, and as love is an emotion (a way in which humans quantify chemical signals), it suggests kindness is an emotion and not a concept. Emotions can be felt by other species, but concepts, I would argue, pertain to humans only. The Quran teaches one should be “kind to parents, relatives, orphans, the poor, near and distant neighbours, close friends, [needy] travellers, and those [bondspople] in your possession.”(Surah Al-Baqarah 2:263). In this verse, it is suggested that one should act in an emotionally compassionate way, and further reinforces the religious, and therefore historical, prerequisite for kindness in human societies all over the world.

In the past, however, religion has also been used to restrict movements, actions and thoughts. The feudal system in England in the Middle Ages prevented peasant uprisings, and the fear of God, perpetuated by the Catholic Church, acted as a constraint on the actions of the masses. Therefore, this idea of kindness as part of religious duty could be used to restrict negative, potentially justified, actions towards oppressive feudal lords and barons. Is this use of “kindness” kind?

Regardless of the historical context, it is undeniable that humans show compassion towards others in times of distress. When the British colonists settled in America in 1607, the indigenous population provided aid and agricultural lessons to alleviate the hunger and despair the colonists felt as their crops failed. Moreover, the Bible teaches that the people of Malta showed “unusual kindness” to the shipwrecked and took them in and fed them. There is no gain to the local people in these scenarios. Despite that, both isolated populations were compassionate in a situation where prior communication, beliefs, religions and constructs would not have been shared. Does this point to kindness as a natural phenomenon, then, or a global construct, perhaps spread before humans left Africa 100,000 years ago?

Typically, the origin of a word helps us understand why and for what purpose a word exists. So, where does this word come from? “Kindness” has two main derivations. One of these, “kyndnes”, comes from Old English (c. 450-1150 CE) and means “nation”, and has roots in the word “kin”. This evolved into our modern understanding of “courtesy or noble deeds” by the 14th century. The second word “gecynde” means “natural, native, innate”, which suggests kindness is a natural feeling of compassion, which therefore moots the idea that kindness is not a concept, and more an aspect of life. These origins could suggest kindness is an umbrella term for compassionate or friendly actions.

Other forms of life can certainly be kind, which challenges the idea that kindness is a concept. In a study by the Max Planck Institute for Ornithology in Germany, African Grey Parrots aided each other to get food. Bird 1 had sole access to tokens and Bird 2 had sole access to walnuts. Bird 2 could only get a walnut if it gave the scientist a token, but the only way for Bird 2 to get the token was to be given one by Bird 1. There was no way for Bird 2 to pass Bird 1 a walnut, so there was no obvious benefit to this action for Bird 1. After a while, Bird 1 gave Bird 2 tokens, voluntarily.



This is a clear sign of compassion, but is this technically “kindness” (and not compassion) and is kindness always an act? Plato argues that “kindness is more than deeds. It is an attitude, an expression, a look, a touch. It is anything that lifts another person.” This is a broader definition and suggests that kindness is not definitive, but is active, and is more a sense intended for goodness, which still applies as an umbrella term. Plato was a eudaimonist (a philosophy by which happiness is the highest aim of life) and all goods are undertaken to achieve this ultimate goal of happiness. Aristotle acknowledges that this “higher good” is always a disputed matter (a “kind” action differs depending on perspective) but everyone seems to agree that the word “eudaimonia” is always used to denote the highest good, and is typically recognised to be kindness.

Comte argues a case for altruism, a philosophy which is defined by google as “selfless concern for the well-being of others”. This is pretty close to the prior definition of kindness, and this altruistic mood can be seen in

animals too. Ants, for example, will sacrifice themselves for the queen’s offspring, which therefore improves the probability of survival. Is this kindness? I would argue that no, this isn’t kindness. This is a response hardwired into ants genetically, and therefore is an unconscious action. This then raises the question: can kindness be considered kindness if it is unconscious? In a strict sense, no, it can’t, as the traditional meaning of kindness is purposeful, and with no clear benefit to the self. My definition, therefore, of kindness would be “a conscious action taken to improve another’s circumstance, mood or situation, with no benefit to the self”. Some argue, (Socrates, for example) that all actions have some benefit to the self, whether conscious or unconscious. If one gives money to charity, one reason they do it (however indirectly) is because it makes them feel they have lived a more fulfilled life, which is a goal for all humans. This is a branch of psychological egoism, which implies the death of altruism, and therefore of the ability of humans genuinely to embody the construct of “kindness”.

Even with this striking portrayal of our nature, humans do not always act consciously to their benefit. However, I would reinforce that by saying unconsciously we are always striving for our improvement. Even if one accepts that all actions have some benefit to the self, actions can still be compassionate and friendly, but perhaps not “kind” in the strictly technical sense. These senses and emotions are universal, and can be felt by other forms of life. However, I would claim that kindness is a human construct which aims to engender compassionate, selfless actions, perhaps to restrict negative actions in times past, and serves as a template for ultimate “morality”. In this interpretation, kindness is a construct, but one created for the benefit of society. Ultimately, society is a better place when people strive to be “kind”, and society suffers when dominated by selfish motives.

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Kindness.
Pass it on.

kindehumans



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