



A Sense of the Good

Sandy Bannikoff

December 1997

Class: Plato

Socrates: Greetings, Sandy, my friend! I have just been looking for someone to talk to and I notice you are sitting here all by yourself. Would you mind the company and conversation of an old man?

Sandy: Socrates! You are the perfect person for me to talk to right now! Please, sit down.

Socrates: Is something the matter?

Sandy: Kindness.

Socrates: Kindness? Has someone been unkind to you?

Sandy: No, it's that people are unkind in general!! I know kindness isn't something you think much about, you're interested in virtue, human excellence, which is more sublime than kindness. But, I ask you, Socrates, *how could someone be motivated to cultivate excellence if they didn't already have a sense of kindness?* A person who is not perfectly excellent but is kind is not bothersome to have around; whereas a person who is neither excellent nor kind is intolerable!!

Socrates: By Zeus! When I first arrived, a moment ago, you looked sullen. Now, flames have leapt up behind your eyes, and you are on the edge of your seat! Your passion inspires me! I would love nothing more than to discuss kindness with you, my friend. But, first, tell me, why do you think that an 'intolerable person', as you say, is intolerable because they are not kind rather than because they are not excellent?

Sandy: I think kindness is more basic than excellence. It takes an incredible amount of self-discipline and dedication to become excellent; whereas even children can be kind. This is what bothers me: you could have two children from the same family and one will be kind and the other unkind. Kindness can be taught; yet, there are people who never learn. Why is it that some people learn and others don't?

Socrates: You know how to teach people to be kind?!! As to why not everyone learns, I wish I could tell you. It is very difficult to say, especially given that you say it's something you know how to teach. This is wonderful!! Please, do not keep me in suspense! Tell me, how do you teach kindness?

Sandy: Well, it's not so much that *I* can teach it; experience teaches us how to be kind. It doesn't take much time in the world to learn what makes you feel bad and what makes you feel good. Kindness is just treating everyone in such a way as to not make anyone feel bad, being careful not to hurt anyone.

Socrates: Experience shows us how to be kind by showing what makes us feel good and what makes us feel bad?

Sandy: Yes, that's the first part. Then you realize that everyone else is pretty much the same as you are. Then it's just a matter of treating everyone the way you'd like to be treated.

Socrates: Well, suppose for a moment that I am not at all fond of mornings. In fact, suppose I hate mornings so much that every time somebody says "Good Morning, Socrates", I cringe. On your account, since morning salutations make me feel bad, I should never greet anyone in the morning. Is that right?

Sandy: Not exactly. If someone greets you, you should greet that person in return. It's impolite to ignore people.

Socrates: Experience also show that we ought to be polite?

Sandy: Yes, because when someone is impolite to you, rude to you, it makes you feel bad. Rudeness conflicts with kindness.

Socrates: You said that to be kind I should not treat others in a way that would make me feel bad should I be the one receiving the treatment. That means that I should not wish people 'Good Morning'. Now you say that I am bound by politeness to wish people 'Good Morning.' So, which is it that we learn from experience?

Sandy: Well, we learn them both from experience.

Socrates: Does experience also show us when we should be polite even though it goes against what we feel? Does it show us when it would be better to go with what we feel at the risk of seeming impolite? Or does it show us that we ought to be polite no matter what?

Sandy: Well...I'm not sure that it's good to be polite *no matter what*. Oh, Socrates! I thought that experience taught us to be kind and the problem was that, for some reason, not everyone learned. Now I don't know what to think. Let's talk about something else.

Socrates: I think it's just that we have proceeded too quickly; we should not give up. I do think there is truth in what you have said. In particular, I am interested in your question: *How could someone be motivated to cultivate excellence if they didn't already have a sense of kindness?* You suggested that experience teaches us to be kind. However, there is far too much involved in experience to see how it leads to such a sublime feature of character as kindness without first determining which parts of experience are relevant to our question. Do you agree?

Sandy: I guess.

Socrates: So, we are trying to find out what experience shows us about how to behave, right?

Sandy: Aren't we trying to find out how one learns to be kind?

