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IS KINDNESS A VIRTUE?

Kristján Kristjánsson[1]

[1] University of Birmingham, UK

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ABSTRACT

This article swims against the stream of academic discourse by answer the title question in the negative. This contrarian answer is not meant to undermine the view that kindness is a good thing; neither is it, however, an example of a mere philosophical predilection for word play. I argue that understanding kindness as a virtue obscures rather than enlightens, for the reason that it glosses over various distinctions helping us make sense of moral language and achieving "virtue literacy". I survey some of the relevant psychological literature before moving on to philosophical sources. I subsequently delineate the alternative ways in which coherent virtue ethicists can say everything that they want to say about kindness by using much better entrenched and less bland terms. I offer a view of kindness as a cluster concept in the same sense as the Wittgensteinian concept of a game. Finally, I elicit some implications of this view for practical efforts at character education.

Keywords: virtue ethics; Aristotle; kindness; moral virtue; umbrella concept; cluster concept.

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Correspondence: k.kristjansson@bham.ac.uk

1. Introduction: Umbrella concept or cluster concept?

The question of whether kindness is a virtue may seem odd. In Google, the search string "kindness a virtue" elicits 514,000 hits. A quick look at the first dozen of those indicates that most answer the question in the affirmative—albeit typically indirectly, by assuming (without argument) that kindness is indeed a virtue; subsequently employing it as an example of a paradigmatic virtue when introducing virtue ethics of a religious or secular kind. Recently, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a series of radio programmes on the virtue of kindness, accompanying a large UK national research project. Moreover, in the VIA-model, the most widely used psychological system of virtues—self-described as the "social science equivalent of virtue ethics" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, 89)—kindness features among 24 strengths of character: more specifically as one of the three strengths (along with love and social intelligence) instantiating the overarching virtue of "humanity".

My aim in this article is to swim against the stream and answer the question in the negative. This contrarian answer is not meant to undermine the view that kindness is a good thing; neither is it, however, an example of mere philosophical pedantry: an ill-famed professional predilection for playing with words. I will be making the substantive claim that understanding kindness as a virtue obscures rather than enlightens, for the reason that it glosses over various distinctions helping us make sense of moral language and achieving what virtue ethicists call "virtue literacy" (Jubilee Centre 2022; cf. Vasalou 2012).

To elaborate upon what I mean by the title question, it is helpful to nuance it as follows: does the term "kindness" refer to (i.e., identify, pick out) a discrete disposition that can helpfully be called a "moral virtue"? It is this specific question that I propose to address and answer in the negative. My study will be conducted to a large extent within the parameters of what is commonly referred to as Aristotelian (or neo-Aristotelian, if updated by contemporary research findings) virtue ethics. The reason for this choice is simply that Aristotle offered the most rigorous specification of moral virtue available to us, and that the majority of current Western theorising about virtues has an Aristotelian provenance. However, most of what I have to say has a wider application and will, hopefully, carry traction also for anyone interested in the contemporary discourse about (moral) virtues that takes place outside of the charmed circle of Aristotelians.

The standard historical view of moral virtues is that they constitute settled *dispositions* (acquired states of character, or *hexeis*, in Aristotle's language), concerned with excellent choices and functioning in a number

of significant and distinguishable socio-moral spheres of human life that are conducive to human flourishing (Nussbaum 1988). For each virtue, the term "dispositional set" is perhaps more apt than "disposition", for each virtue is typically seen to comprise a unique set of perception/recognition, emotion, desire, motivation, behaviour, and comportment or style, applicable in the relevant sphere, where none of the factors can be evaluated in isolation. The person possessing the virtue of compassion, for example, *notices* easily situations in which a lot of others has been undeservedly compromised, *feels* for the needs of those who have suffered such undeserved misfortune, *desires* that their misfortune be reversed, *acts* (if humanly possible) for the relevant (ethical) reasons in ways conducive to that goal, and *exudes* an aura of empathy and care.

In addition to the above general conditions, Aristotle places a higher bar on a trait to constitute a moral virtue. It must 1) be driven by the right intrinsically motivating emotions;[1] 2) hit the golden mean between the extremes of excess and deficiency; 3) be performed knowingly, autonomously, and for the right reasons, overseen by the intellectual virtue of *phronesis*; 4) result from a 'firm and unchanging' state of character (see esp. Aristotle 1985, 40 [1105a30-33]); 5) include a clear behavioural component, not just a proclivity to behaviour as is the case for virtuous emotional traits. Thus, the various commendable emotional traits that Aristotle analyses in his *Rhetoric* (2007), such as compassion (*eleos*) and righteous indignation (*nemesis*), fail his strict test as full-blown virtues (see Kristjánsson 2018, ch. 1).

