

Minding Strangers' Business

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Abstract

When should we interfere in the course of a stranger's life? While philosophers have discussed at length extreme cases of assisting poor people in famine stricken countries, much less attention has been given to casual, everyday episodes. If I overhear two people discussing a place they are about to visit, and know that it is closed for renovation, should I interfere and tell them so? If I stand next to a customer who has not been given enough change in the supermarket, should I point that out or mind my own business? Using the Kantian notions of love and respect, I answer such questions. I claim that Kant's terminology is ill-suited for instructing us how to deal with others with whom we are personally involved, but is important for our encounters with strangers. I suggest that we take seriously Kant's claim that we are "united in one dwelling place". When around others, keep an open eye to the possibility that they might need help. If there is good reason to suppose that you may help, knock on their door. Let them decide whether they want to open it. They are totally entitled to decline the offer, but should keep in mind that it was given as part of the joint venture of living together with others. The interference should therefore not be regarded as an infringement of privacy.

Keywords

Interference, strangers, respect, gratitude, ethics.

When should we interfere in the course of a stranger's life? An obvious answer suggests itself: when they are suffering and need our help. It is no accident that the philosophical discussion about the treatment of strangers has revolved around the question of when, and how much, we should assist poor people in famine-stricken countries.¹ Writers on this subject often refer to Peter Singer's claim that "if

¹ To cite just a few examples: Unger 1996, Cullity 2004, Barry and Overland 2013, Robson 2013.

it is in our power to prevent something very bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything morally significant, we ought, morally, to do it. An application of this principle would be as follows: if I am walking past a shallow pond and see a child drowning in it, I ought to wade in and pull the child out" (Singer 1972: 231). The price that I pay—getting my clothes muddy—is of no importance compared to the great benefit achieved in this case.

This is an extreme situation: it is a child, and she is drowning, and I can easily help. I am not allowed to excuse myself by claiming something in the spirit of: "this is not *my* child, and therefore it is none of my business." I ought to *make* it my business, which is the very reason for Singer's putting forward this example. We tend to treat what happens in hunger-stricken places, far away from us, as "none of our business." But we should not.

While philosophers have discussed at length such extreme cases, much less attention has been given to casual, everyday episodes of encounters with strangers. Consider Judith N. Shklar's example of "the case of a shopper who is given the wrong change by the cashier in a supermarket. It amounts to \$2.50, a considerable amount for him." There is a woman standing next to him in line who observes this yet does not interfere. Should she say something? Shklar characterizes her as "passively unjust." She seems to ascribe more fault to her than to the store manager. True, the manager's duty is to "see that no one gets shortchanged," while the fellow shopper has no such responsibility. However, the manager also "has a duty to keep the atmosphere among the employees reasonably happy," and does so not only because of the "real labor shortage" she should deal with, but also because she is "an ardent communitarian." Thus, she might have good reasons not to help the customer. The fellow shopper, as opposed to that, has "no countervailing obligations." "[T]here is really no excuse for her. Her motives may range from misanthropy to merely being in a rush," and she is "collaborating with injustice" (Shklar 1990: 43–45)

Is this actually the case? Is the wrong change given to another customer this woman's business? What if she were to say that she was simply minding her own business, as she should have been doing? What if she were to say that searching another customer's shopping cart, reviewing what he has bought and how much each item costs,

is simply rude? How can we distinguish between being rude by failing to respect another's privacy, and acting for that person's good? Can we construct guidelines as to when we should interfere with strangers' lives? These are the questions that I shall be addressing in this paper. To the best of my knowledge, they have not been thus far addressed directly in the philosophical literature.

In section 1, I address the question who I am to offer help in such cases. Supposedly, as a stranger I have no moral standing that would entitle me to assist, and thus I am indeed simply rude in interfering. This supposition might be further supported by the notion of "offensive beneficence" discussed in section 2, where our helping, albeit done from worthy motivations, is humiliating to the receiver. In section 3 I tackle the challenges presented in sections 1 and 2, using the Kantian notions of love and respect. I claim that Kant's terminology is ill-suited for instructing us how to deal with others with whom we are personally involved, but is pertinent to our encounters with strangers. I suggest that we take his claim that we are "united in one dwelling place" seriously. This union is the ground for our moral standing to offer help, and yet such offers should be made with a great amount of caution. Section 4 goes back to the shopper's example and discusses other cases as well, in order to decide how the concepts developed in section 3 can and should be implemented in practice.