Socrates: Do you agree, though, that before we can address that question we will first have to answer two other questions: *How do we learn to behave*, and *What is kindness?*

Sandy: Yes, that sounds like a good method.

Socrates: And even though we have not determined what kindness is, can we agree that it is manifested through behaviour?

Sandy: Yes, we can agree to that.

Socrates: Do you also agree, then, that a good starting point would be to determine what influences our behaviour in general? Then, once we have before us what influences us generally, we will return to the question of learning kindness?

Sandy: That sounds good, Socrates. Where do we begin?

Socrates: Well, let's begin simply, with things we all have in common. For example, we all walk on two feet, and we all communicate with language. Do you think these things pertain to learned behaviour?

Sandy: Walking and talking, I think, are biological traits.

Socrates: Can they not be distinguished from something like breathing because they are acquired traits?

Sandy: Yes, you're right.

Socrates: Before a child learns how to walk, it probably falls over at least a hundred times! Do you agree that learning to walk is a combination of mastering the necessary coordination and balance while, on the biological side, muscles and bones are strengthening?

Sandy: Yes, and someone has to stand them on their feet and show them what their legs can do. They don't just naturally stand up.

Socrates: Yes, that's right. And do you think it is the same with language? That learning a language is similar to walking because it involves mastering a technique which requires sustained effort on the part of the learner and the encouragement and guidance of those who are already masters?

Sandy: Except that talking comes naturally and walking doesn't. Everyone is inclined to use their vocal chords; it's just figuring out which words to use that requires effort. And, you never really stop learning language; there are always more words to learn and better ways to express yourself.

Socrates: Yes, everyone is inclined to speak, as you say, and language is open ended, as it were. But, what is clear is that learning what to say involves a process of socialization. Do you think, then, that socialization is another feature of our experience with relates to how we learn to behave?

Sandy: Most certainly.

Socrates: Would you agree that the initial stimulus to speak is biological, and the language spoken is determined by the group?

Sandy: Yes.

Socrates: And this is necessary in order to facilitate communication between members of the group?

Sandy: I would agree with that.

Socrates: People within a culture also dress similarly, and eat similar foods; though, we should keep in mind that how they dress will be influenced by climate, and what they eat will depend on what is available. Is wearing similar clothes and eating similar foods necessary in the same way that speaking the same language is necessary?

Sandy: No, I don't think so.

Socrates: Would you agree that how people dress and what they eat is influenced by society, but that it is not mandatory for a person to conform to this influence?

Sandy: Well, I think it depends., As for what people eat it depends, as you say, on what is available. Though, a person will have to be taught what is edible and what isn't. As far as what people wear is concerned, I think that's more serious. There are pretty strict rules, laws in fact, about how people should dress, *that* people should dress. You can't just go around naked.

Socrates: Is it that one cannot, or is it that one is not permitted to?

Sandy: One is not permitted to.

Socrates: So, walking depends on nature providing two legs and the individual being encouraged to master the technique. Language requires the natural impetus to communicate and socially established words. What to eat and what to wear, that sort of thing, depends on natural circumstances and cultural preference. So, do you agree to the conclusion that our behaviour is rooted in nature, and influenced in part by and individual's inclinations, and in part by society?

Sandy: We had to go through all that to come to this conclusion?!

Socrates: I think it was beneficial that we did because now we know what to focus on. All of the things we've discussed rely on the presence of the group: someone has to show us how to walk; we learn our language from others; we are shown what is available to eat; we learn the preferences of our culture. What is clear, then, is that we cannot live a human life in isolation.

It seems to me that kindness is not learned in a fashion similar to how we learn to walk and to speak because these things are, in the normal course of things, necessary for human life. That there are unkind people around shows that kindness is something we can get by without. That we have, at least in the early part of our lives, sustained contact with other people, however, is necessary. But, in a similar fashion to how we choose our clothes and our food, the *way* we associate with people is up to us. So, would you agree to the conclusion that kindness is a matter of choice?

Sandy: That sounds right; though, I do think that kindness is totally different from clothes and food.

Socrates: So do I! To say that it is a matter of choice is not to say that it is the same as other things we are able to choose. Kindness, as we have been talking about it, is something manifested through behaviour. The examples of social influence we have looked at are material: food and clothes. What makes a person kind, it seems to me, is deeply rooted in psychology. It has to do with what *kind* of people we are.