It could be argued that if I invoke Aristotle's strict conditions for a trait to constitute a virtue, my argument that kindness is not a moral virtue will only target straw men, as a) Aristotle himself did not designate kindness as a virtue, and b) most contemporary writings about kindness as a virtue do not apply Aristotle's criteria. Although neither a) nor b) are quite true—as a) Aristotle did discuss kindness as, at least, a virtuous emotion (see Section 3 below), and b) many philosophers who refer to kindness as a moral virtue do so from a standpoint that can only be described as Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian (see, e.g., McDowell 1979; Crisp 2008) —I will relax some of those strict conditions. In order for my definition of virtue to fit, for instance, with Peterson and Seligman's (2004) positive

[1] The only exception to this rule are the social-glue virtues of friendliness, truthfulness about oneself, and wit in casual social encounters that people nowadays associate with manners rather than morals (Aristotle 1985, 107–114 [1126b11–1128b9]). Aristotle obviously had no specific concept of the "moral" (as distinct from the "characterological") to work with.

psychological definition of virtues and character strengths,[2] I will leave conditions 2), 3), and 5) out of the equation. Thus, I omit the famous reference to the "golden mean", simply because it is surplus to my current requirements here, and I do not confine "moral virtue" to *phronetic* virtue, as Aristotle does in his official definition.[3] In any case, Aristotle is elsewhere happy to designate merely habituated developmental dispositions as virtues, although they have yet to become *phronesis*-infused complete virtues. Moreover, I am ready to specify the various positive emotional traits that Aristotle analyses in his *Rhetoric* (2007) as full-blown virtues, although he refrains from it there for the rather obscure reason, it seems, that they do not necessarily include an enacted behavioural element, as distinct from a behavioural proclivity (Kristjánsson 2018, ch. 1). Let me simply stipulate that my term "moral virtue" here also includes "virtuous emotions" as it does in the positive psychological system, in which various emotional traits, such as gratitude, make the grade as overarching or specific virtues. That makes my task in this article more demanding, however, because it does not allow me to reject kindness as a moral virtue for being merely a virtuous emotional disposition.

To resume the earlier thread, we saw that within virtue theories such as Aristotle's each virtue term (like "compassion") typically refers to a specific inter-connected dispositional set unique to a discrete experiential "sphere of human life" (Nussbaum 1988): say, in compassion, the sphere of undeserved misfortunes.[4] In Plato's system, but not Aristotle's, there is one moral *master virtue* trumping the others in cases of conflict (namely, justice); in Aristotle's there is, however, an intellectual *meta-virtue* that

[2] Their taxonomy is unusual from a philosophical perspective. They posit six overarching "virtues" and twenty-four subordinate empirically measurable "character strengths" through which the virtues are represented (Peterson and Seligman 2004, chs. 2–3). It must be admitted that the distinction between virtues and character strengths is not entirely clear; "character strengths" could just as well have been called "specific virtues", with the "virtues" understood as umbrella constructs on the understanding elaborated later in this section. In any case, all these traits would fall under Aristotle's definition of virtue as a stable character state, although Peterson and Seligman do not apply all of his strict criteria.

[3] Despite being heavily criticised for omitting the golden-mean architectonic, which creates various conceptual and moral problems (see, e.g., Ng and Tay 2020; cf. Morgan et al. 2015), I have not seen any responses from positive psychologists on why they insist that "the more is always the better" for every virtue. However, McGrath (2019) explains why positive psychology makes do without an intellectual virtue of *phronesis*. Interestingly, Peterson and Seligman (2004) retain the strict condition from Aristotle that virtues and character strengths must be intrinsically valuable: an unexpected concession given that instrumentalism about value is the dominant paradigm in psychology (Fowers 2010).

[4] Nussbaum (1996, 31) alters this to the sphere of outcomes not caused primarily by the sufferer's own culpable actions. Although that sphere does not coincide fully with the sphere of undeserved misfortunes, both presumed spheres are well circumscribed with respect to discrete experiential contexts. Notice that the condition about virtues referring to distinct sphere of human experience applies to all moral virtues, be those complete (*phronetic*) or still only habituated.

oversees all the moral (and civic) virtues and adjudicates upon potential virtue conflicts: the above-mentioned *phronesis*. To complicate matters, Aristotle also makes space for what I call "umbrella virtues" that incorporate more than one moral virtue. Those assume two main forms. The first is that of a virtue which, while possessing some unique content of its own, also incorporates all the other moral virtues, and "does not arise without them", but "magnifies" them; this is the virtue of great-heartedness or magnanimity (*megalopsychia*) (1985, 99 [1123a1–3]).[5] Second, there are virtues that simply combine the content and moral salience of other underlying virtues without adding anything substantive to them; the prime example in Aristotle (2007) is justice (*nemesis*) as a virtuous emotion bringing together under one umbrella the four underlying virtues having to do with pleasure at deserved, and pain at undeserved, fortune or misfortune (see Kristjánsson 2006, ch. 3).[6]