1 Who am I?

Karen Stohr's essay (2009) first seems to be an exception to the overall neglect of the topic of interfering with strangers in the philosophical literature. Its title talks about "Minding Others' Business." However, Stohr deals not with our attitude toward strangers, but rather with our relationship with people we love, who seem to set wrong ends for themselves and mess up their lives. Stohr claims that Kantian respect would prevent our trying to direct these people to more fruitful ends. As opposed to that, virtue ethics would be more suitable for this type of task. Virtue ethics would stress the supposed benefactor's inner characteristics as a potential helper, rather than focus on the beneficiary. In Stohr's words, "[w]hether I should intervene depends primarily on my qualifications for intervening, not on

the status of the other person as a setter of ends” (Stohr 2009: 134).

It seems, however, that when close relationships are at stake, the main question to ask is different. It would not (only) be about the intervening party on the one hand and the agent on the other. It would have to do with their relationship: how close are they? How much and in what ways does the other party matter to me? If it is a close friend or a family member we are talking about, then *her* flourishing (a term Stohr uses in order to differentiate it from the more subjective “happiness”) is important to *me* as well. I intervene because of our love, concern, shared past, present and future, etc. Stohr’s analysis lacks this dimension altogether.

But our relations with strangers, which is the concern of this paper, lack it just the same. Therefore, here it would indeed be to the point to ask what should prevail: “my qualifications for intervening,” or “the status of the other person as a setter of ends.” And the most straightforward answer, as opposed to what Stohr claims, would be the second. It is her life and her interests that matter. I am just a stranger, unconnected to her. Who *am* I to intervene?

It might seem that if I have a persuasive answer to the aforementioned question, then intervention is indeed in place. Consider Stohr’s following example:

Sometimes all that is needed in order to help someone occupy the relevant epistemic position is to provide her with information. If I am a physician listening to someone at a cocktail party casually report symptoms that she wrongly thinks are insignificant to her health, it will likely be enough if I point out to her that they are in fact serious, assuming that she recognizes my expertise. I can help her by providing her with information that, once she has it, motivates her to take the steps necessary to promote her own flourishing. (Stohr 2009: 130)

In such a case, the answer to the question “who am I” is that I am a physician. I am an expert in my field. I have some information that the woman at the party lacks, and informing her of it helps her “occupy the relevant epistemic position.” Stohr does not tell us how exactly this woman “casually reports” her symptoms. Supposedly, she reports them to *me*, the physician in this example, during a small talk typical of such parties. But it might be argued that even if a physician overhears such a conversation, in which information concerning

the woman's symptoms is revealed, she should intervene in order to help this woman. This would cohere with the approach suggested by Gustav Preller and Sabine Salloch, who encourage physicians to offer unsolicited medical opinions to strangers, on utilitarian grounds. Their leading example involves a medical doctor standing in a well-lit elevator next to a fair-skinned woman, and noticing a mole on her neck. Their general conclusion is that "In most cases, physicians do not sacrifice anything of equal value to the potential loss of health when intervening. Thus, physicians who make a diagnosis by visual inspection in an informal setting have an obligation to intervene in some situations" (Preller and Salloch 2018: 197).

It is no accident that Preller and Salloch make use of the terminology suggested by Singer ("do not sacrifice anything of equal value"²). They are influenced by his theory and apply it to how physicians should behave. Their main concern is that the physician is in a position to prevent great harm by her intervention. Thus, even if we conclude that a physician ought to inform the woman at the party, or in the elevator, about her medical condition, it has to do with the danger she is in. This is why I said earlier that "it might seem" that the clear answer to the question "who am I" is what would do the work of persuading us that an intervention is called for. We now see that this clear answer cannot stand alone. If we indeed conclude that interference is called for in such a case, it has to do with the risk that the woman is facing, *plus* the fact that the physician has the information that might save her. It is terms such as "danger," "risk," "saving" that do the most moral work here, and incline us to conclude that interfering is the right thing to do.

Note, however, that the conclusion that the physician should indeed interfere is not unequivocal, and would depend on the circumstances. Suppose that it is not only these two people who share the ride in the well-lit elevator, but three others as well. The physician has no chance to address the woman privately. Should she then inform her of her supposed medical condition in front of these

² I quoted Singer as speaking not about "anything of equal value," but rather about "anything morally significant." His real position is the former—cf. Singer 1972: 241. His mentioning of "anything morally significant" is a qualification of this principle, and would certainly pertain to the physician case. She hardly sacrifices anything—perhaps a moment of her time.

strangers? In terms of overall utility, we would get the same result: what is the brief exposure to three strangers, whom she would never meet again, as compared to the chance of saving her life? And yet, as Michael Walzer said in a completely different context, “if popular views are resistant (as they are) to utilitarianism, there may be something to learn from that and not merely something to explain about it” (Walzer 1973: 162). We are hesitant to claim that offering the unsolicited medical advice in front of strangers is right, for reasons that have to do with the woman’s privacy. It is *her* health, *her* body, not anybody else’s business.