Sandy: What do you mean '*what kind of people we are*'? That makes it sound hopeless, as though it isn't the sort of thing which *can* be taught; it's the sort of thing someone either is or isn't!!

Socrates: But this only explains *part* of what kindness is. The word 'kind', you see, can be used to distinguish classes of things: a rose is a *kind* of flower; an oak is a *kind* of tree. People do not come in kinds in the same way that flowers and trees do; we all belong to the same species. Nevertheless, there are different kinds of people. *Kind* people are those which ought to serve as a model for the rest; they are the best *kind* of

person. But because there is no rigid distinction between sorts of people, it is possible for an unkind person to become kind.

Sandy: How?

Socrates: Well, going by our discussion so far, it seems to have to do with psychology and choice. Let's think about how we make choices first. Do you find you tend to make decisions based on what you know of the relevant information?

Sandy: Yes.

Socrates: So, do you think we ought to inform people as to their options for behaviour and, to the best of our ability, of the consequences of what they choose?

Sandy: But how can we be sure that someone will choose what leads to kindness?

Socrates: That depends on the nature of kindness, which we have yet to determine, because that will indicate what reflection on kindness reveals.

Sandy: What do you mean by 'reflection'?

Socrates: It is very hard to explain directly, which, incidentally, is also why it is very hard to teach. I can give you an example if you like.

Sandy: Please.

Socrates: It is well known among seamen that rats are the first to leave a sinking ship. In fact, sometimes the departure of the rats is the first indication to the seamen that the ship is going down. Why does this happen?

Sandy: I have no idea.

Socrates: This requires *reflection*. Where do rats normally reside?

Sandy: They are burrowing sorts; so, they tend to live under things in dark places, I imagine.

Socrates: So, rats on a ship are likely to live deep below the deck in the bilge. What happens when a ship is damaged due to running aground?

Sandy: *Ah ha!!* The water will leak into the bottom of the boat! So, the rats leave first because they are the first to know the ship is taking on water!!

Socrates: Yes! That's it exactly! You see, reflecting on a problem is *thinking* about it, and the answer tends to come all of a sudden. Like just now when you suddenly realized that water leaks into the bottom of a boat where the rats are, and, *at the same time*, you realized the rats are the first to know there is a problem and, hence, the first

to leave a sinking ship. It was a sudden flash of insight. People used to attribute this phenomenon to a special mystical power in the rats. Then someone reflected on the matter and realized the true reason why. Of course, sometimes it is possible to reflect and come up with the wrong answer, as the people who concluded that rats had mystical powers may have done.

Sandy: How is this going to explain how we learn kindness? If the idea is to get people to reflect on their behaviours and we can't guarantee that reflection is going to result in the right answer, how is reflection going to lead to kindness?

Socrates: That depends on the nature of kindness. The result one gets from reflection depends on what sort of thing one is reflecting on. When reflecting on why rats are the first to leave a sinking ship, we came up with a reason. When we reflect on a problem in arithmetic, we come to understand mathematical necessity. There is only one right answer to a mathematical problem. Reflection may lead to a new proof, but mathematical necessity fixes the result.

Sandy: So, you're saying that unless kindness is like math, reflection won't necessarily lead to kind actions?

Socrates: Yes, and something we have neglected to mention about kindness is that it has to do with *the good*. For this reason, reflection on kindness will not permit of error because *the good* is fixed in a similar fashion to the way mathematical necessity is fixed.

Sandy: That doesn't mean a person will necessarily choose a kind act over an unkind one, does it? It just means that if a person reflects on the options for behaviour in a given case, he or she will know which option would be kind. How does this help us figure out how we can teach people to be kind?

Socrates: Remember how our discussion started? You said I'm not interested in kindness, rather excellence, and asked: *How could someone be motivated to cultivate excellence if they didn't already have a sense of kindness?*

Sandy: Yes.

Socrates: And we have determined that it is within our power to choose to be kind; but, we also feel that kindness has something to do with psychology. Is that right?

Sandy: Yes, but we haven't figured out anything about the relation between kindness and psychology yet.