In light of these complications, it is in order to extend slightly our guiding question: does the term "kindness" refer to a discrete disposition that can helpfully be called a "moral virtue", either in the specific sense of a single virtue or as an "umbrella term" referring to a unified combination of specific related virtues? Without getting ahead of my argument in Section 2, where I pinpoint the fuzziness of ordinary-language uses of "kindness" that have made their way into social scientific studies, I gather that my answer to the first part of the question will not sound unduly radical. It requires no deep scrutiny to notice that "kindness" does not designate a sphere of human experience with anywhere near the same type of specificity as, say, compassion (on either Aristotle's or Nussbaum's understanding, recall Footnote 4 above), or—to take another moral virtue, generosity: the sphere of appropriate giving. The view that kindness is an umbrella virtue, like the emotional virtue of justice (*nemesis*), sounds initially more plausible. However, my intention is to reject that part of the question also; hence, refusing kindness the label of a 'moral virtue' on either understanding.[7]

To anticipate, my overall view on kindness is that it is a *cluster concept* in the same sense as the Wittgensteinian concept of a game (Wittgenstein

[5] *Megalopsychia* is only available to people with considerable material riches and certain larger-than-life personalities. However, as an enabler of great deeds, it also places psycho-moral burdens on them––to be constantly at others' beck and call—and can thus be characterised as a burdened virtue.

[6] Somewhat confusingly, Aristotle (2007, 1386b–1387a) also uses *nemesis* as a term for one of the four underlying virtues, namely pain at someone's undeserved good fortune, or what I called "righteous indignation" above.

[7] A reviewer referred me to a recent paper by David Carr (2022) on love as a non-virtue. Although love is in some ways an easier target to hit at in this sense than kindness, because of its increasingly eclectic and fuzzy uses, I think that much of what Carr argues about love applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to kindness: namely, that the more kindness appears to resemble a virtue, the less it looks like kindness in the ordinary sense, and vice versa.

1973). Cluster concepts distinguish themselves from umbrella concepts by not simply collating a number of related characteristics under one umbrella. The same cluster concept can refer to a number of fairly distinguishable phenomena that do share some vague similarity but cannot be easily defined or categorised as tokens of the same type. A cluster concept is specified by a weighted list of criteria, such that no one of these criteria is either necessary or sufficient for membership. Without a shared common cognitive core, what connects the criteria are family resemblances: for example, tennis as a game is connected to chess in the sense of having two players; it is, however connected to football because both are played with a ball. It is difficult to come up with a comprehensive definition of a "game", although Suits (2005) makes a healthy stab at it. Yet the possibility of a reasonable-sounding comprehensive definition of a concept *C* does not mean that *C* is not a cluster concept. Google tells us that a game is "an activity that one engages in for amusement or fun", but that definition is clearly liable to counter-examples.[8] What about professional football qua *game*; and what about the mind-games people play to manipulate one another? Contrast this with decathlon, which is a specific game/sport that shares conceptually many of the same logical/structural characteristics as Aristotle's *megalopsychia*. The term "decathlon" thus functions as a conceptual umbrella rather than a cluster concept: it incorporates other sports but synergises them in a certain way (see Kristjánsson and Fowers 2024a).

I argue that "kindness" is more akin to "game" in this respect than to "decathlon". To be sure, the word "kindness" conjures up a broad image of positive personal characteristics, but these characteristics are eclectic; they have very little in common structurally except being "morally good" in a sense that is too thin to carry weight within standard forms of virtue ethics. My core methodological assumption here is that the success criteria for an account of kindness as a virtue (in addition to tallying with some basic linguistic intuitions about the meaning of the word "kindness") are that it *either* specifies a disposition with the required specificity to constitute a single virtue—inter alia, by identifying a distinct sphere that it is "about"—or a broader disposition that collates, and possibly synergises, a number of specific dispositions aiming cognitively at the same broad sphere but coming at it from different directions. My claim is that existing accounts of kindness fail to satisfy either of these criteria. To evidence this claim, I survey some of the relevant psychological literature in Section 2 before moving on to philosophical sources in Section 3. For those who

[8] Notably, the idea of a family resemblance can of course be conveyed without the example of a game, i.e. just by pointing to the resemblance of family members sitting around the table at a typical family dinner!

hoped that the latter would help bring kindness talk back from its social scientific "language on holiday" (Wittgenstein 1973, §38, 232) and infuse it with conceptual rigour, Section 3 may be a disappointment. In Section 4, I address the "so-what" question, constantly hanging over conceptual studies like the sword of Damocles. I try to give a clear answer on why this analysis matters.