And this is true even when no strangers are around, and she is alone with the physician in the elevator. If she came to see the physician in the latter’s clinic, things would of course be different. In this case she voluntarily chooses to make her health the doctor’s business as well. This is untrue in the case of unsolicited help. Preller and Salloch (2018: 196) admit that such help might cause some “psychological stress” for the agent. She thought of herself as healthy, and has suddenly to realize that this might not be the case. But there is much more to that. Interference might be an infringement of her rights for privacy, for autonomy, for choice of what sort of information she wishes to disclose, and to whom. All of these have to do with her as a setter of ends—the term that Stohr wished to avoid.

2 Offensive beneficence

Surely, the physician’s intentions are good. But interfering, albeit with the best intentions, can hurt. Adam Cureton begins his article “Offensive Beneficence” with the following claim: “Simple acts of kindness that are performed sincerely and with evident good will can also, paradoxically, be received as deeply insulting by the people we succeed in benefiting” (Cureton 2016: 74). Focusing on how people with disabilities regard the help often offered to them, Cureton claims that “Even when we are sure that their beneficence is genuine and good for us, we may still feel somewhat disrespected, resentful, or put down when others help us. Their assistance can sometimes make us feel helpless, vulnerable, needy, or pitiful, which may lead us to reject it or to react in ungrateful and begrudging ways once it is given” (Cureton 2016: 77). Cureton is especially worried about the

debt of gratitude that people with disabilities owe to the people who help them, a point I shall get back to soon. But for now, let us look at one of his solutions to this problem:

There may be reasons, therefore, to hide or downplay the beneficence we give to some people if certain kinds of gratitude would not be required of those who are unaware that they have benefited by a morally optional act. We can also interpret and express the assistance we give other people as morally required rather than charitable, which may not require the same kind of gratitude on the recipients' part. (Cureton 2016: 81)

First, note that such an attitude would be hypocritical. The benefactor believes that she is doing the person a favor, something that is "morally optional," but she hides this fact and pretends to only do her duty. This would be even more condescending than the original attitude that Cureton has been considering. The helper is in effect telling the person she is assisting: I pity you. You need help, and I hereby give it to you, but you are not capable of being on an equal moral footing with me. I have to pretend that my motives are not what they really are. I have to deceive you, just to make sure that you do not refuse the help that, as I know all too well, you actually need.

Second, let's suppose that we treat the helper's actions as indeed "morally required." In certain cases, people with disabilities are entitled to our help. The helper should thus not be "hiding or downplaying" the beneficence she gives. She indeed performs her duty. Cureton himself acknowledges such an option later on in his article: "people exhibit a disrespectful attitude toward a person with a disability if they fail to understand and acknowledge that person's rights. They may express their belief that the assistance they successfully provide is optional when in fact the disabled person has a right to this assistance" (Cureton 2016: 83).

Now that the helper is not doing the recipient a favor but only performs her duty, does she really change the status of the gratitude he owes her? I doubt that. Think once again of the notion of having your life saved. Suppose that you are about to drown at sea, and the life guard saves you. He only fulfills his duty: he is called a life guard because his job is to guard our lives. But would that diminish in the least your debt of gratitude towards him?

All of this is not to say that Cureton's main point is not correct. Help offered, or given, in the wrong way, can be humiliating. In certain cases, it can be both required and humiliating, simultaneously. The problem is not so much in incurring a debt of gratitude *per se* than in what this debt signifies in this case. I do not want to feel obliged to *this* person, who has helped me in *this* way.

