

In Defense of Kindness in the Age of Cynicism

As a symptom of being overexposed to the world in the form of a phone, our generation has become depressingly jaded in life before we're even legally allowed to vote. When a video of someone buying hundreds of burgers and fries to hand out to the homeless goes viral, it's deemed to be another fake stunt done for views and clout. This Nietzschean sentiment transfers to our own good deeds, creating a shallow mockery of a philosophical question of trees and sounds: if there is no phone to record a good deed, does it even matter? As we begin to lose sight of the forest from the trees, we believe good deeds will not earn us anything more than skepticism and scorn from our peers. However, this novel human instinct that dismisses kindness as attention-seeking is detrimental to society. True kindness can still exist, and understanding that is enough to maintain empathy in a world that often feels indifferent.

All the criticisms of social media kindness and its fake nature are valid, as they definitely have a detrimental effect on the public perception of kindness. Yet, concluding that all kindness seen through the screen is fake assumes the worst possible in humanity. Of course, it's easy to suspect these videos are fake and be cynical—just as how easy it is to be racist, to be homophobic, to be sexist, to be xenophobic. It's so much easier to give in, to take on all these negative characteristics, as complacency and stagnation breed a shallow nirvana. Kindness, on the other hand, is difficult. It requires a quiet kind of strength that we must fight for within ourselves to preserve the good in the world. And in that way, while the line between true acts of kindness and performance may be blurred with social media skits, we must get rid of the absurd idea that no one can be good just for the sake of good. By choosing the strength of kindness and hope, we should not hate, but instead try to see the best in people.

Additionally, even if the recorded kindness is fabricated and even monetized, a public

good can still arise. There is an influx of hateful content in social media, ranging from anti-immigrant rhetoric (which acts as barely disguised dog whistles) to “masculine” culture that demands women to go back to being housewives. With that in mind, the very fact that an act of kindness is being performed and spreading means that the “stunt” is ultimately good. Now, there may be an argument that there may be harm in flooding Instagram reels and TikToks with shallow “kind” acts as an ineffective bandaid that also creates complacency, but it is still much more preferable than the alternative of spewing the aforementioned hatred. A real act of kindness does not have to be done with entirely a purity of heart but with the ability to help another. Not to mention, the people in the videos are doing more good than anyone criticizing the videos for being fake while lying on the couches of their homes scrolling, thinking “they just want to get famous” without doing anything to help the homeless themselves. And if society comes to reject all goodness as being just for performance, it risks encouraging a world where no one tries to help others at all, even if it is done for publicity.

So instead of obsessing over whether a good deed is “real” or “fake,” we should ask: is it helpful? When society becomes too focused on authenticity, we risk discouraging people from taking any action at all—out of fear of being exposed as fake. The pressure to seem perfectly sincere becomes paralyzing. It shifts the focus from impact to image, which ironically makes kindness less likely to occur. This moral purity culture is especially harmful for young people growing up online, who want to do good but are afraid of being torn down for “virtue signaling.” But imperfect action is still better than no action. We don’t need saints—we need people willing to try. If we keep insisting that every good deed must come from a spotless heart, we may end up creating a culture where no one dares to be good at all.