2. Recent psychological sources on kindness

There are abundant sources to choose from here, and I need to be selective. The most obvious place to start is with the Values-in-Action (VIA) model, as that has proved to be hugely popular with psychologists and educators since its inception (Peterson and Seligman 2004). I will leave the more general critical philosophical and psychological discourses about it[9] out of the current purview and focus solely on its inclusion and analysis of kindness.

In the VIA-model, kindness is one of three lower-order virtues appearing under the high-order virtue of *humanity*; the other two are love and social intelligence. In the chapter on kindness in the original *Handbook* (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 325–335), the title word "kindness" has "generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, and niceness" in brackets, apparently meaning that kindness serves as a general designator for all of them. I explained the general relationship between virtues and character strengths in positive psychology in Footnote 2 above. It is clear from Peterson and Seligman's taxonomy (2004, ch. 1) that "humanity" is an umbrella concept that is meant to cover the extensions of its three underlying strengths, including kindness. It is not as easy to decipher the relationship between kindness and all the underlying terms that are seen as instantiations of kindness. Any philosophically inclined reader will find reason to pause on the first page of this account when various statements are listed that a kind person "would strongly endorse" (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 326). Those include some uncontroversially kindness-sounding ones, such as "People in need require care", but also a more loaded statement such as "All human beings are of equal worth". That latter statement has, as far as I can see, nothing to do with kindness but all to do with respect. An elitist or a radical nationalist, who believes some people

[9] For the former criticism, see Kristjánsson (2013). Regarding the latter, positive psychology is often criticised for not having published the primary data from around the world that presumably went into the creation of the original virtue taxonomy. In any case, subsequent factor analyses of millions of self-reported survey data from the VIA measure consistently fail to reproduce the original six-factor structure, but normally yield just three factors, coinciding broadly with the moral/civic, intellectual, and performative (cf. McGrath 2015). For a recent passionate defence of the VIA-model, see McGrath (2022).

are of less worth than he is (and perhaps his fellow nationals), can still consider kindness the right attitude to treat the "inferior" people. The plot thickens further when Christian *agape* (love, charity) and Buddhist *karuna* (compassion) are introduced as being in the same "network", for those hark back to quite different world-views. When, on top of that, David Hume's sympathy is invoked by Peterson and Seligman as one more member of the kindness set, Wittgenstein's language-on-holiday complaint about social science really begins to hit home. The way all of this is formulated is that kindness constitutes a "network of closely related terms indicating a common orientation of the self toward the other" (Peterson and Seligman 2004, 326). That seems to indicate that kindness is, indeed, understood here as a cluster concept rather than an umbrella concept, although this is not made explicit.

As they come to listing possible measures of kindness, for practical purposes, the authors correctly point out that there are not many of those around. Hence, they rely on validated tests of altruism instead. However, given that standard psychological accounts of altruism in psychology typically consider moral reasoning and social responsibility among its main components (e.g., Batson et al. 1986), the awkwardness of testing kindness via altruism soon becomes apparent. Google defines altruism as "*disinterested and selfless* concern for the well-being of others" (my italics). For once, a simple dictionary definition seems to do a good philosophical job. The striking difference between an altruistic and a kind motive is that the former is disinterested but the latter is interested (i.e. emotion-imbued). The textbook (pantomime?) altruist is a Kantian who, while not motivated by other-regarding emotions, relies on a universalist principle to steer herself into helping others.[10] This is where the "social responsibility" and detached "moral reasoning" components enter in. Moreover, this is precisely why kindness cannot be an umbrella concept containing altruism; the two are largely incompatible as moral characteristics. For however vague the word "kindness" is in everyday discourse, it is at least clear enough to exclude Kantian-styled altruism.[11]

Fortunately, positive psychology has moved on since 2004, and a current website (Miller 2019) presents a much more nuanced and thoughtful account of the supposed virtue of kindness. This website freely

[10] Philips and Taylor (2009, 41) even ascribe the elision of kindness in the 19th century to the rise of Kantianism and Protestantism. For a while, they argue, kindness became the prerogative of "clergymen, romantic poets and women".