Cureton relies heavily on Kant's construal of gratitude, or rather, ingratitude. For Kant, gratitude is always burdensome. He believes that owing to someone is a feeling none of us would ever enjoy. In fact, according to his analysis, "in gratitude the one obligated stands a step lower than his benefactor," and his self-hurt pride is what "causes so much ingratitude" (Kant 1964: 127). Gratitude thus leads to its exact opposite. What has originated in the noble act of reaching out and helping another human being will inevitably result in feud and hatred. Therefore, one should always refrain from receiving a favor from anybody:

Men are shamed by favours. If I receive a favour, I am placed under an obligation to the giver; he has a call upon me because I am indebted to him. We all blush to be obliged. Noble-minded men accordingly refuse to accept favours in order not to put themselves under an obligation. But this attitude predisposes the mind to ingratitude. If the man who adopts it is noble-minded, well and good; but if he be proud and selfish and has perchance received a favor, the feeling that he is beholden to his benefactor hurts his pride and, being selfish, he cannot accommodate himself to the idea that he owes his benefactor anything. He becomes defiant and ungrateful. His ingratitude might even conceivably assume such dimensions that he cannot bear his benefactor and becomes his enemy. (Kant 1930: 218–9)

This construal of relationship is surely much exaggerated. We are often not only happy to be helped by others, but even honored to be thus helped. We cherish our teachers and mentors for the attention they give us and for functioning as role models for us. We are honored to be part of a community of colleagues and friends in which people like to aid—and receive aid—from each other.

3 Kantian respect and love

It seems that for Kant, a close relationship is always questionable.

He takes it as a "rule" that "even the best of friends should not make themselves *too familiar* with each other" (Kant 1964: 141). This has to do with the fact that Kant views friendship as "the union of two persons through equal and mutual love and respect" (Kant 1964:140). Love and respect are the two feelings that, according to Kant, accompany our duties towards others. "The principle of mutual love admonishes men constantly to *come nearer* to each other; that of the respect which they owe each other, to keep themselves at a *distance* from one another" (Kant 1964: 116) Most of us, I believe, would construe friendship in a non-Kantian way. We would affirm that it involves mutual love, but deny that it involves respect in the sense that Kant speaks about—that which cautions us not to get too close, not to get involved, not to interfere.

But in the context of this article, our starting point is at the opposite end. We are speaking about strangers—not about friends. We have been emphasizing the notion of respect for others' ends, which would hold us at bay and direct us to mind our own business. Therefore, our question should be when and how we should get closer to others and interfere. In Kantian terms, that would be asking when we should add the notion of love to that of our respect towards others.

Not all aspects of Kantian love should concern us here, and I don't intend to adhere to his conception in general. What should be noted, however, is that what Kant views as "love" is not the affectionate emotion we are all (hopefully) familiar with. Love, he says, "is not to be taken as a *feeling* (aesthetic love), i.e. a pleasure in the perfection of other men; it does not mean *emotional* love (for others cannot oblige us to have feelings.) It must rather be taken as a maxim of *benevolence* (practical love), which has beneficence as its consequence" (Kant 1964: 140).

This, once again, seems totally misguided if we try to apply it to our personal relations. Kant's analysis of friendship is strange not only because of the distancing dimension of respect that he connects to it, but also because the love he talks about lacks the warmth and affection that makes such a relationship so dear to us. But what is not sufficient as an apt description of our relationship with our dear ones might very well be an accurate portrayal of how we should treat one another in our encounters with people who are not that dear to

us, i.e. with strangers. It is this aspect of Kantian love that I wish to stress here: “[M]en are to be considered fellow-men—that is, rational beings with needs, united by nature in one dwelling place for the purpose of helping one another” (Kant 1964: 121).

This is true for men (we should of course add women here) in general. Every other person we encounter is a fellow-human. Strangers share our “dwelling place” with us, and we should help them. We should treat them with proper (Kantian) love. If we connect this love to the proper respect that we owe them, we shall know when and how to interfere with their lives. My suggestion as to how to go about it is the following: let’s take seriously the metaphor of the dwelling place. Let’s not ignore each other. When around others, keep an open eye and ear to the possibility that they might need help. If you think there is good reason to suppose that you may help, knock on their door. Let them decide whether they want to open it. And do not be offended if they refuse to. Respect their right to do so. And as for the other party—the potential recipient of help: you are totally entitled to decline the offer. But keep in mind that it was given to you as part of the joint venture of living together with others. Don’t regard the suggestion as an infringement of your privacy, and when declining, do not do so insolently.

4 Some examples

Let’s look at some examples, and begin with the first one presented in this paper: a fellow shopper is witnessing the wrong change given to the customer standing next to her. It seems that as Shklar would have it, the shopper must immediately address the cashier, who caused the injustice. But I believe that the right thing to do in this case is to first address the wronged customer, and ask him: “Do you need help in this?” This would be what I have termed “knocking at his door.” The woman is ignoring neither his distress, nor the wrong done to him. She is surely no “misanthrope” as Shklar has characterized the non-intervening customer in the original example. The wronged customer, on his part, is free to answer in the negative.