Socrates: Well, when you said I have focused my attention on excellence, you reminded me how many people I've questioned over the centuries, *What is justice?*. What your question about kindness made me realize is that, although these people had no true knowledge of justice, what a great many of them did have was a *sense of*

fairness. This reminded of something a Priestess, Diotima, once told me when I was a young man. I asked her to explain how one comes to have knowledge of virtue. I must confess that I did not consider what she told me with respect to kindness. But, through our discussion, and maybe because I am very old now and you are young, I feel I have a better understanding of her story. Would you like to hear it?

Sandy: Yes! Please!

Socrates: This is an old, old story about something that happened to Apollo when he was a very young god. Ursa, the goddess of all of heaven and earth, had chosen Apollo to be the god of Truth. "Apollo," she said, "soon there will be people on earth and they will look to you for guidance in moral matters. To be able to help them you must be able to find the horizon. For this is where I reside: where the heavens meet the earth. Only by looking there will you find the way to the Truth."

So, Ursa left Apollo by himself on a vast stretch of land where he promptly began to look for the horizon. Since he knew he was looking for the place where the heavens meet the earth, he kept his head down and his eyes fixed on the ground. For, sooner or later, he reasoned, he would come upon the edge of the earth which would be where the earth meets the heavens. Apollo, day after day, tirelessly searched. Ravens brought him water and food and nymphs were his company through the night.

Ursa, of course, had been watching him. On the twelfth day, while he was still looking as intently as he had been on the first, Ursa returned - the sight of her sent his pulse racing. He felt a love for her that poets throughout the ages have written about. It is a love in which

the tongue turns to splinters, a gentle
burst of flame runs under the skin
eyes don't see a thing, ears
whir and rumble,

"Apollo," she said, "your efforts have impressed me. Now I will tell you something about the source of Truth: it will rarely be found by one who seeks alone." She then stroked his cheek with her fingertips, leaned forward, and kissed him. Apollo's heart practically stopped beating! Then she cupped his chin in the palm of her hand and, with the other, she motioned towards the distance.

"Look," she said. That first sight of the horizon took his breath away.

Sandy: I am not used to ancient stories about the gods, Socrates. You'll have to explain what this has to do with kindness.

Socrates: Like I said, I haven't thought of this story with respect to kindness before, and it is not likely I will get it right on the first try. When I first heard it, I thought

about it in connection with virtue. So, I asked Diotima if the first time Apollo saw the horizon was akin to gaining knowledge of virtue. She said that was right only insofar as it will happen all of a sudden. She said that to gain knowledge of virtue one must look to the light.

Now, after talking with you, I am inclined to think that knowing where to find the horizon provides one with a *sense of the good* because it shows one *the way to the truth*. Knowledge of *the good*, and hence knowledge of excellence, is found in the light. Looking to the horizon will give one a sense of goodness and, hence, a sense of kindness. Truth itself, knowledge of *the good*, resides with the goddess in the light.

Sandy: But I thought that the truth resides with the goddess who resides in the horizon.

Socrates: The goddess holds the truth which *is the light*. Remember our question: *How could someone be motivated to cultivate excellence if they didn't already have a sense of kindness?* I think that you're right and that kindness, having *a sense of the good*, comes before the cultivation of excellence, before gaining *knowledge of the good*.

Sandy: I think I understand: one comes by a sense of *the good*, and thereby becomes kind, by lifting the mind's eye to the horizon which shows the way to the Truth. Some people are born knowing where to find the horizon, and other need to be shown. But, Socrates, how are we going to explain this to people who are unkind? We can't just say, "My friend, look to the horizon." They won't understand.

Socrates: Well, we can do our best to show them what it is to be compassionate, considerate, and the like, in a word, kind. We may find they sort of understand what we are talking about but are like Apollo: staring at the ground beneath their feet. How can they be inspired to look up? They must have a flash of insight that shows them what *the good is like*. The best method I can think of to do this is to set an example. Living our lives with the horizon in view will motivate others to look in the direction we are looking. They will look up, see what we see, and will become kind.

Sandy: Failing that, we'll have to see to it that they be kissed by a goddess!!