[11] There are other philosophical and lay uses of "altruism" that do not exclude an emotional motivation. However, the tests mentioned by Peterson and Seligman (2004) seem to have a Kantian/Kohlbergian provenance.

acknowledges the complications and controversies regarding a definition of "kindness". Nonetheless, it offers the following specification:

> (…) a benevolent and helpful action intentionally directed towards another person, it is motivated by the desire to help another and not to gain explicit reward or to avoid explicit punishment. (Miller 2019)

This specification serviceably seems to rule out Kantian altruism; however, it comes perilously close to equating kindness with prosociality, which is a social scientific term that virtue ethicists tend to avoid. Although I have already indicated that kindness does not lend itself to an explicit definition with necessary and sufficient conditions, any more than the concept of a game or other cluster concepts, the specification on offer here seems to clash with at least some fairly common understandings of kindness. For example: (a) Why define it as a state rather than a trait? (b) Why only "directed towards another person" but not towards animals/pets? (c) Why must it be manifested as an action? Surely, sometimes people are barred from acting on their kind motivations for various reasons (e.g., disabilities, a lack of resources); and in some cases kindness is best displayed by intentional inaction: withdrawing from a charged scene and allowing others to sort out their affairs. (d) Why must there be no expectation of a reward? What about the famous "double benefit" that is meant to be derived from young people's volunteering; does it detract from the merit of their kind acts if they are *also* motivated by the hope those will enhance their CVs for the future?

I admit that these are quick-fire responses, and that Miller's specification could possibly be amended to take account of them. However, even after such tweaks, the specification does not come anywhere close to satisfying either success criteria for a definition of a virtue, set out in Section 1. Going from the frying pan of trying to define an ill-definable construct, the author later jumps straight into the conceptual fire by claiming that kindness and compassion are, in the end, one and the same thing. Whether one understands compassion along Aristotle's restricted lines as referring only to pain at another's *undeserved* bad fortune,[12] or makes it more inclusive by understanding it as pain at another's bad fortune *tout court* (namely, as sympathy), compassion is clearly a much narrower concept than kindness (cf. Crisp 2008, 244).

[12] Aristotle thinks that pain at deserved bad fortune (that we would normally refer to nowadays as pity) is a vice: namely, the excess of compassion (see further in Kristjánsson 2018, ch. 4).

Let us now turn to a recent attempt to design a psychological instrument to measure kindness—ameliorating the previously mentioned lacuna in the psychometric field. Canter, Youngs, and Yaneva (2017) administered a 40-item self-report questionnaire to 165 people and came up with three main factors of kindness: as benign tolerance, empathic responsivity, and principled proaction. While I acknowledge the relevance of this work and all the effort that has gone into it, it is no secret that the quality of the factors elicited depends on the credibility of the original items with which participants are presented (in an exploratory factor analysis). The authors concede that the items had a varied provenance: pilot discussions, items used in previous studies, and theoretical issues identified in the literature. Some of items are bound to raise philosophical eyebrows. For example, one wonders why the item "I admit when I don't know something" (falling under "benign tolerance") should have been included in the first place. That seems to be about intellectual humility, not kindness—however broadly one understands the latter term. Similarly, "I open doors to let people through" conveys a sense of agreeableness or politeness (a distinct Aristotelian-style virtue of civility or considerateness, see Kristjánsson 2023), rather than kindness. Furthermore, most of the items falling under "principled proaction" seem to be more easily relatable to generosity (again, a clearly demarcated Aristotelian virtue) more so than kindness: for instance, "I give to charity". Without wanting to detract from the merits of this exercise, I consider the most important finding to be the authors' concession that kindness is not readily construed as a single, structured concept.

Any credible psycho-moral concept has to pass a test of developmental adequacy; we must be able to say something about how it develops and, consequently, how it can be educated. Therefore, Tina Malti's recent (2021) article on the development of kindness is potentially of great interest for present purposes. I learned a lot from this article, but not so much about the development of kindness specifically as about the development of a person's moral capacities in general. Malti begins with such a broad definition of kindness (as relating to "the precariousness of every human life and the beauty of imperfection" as well as entailing "feelings of respect for all others and their dignity": 2021, 630) that it is almost impossible to think of any moral developmental construct that does not fall under this specification. She divides her discussion up into explorations of kind emotions, kind cognitions, and kind behaviours. That is a helpful conceptualisation, but given the extreme permissiveness of the original definition of "kindness" (which arguably goes even further than the vagueness of ordinary language allows), we end up with a veritable smorgasbord of constructs and their developmental trajectories. Does kindness lie somehow at their intersection? I am not sure, and Malti does

not persuade us that this is the case. Particularly worrying from an Aristotelian perspective is her insistence that each of the three components can be self- as well as other-oriented; thus, making much of constructs such as "self-kindness". Those will sound fairly alien to most virtue ethicists, however, be those Aristotelian or not.[13]

All in all, then, psychological studies of kindness have not succeeded in identifying a concept of kindness with a clear common core, nor have they made a strong case for kindness as a helpful umbrella concept, approaching a common core from different directions. Indeed, psychologists have not made much progress in tidying up the vagaries of ordinary language. Yet it is clear that their intention is to conceptualise, operationalise, and measure a lay concept of kindness as a virtue, and they frequently use the "virtue" word. The image of kindness that emerges from contemporary psychology is, however, far from that of either a specific virtue or a discrete umbrella-like virtue trait.