The same goes for the following case, presented by Stohr. Interestingly, Stohr presents it as a case of conflict between Kantian love and respect (which she, as I have mentioned, offers to replace

with notions that originate in virtue ethics): “[t]he conflicts are of a sort that anyone who has ever seen a stranger weeping in public immediately recognizes. (Do I approach and offer aid, or would that be too intrusive?)” (Stohr 2009: 118). Stohr supposes that Kantian love would suggest that we offer help, while Kantian respect would advise not to do so, as this would be “too intrusive.” But why so? The stranger is obviously in some kind of distress—otherwise she would not be weeping. A kind question such as: “excuse me, do you need some help?” is all that is called for. It would not be too intrusive. It is both loving in the Kantian sense (acknowledging the stranger as a “fellow-dweller”), and respectful (I do not help unless she allows me to, I do not request that she describe in detail what it is that is troubling her, I shall walk away immediately if she declines my offer.)

My account seems to cohere with what Melissa Seymour Fahmy says in reply to Stohr. Fahmy tries to prove that Kantian ethics does not preclude one from trying to suggest that another change her ends. Like Stohr, her main interest is in helping a close person we love. Like Stohr, she focuses on help given by trying to direct another to the proper ends. In these two respects, the focus of my paper is very different from hers. But the following statement she makes is akin to what I have been suggesting: “By offering invitations and assistance I show my loved one that I care; but by giving her the opportunity to decline, I also demonstrate that I respect her prerogative to make decisions for herself” (Fahmy 2011: 179). Replace “loved one” in this quote with a stranger seen as “fellow-dweller,” and you get what I have been aiming to show.

As part of her paper, Fahmy discusses the following example: I and Marie are traveling on the same train. We start a conversation, and Marie tells me that she lives on the other side of the country, is about to fly back there in the evening, and hesitates between visiting the botanical gardens and touring some historic homes. “I happen to know that the botanical gardens are currently closed for a renovation project and will not reopen to the public for another week” (Fahmy 2011: 176). Fahmy plausibly claims that telling Marie about it is the right thing to do, and that withholding such information would be disrespectful to her.

But suppose that the conversation is held not between Marie and me, but between Marie and another person. Both of them are

strangers to me. I sit next to them. I hear them speaking. They discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the botanical gardens and the historic homes. None of them has the information that I have: the gardens are closed. Should I intervene and tell them? It might be claimed that I am not “knocking on Marie’s door” in this case: I am bursting right in. This would indeed be a case of unsolicited advice, or help. Unlike the medical case, nothing grave is at stake. Sharing my information with Marie will not be even remotely close to saving her life. Then why tell her?

Well, why not? I will be a stranger interfering in another stranger’s business. I will be offering some piece of information that she obviously lacks. I will be doing so respectfully, without prying into Marie’s private life. I will be manifesting the well-known idea that no person is an island, that all of us share the public sphere, that delicately getting involved in another person’s business for just a moment, just to kindly offer some help, is a manifestation of people being social animals. Note that Fahmy’s original example is taking this fact for granted: why else would I start conversing with a complete stranger on the train?

Fahmy describes this as a conversation with “a fellow traveler” (Fahmy 2011: 176). Kant, as we have seen, talks about our being “fellow-men.” As strangers, we are all fellows of one another. We encounter each other however briefly, and then go on our routine business. Interfering with others, respectfully and for a good reason, is a mark of our joined humanity. Julia Driver is correct to state that “[o]ur lives would be quite impoverished if people felt that they needed to go about very cautiously when it came to offering help to others” (Driver 1997: 855).

Like other articles I have discussed, Driver does not deal directly with the subject I am addressing. Her analysis focuses on interventions that go awry, and discusses the aider’s obligation to keep helping and correct what has gone wrong. The main reason she offers for the initial help is that it might cause great benefit. The cases we have been discussing are not all of that sort. Telling a stranger that the botanical gardens are closed for renovation is no great benefit.

But our lives would indeed be impoverished if people only minded their own business. If going to the store, or walking in the street, or taking the train, were solitary experiences, much of our existence as

social beings would disappear. That is not to say that we should compose strict laws as to when we should interfere. I asked at the outset if we can construct guidelines, and I answer in the negative. Some countries have Good Samaritan Laws that deal with dire situations such as the case of the drowning child. There is no need for correlative rules that would tell us exactly when to interfere with others in our daily encounters with them in the public sphere. The notions of Kantian love and respect offer parameters that can sharpen our intuitions rather than clear-cut answers. Surely, each of us will have her own standards and her own limits. But I hope I have said enough to show that there is much room for respectfully and delicately minding strangers' business.

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