3. Some philosophical sources on kindness

Given that some of Wittgenstein's haughtiness towards social science seems to ring true in the case of kindness, can philosophers do any better? Obviously, for virtue ethicists, at least of Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian persuasion, the natural entry point will be in Aristotle's own texts. Kindness does not emerge in the (non-exhaustive) list of virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It does, however, appear in the analyses of various virtuous emotions in the *Rhetoric*. I have already dismissed, albeit cursorily, Aristotle's own misgivings about considering those as full-blown virtues, so we may appear initially to have hit the jackpot here. Indeed, many of the things Aristotle says about kindness in his uncharacteristically quick treatment (2007, 137–139 [1385a16–1385b11]) seem to give succour to the idea that kindness does indeed fit into the architectonic of a virtue. It is defined as helpfulness towards someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself, but for that of the person helped. Although the analysis is elliptical in an Aristotelian sense in that the excess and deficiency forms are not enlisted, it does not seem to be a tall order to add the missing bits and pieces.

Unfortunately, this impression is illusory. Although the standard translation of the emotional virtue explored here, *kharis* in Greek, is

[13] Cf., e.g., Peter Geach's well-known remarks about self-love as a potential virtue: "A man's self-concern is unworthy of the name of love: and if it were love, the man who thinks he is trying to extend that sort of personal interest even to all the other persons he knows will pretty certainly be kidding himself" (1977, 74).

"kindness" or "kindliness" (see, e.g., the 2007 translation, while it rightly notes that the word has various meanings, p. 137), David Konstan (2006, ch. 7) has argued persuasively that the specific meaning of *kharis* in the *Rhetoric* is the inclination to return favours received, namely gratitude. Indeed, Aristotle is not analysing the emotion of *kharis* here at all, but rather *ekhô kharin*: the kindly feeling one experiences when receiving a gift. It is no wonder, then, that Aristotle is quick to deliver his account of this virtuous emotion as a discrete one, for gratitude constitutes a fairly specific state and trait with clear cognitive and motivational components (see Kristjánsson 2018, ch. 3). Aristotle, however, offers no help to us in specifying kindness—on contemporary understandings—as a virtue.

Despite kindness appearing in almost uncountable (in Google Scholar) philosophical writings about virtues and virtue ethics,[14] I tried hard but failed to identify a single philosophical article that sets out to define kindness explicitly as an Aristotelian moral virtue, with its standard components and parameters, although many seem to assume an Aristotelian architectonic of virtue implicitly (see, e.g., Crisp 2008). The closest I came to an explicit understanding of kindness as an Aristotelian virtue was an article by John McDowell (1979), a classic and much-quoted one. Although the article is not cited mainly for its focus on kindness, but rather for its account of the uncodifiability of virtues in general, McDowell takes kindness throughout as the paradigmatic example of a moral virtue to which his general account will then apply. One will look in vain for a clear specification of kindness in this article. Yet McDowell says about kindness that the

> (…) kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour. The deliverances of reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge and (…) a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness (McDowell 1979, 331–332).

The problem is that McDowell does not specify what exactly is "specialised" in those specialised sensitivities towards kindness, although he later says those have to do with "proper attentiveness to others' feelings" (1979, 333). But then, again, what counts as "proper" here? McDowell seems simply to have chosen kindness in this article as an illustration, because of its prevalence in ordinary language, without taking account of the fact that kindness is not a good example of the kinds of virtues whose incarnations flower in Aristotle's virtue ethics.

[14] The search term "kindness AND virtue AND philosophy" elicit 289,000 hits.

Quite a different take on kindness can be found in Alan Wilson's (2017) article on how to avoid the conflation of moral and intellectual virtues. As with McDowell, kindness is not the main topic of Wilson's article. However, it enters his argument in a way that is highly pertinent for present purposes. Wilson tries to contrive a way out of the conundrum of how to distinguish systematically between moral and intellectual virtues when the dividing line between them seems to be thin. When exactly, for example, is honesty an intellectual and when a moral virtue? Wilson's solution is motivation-based: intellectual virtues can be identified by their shared motivation for cognitive contact with reality whereas moral virtues are identified by the characteristic motivations of justice and kindness.

Wilson's solution, while ingenious, is outside of the present purview. What matters is his definition of kindness as a broad motivation to protect and promote (others') well-being. I think he hits the nail on the head to understand kindness as a broad motivation of this kind.[15] Far from being antithetical to my view of kindness as a cluster concept, Wilson's characterisation actually supports it. Understood as a broad motivation, kindness attached itself to various attitudes, virtues, beliefs, and gestures—just as the broad motivation to have fun attaches itself to various rituals and practices that we call "games". We refer to the plethora of these kindness-as-a-motivation-attached phenomena as being "kind". There is nothing wrong with that usage. However, these items are too varied to fall under a single umbrella of an overarching virtue that we could call "kindness".[16] Rather, they are part of a cluster concept whose items are connected by their vague family resemblance of being similarly motivated, while otherwise having very little in common:[17] compare, say, giving a

[15] It could be argued that not all kindness is even virtue ethically relevant at all; consider "light-weight" forms of kindness such as smiling kindly at the shopkeeper, which seem to have to do with good manners rather than morals. However, interestingly enough, Aristotle failed to make a distinction between manners and morals, and considered friendliness in casual social interactions to be morally (i.e., characterologically) virtuous, even if not accompanied by any underlying virtuous emotions (Aristotle 1985, 107–108 [1126b11-29]).

[16] Notice that sharing the motivation of kindness does not come anywhere close to the criterion of an umbrella concept of having a "shared common cognitive core". If it did, all the moral virtues would simply be instances of one umbrella virtue. However, that is not what Wilson (2017) is arguing. The relationship of generosity and compassion—although having a shared motivation of kindness driving them—is much closer to that of tennis and chess (which share the motivation of wanting to play) than that of, say, righteous indignation and satisfied indignation (which share the cognitive content of aiming towards deservingness). Wilson's account, as I understand it, is therefore not to be best interpreted as an argument for kindness as an umbrella concept. That said, Wilson does refer casually in his article to kindness as "a virtue", without any argument, perhaps simply relying on the received wisdom from ordinary language. He did the same in an earlier article (Wilson 2016).

[17] It could be argued that, on this understanding, kindness is not a true cluster concept because acts of kindness have one necessary feature in common, unifying everything in the set: namely motivation. However, the fact that traits *x, y*, and *z* share the same motivation does not establish either that they are about the same sphere or that they all fall under the same umbrella concept. Analogously, in a way, all

large chunk of your income to charity versus holding the elevator door open for an arriving person in a department store. Wilson carefully explains how a virtue such as compassion counts as a moral virtue in the first place because of its containing the overarching motivation of kindness, but he avoids positing a distinct sphere of human activity (in Nussbaum's 1988 sense) to which a moral virtue of kindness uniquely refers—which is just as good, because it would be impossible to identify such a sphere.

4. Why this matters: Educational ramifications

Virtue ethics is perhaps most influential these days in its practical incarnation as character education, both within schools and professional ethics education (Jubilee Centre 2022). This extension of virtue ethics is very much in line with Aristotle's contention that the purpose of moral inquiry "is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us" (1985, 35 [1103b27-29]). However, as inconvenient as a fuzzy definition of a virtue term is for philosophical and psychological studies, it is virtually devastating for the process of carving out character educational interventions. For those to work, we need to be pedantically clear about what sort of concept we are working with, how that refers to a specific psycho-moral quality, and what strategies are most effective in cultivating this quality in classroom contexts. Kindness is, I argue, particularly badly fit for that purpose.

Recall some of the specific moral virtues and virtuous emotions that Aristotle demarcates in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric*: compassion, generosity, agreeableness, friendship. These are specified with meticulous precision, the main focus being on their cognitive content: what they are *about*. What is more, Aristotle provides systematic advice about how to educate them as virtues. Although he is much more detailed on the early stages of that process, where the cultivation takes place through emotional contagion/sensitisation, social osmosis, emulation of moral exemplars, and habituation (learning by doing), he also gives clues about how to infuse those virtues with *phronesis* at a later stage, once the soul of the student is prepared for metacognitive intellectual pursuits. It is no wonder that the most advanced theories of character education in modernity have done little more than systematise Aristotle's account as

moral traits are motivated by a concern for what psychologists would call "prosociality", but it would not be helpful to claim that they are all therefore instantiations of a single umbrella concept; consider, e.g., moral traits as distinct as (proper) pride and (proper) compassion.

that of "caught", "taught", and "sought" method of character cultivation and bring it up to date with empirical evidence (Jubilee Centre 2022).

To be sure, the four virtues that I mentioned above could all be called "kind", but it does not add anything to an educational account of those well-entrenched dispositions to try to educate them together under one label of "kindness"—let alone add kindness to them as a discrete additional virtue. Quite the opposite, it simply waters down the educational content. Admittedly, virtues "hunt in packs", as it is often put, and they form various conceptual and substantive alliances (see, e.g., Gulliford and Roberts 2018). However, there is no convenient conceptual umbrella bringing all "kind" virtues together; they serve very different purposes in the moral landscape although they share a vague common moral motivation.

I am not saying that we should expunge the term "kindness" from our general moral or educational vocabularies, any more than we should get rid of the word "game". However, I doubt that the term is salient within (broadly) Aristotelian virtue ethics in carrying significant substantive, explanatory, or developmental weight. I worry that invoking it in virtue talk may undermine rather than enhance virtue literacy.[18] Educationally, there is also much less to learn from Aristotle about the cultivation of general moral motivations. Even after *phronesis* has developed, helping us to adjudicate upon virtue conflicts between, for instance, honesty and compassion, the primary moral motivation continues to stem from the relevant discrete virtues (Kristjánsson and Fowers 2024b). *Phronesis* may furnish us with a more general motivation to be good persons, committed to *eudaimonia*, but Aristotle is very cagey about how that general blueprint-of-the-good-life-forming motivation emerges, except noting that it is not inborn (although the capacity to develop it is) and that it forms only if we are brought up "in good habits" (Aristotle 1985, 6 [1095b4–5]). *Mutatis mutandis*, if Aristotle had written about a general motivation to be kind, he would probably have been equally reticent about it. As practically minded as he was, he was mainly interested in the discrete character traits that can be inculcated, honed, and later sought and revised by the students themselves. We know that he was very pessimistic—perhaps unduly so—about radical moral conversions later in life, and seemed to believe that the general foundations of what is nowadays referred to as "moral identity" are mostly the result of the ethical environment which nurtures us, and hence deeply susceptible to moral luck. To be sure, among the "caught" methods that Aristotle mentions as forming the core of character education is the

[18] For a spirited defence of the importance of coherent virtue language for the development of virtue, see Vasalou (2012).

emulation of moral exemplars; so one could envisage an Aristotle-inspired character intervention focused on getting students to read about exemplars of kindness, reflect on how such folks might behave in their circumstances, and try to emulate them. Yet, in his talk about emulation, Aristotle reminds us not to copy the emulated person *qua* person, but rather to understand and emulate the specific virtuous traits that she represents (see various references in Kristjánsson 2007, ch. 7). That cannot be done without a clear grasp of the relevant virtue; and if there is no discrete virtue of kindness, as I have argued, we might end up with the counter-productive consequences that are likely to ensue when teachers try to develop positive traits in students indiscriminately and without the necessary conceptual nuance (Morgan et al. 2015). So, while there are surely some valid ways in which the meaning of cluster concepts such as kindness can be conveyed to moral learners, for instance through "caught" methods of language osmosis, they would never, on an Aristotelian account, be accorded the same priority as that of more discrete concepts referring to discrete or umbrella-like moral virtues.

Of course, there is no reason for contemporary virtue ethicists and character educators to take Aristotle as the last word on those issues (see Kristjánsson 2020, ch. 6). As a die-hard methodological naturalist, he would encourage us to revise his theories in light of new empirical findings. However, as the tenor of my above argument suggests, I am not sanguine about the possibility of some sort of retrieval of a virtue of kindness being able to aid us in those revisionary endeavours.

5. Concluding remark

One of Lord Rutherford's famous aphorisms is that all academic work is either science or stamp collecting. Conceptual analysis, as conducted above, can either aim at "carving nature at its joints" or arranging a "stamp collection" in a more orderly and systematic fashion. I have only aimed at the latter here. Unfortunately, conceptual analysis has fallen out of favour of late in analytic philosophy. Apart from making a substantive point about what kindness is—in the sense of being "best understood as"—in this article, I hope to have demonstrated that even "stamp arrangement" of this sort does have practical reverberations. Some arrangements are, for example, educationally productive but others much less so. I have argued that understanding kindness as a discrete moral virtue falls into the latter category. That is one of the reasons, albeit not the only one, for rejecting the view that kindness is a moral virtue.

The strongest counter-argument to the rejection of kindness as a moral virtue, as set out in this article, would be to attack the "success criteria" for an account of a disposition to count as a moral virtue set out at the end of Section 1. For example, is it necessary for an account of kindness to match our intuitions about the concept, or could a radically revisionary account of kindness (on which kindness is still a virtue) meet the challenge posed here? Moreover, if an account does need to match certain intuitions, is it obvious which intuitions we should appeal to? There are points in this article where I assumed the credibility of intuitions such as that our use of the word kindness is at least clear enough to exclude Kantian altruism and that compassion is clearly a much narrower concept than kindness. These assumptions could be questioned. To anticipate and resist such a possible counter-argument would require a much longer venture into the methodology of conceptual analyses than I have space for here. It suffices to repeat at this final stage the Aristotelian point that one of the most important aims of virtue talk is to make substantive claims relevant to moral development and moral education. It is difficult to envisage how divorcing an account of kindness as a virtue from intuitions embedded in ordinary language would further those essentially practical aims.

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