

“Sly Decency”

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I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Cheshire Calhoun’s thoughtful and subtle rendering of the hybrid category of moral activity known as common decency. Calhoun’s distinctions are particularly useful, given her insight into the relationship among institutional constraints, common decency, and good teaching. I have a few areas of disagreement with her characterization of the genealogy of common decency, but her very clear picture of the importance of common decency and the place of moral gifts remind us that little, seemingly mundane activities are crucially important in the larger scheme of ethical relations. Her discussion reminds me of Lisa Delpit’s criticism of the middle class white decency of the teacher who not wanting to seem coercive and uncaring asks something like, “don’t we need to take out our work now?” Delpit contends that this teacher needs to know that her question only appears to set up a warm atmosphere and the question really covers its power with its graciousness.¹ As Calhoun contends, there is pressure to “elect” to be decent and that pressure can never be far from our consideration of the value we place on common decency.

It is not so much, as Calhoun argues, that moral gifts are non-obligatory, but rather that “custom” or cultural expectations act *as if* moral gifts *were* non-obligatory. And this tension seems even more interesting—and insidious—than the idea that they are gifts, especially since they are not gifts in the spontaneous sense of seeing something someone would like and getting it for them. Rather they are gifts in the context of social rituals that call for the proffering of gifts. Viewed with an eye toward their coercive nature, common decencies do not come out of the domain of supererogatory acts. The category of the decent is constructed out of obligatory acts that are associated with social rituals of rank and status. That those acts have now been given a thin veneer of voluntarism which makes them appear elective is only an indication of how entrenched they have become as crypto-obligatory activities. These crypto-obligatory acts of common decency are indicative of the degree to which social distinctions are embodied and infused in all social interactions. The very subtlety with which acts of common decency reflect social differences only underscores the intransigence of rituals of status distinction. They are not the sort of acts easily criticized for their function in maintaining status because they appear both pleasant and minor and we may even desire that they be common, though they are not.

My point is that acts of common decency are not hybrids of elective and obligatory acts but stealthy forms of obligation. You would not show up at a baby shower without a gift, you likely would not teach a small class without making some attempt to learn your students names and a little something about them. In each case, your motives may be pure and generous, but social and institutional expectations for your behavior also require that you act with that generosity, so even if you feel in your heart of hearts that you were behind that generosity, you also know that social

disapproval or student evaluations will ensure that you continue whether your heart is really in it or not.

UNEQUAL DECENCY

As Calhoun argues, acts of common decency are “socially conventionalized” and not “morally elective.” In addition, she points out, acts of common decency are not “meritorious” and so they only deserve “perfunctory gratitude.” In short, they are the sort of thankless tasks that very often have a highly gendered or raced quality. More often than not, common decency is not experienced in common. For instance, we might agree that it is nice if waitresses smile when they wait on us. Those of us who have ever been a waitress (or simply a woman) will remember the constant question, “Why aren’t you smiling, honey?” as a reminder that we are not just there to serve food, but also there to be a cut rate form of female attention. And in the case of an interaction between a social inferior and a social superior, the point of generosity on the part of the inferior is to make superiors feel better about their privilege. Further, the kind of acts of common decency that Calhoun points to are also the sorts of acts that add a personal touch to the interaction, to give the superior the perhaps mistaken sense that the inferior really does care, would serve regardless of the status differential. As Homi Bhabha argues, colonizers expect deference behaviors from their social inferiors that make it clear those inferiors personally care about the colonizers. Bhabha argues that the colonial reliance on a discourse of civility and democracy was in tension with the discourse of empire and despotism. The doubling of civility with despotism created an ambivalence of colonialist address and a response of “sly civility” from the colonized.² “Sly decency” is a practice that mimics the conventions of decency while simultaneously calling power differences into question and disturbing the seemingly civil interaction. Similarly, though inadvertently, the taint of the obligatory is infused in the gift giving of common decency, and as Calhoun points out in her concluding section, the institutional context of teaching considerably muddies the meaning of common decency, attempting to maintain decency as willfully given and to demand it as rightfully necessary.

But common decencies, as much as they may cover social fractures with generosity, are also moments where those social fractures are problematized because the people interacting through them do move beyond the fractures into a better sort of relationship. So I want to distinguish among three types of common decencies: crypto-obligatory common decencies that maintain distances and enable inequalities to persist comfortably, utopian common decencies that move across distances of inequalities and show what ideal relationships could look like, if only momentarily, and “sly” common decencies that underscore the inequities structuring interactions and hold an ambivalent promise for better kinds of interactions in different, more equitable contexts. In the latter two cases, I think Calhoun is right that small moral gifts are more valuable than we could easily calculate. So I want to save something like utopian and sly common decencies because they are potentially those rare moments when people step outside of where they are and act in the best way possible, in small ways that change the experience of everyone’s larger acts.

But when common decencies become routinized and unambiguous they shift from spontaneous and rarefied moments to reliable actions and I think that is where they drift fully into crypto-obligatory common decencies and the trouble starts. While in exchanges of utopian common decency people may act better than their social context allows, they do nothing to change that context or problematize their own participation in it. In his 1937 discussion of racial etiquette in the South, Bertram Wilbur Doyle argues that social etiquette that ritualizes forms of social recognition between master and slave keeps the distance and the relationship simultaneously important. Doyle argues that these social rituals, like common decencies, guarantee “there will always be some sort of justice and equity” because they require social actors to move beyond roles and into genuine recognition of one another’s personhood.³ But at the same time, it is clear that slave owners’ moments of recognition, even if they eventually led to manumission of the slaves they were recognizing, did not by themselves overturn the institution of slavery. Further, missing in Doyle’s analysis is an examination of how enslaved people engaged in acts of “sly civility” that were meant to render social interactions ambiguous or false. He does point to an interaction in which a master is unable to get information easily from a slave because the slave constantly interjects courteous phrases and assents into his story. While Doyle suggests this story demonstrates the proper formality between master and slave, it is also a story that shows a slave’s ability to manipulate codes to irritate a master in a way that is too proper to be faulted.⁴ In other words, one person’s utopian common decency may occasion the response of sly common decency from another.

NONRECIPROCAL DECENCY

As Calhoun notes, context is important for deciding what counts as decency. In any given interaction, for instance, each participant may view what counts as common decency differently. Take the simple example of holding the door open. If one is a woman one may have experiences where the door held open was not mainly a decent act, but rather one that required hurrying to the door so the person holding it would not be inconvenienced. The door held open may also require of the woman an interaction that she otherwise would have preferred not to engage in. So what looks like a decent act may be interpreted by its recipient as an act requiring further, more onerous obligations than the initial “decent” act. I use this commonplace and perhaps hyperbolic example to show that common decency, even as socially recognized, is not a simple spontaneous gift, but rather one implicated in other relations that precede decency and structure what decency means. So what appears to be beyond the realm of duty but also indicative of minimal moral agency may also be activities that, as Calhoun notes throughout, are quite coercive not just in the act of doing them, but also in the act of receiving them. The force of their coercion is not just the normative force that encourages one to be a moral person, but is also the force of custom reminding one through minute social rituals of one’s position. This is why, of course, Calhoun argues that the expectation of common decency of teachers leads to teacher burn out. They simply do not have the power to demand the labor conditions that could enable them able to give so much, so continuously or on such a scale. So while even crypto-obligatory common decencies may provide the

subtle glue to interactions, they do so by continuously chipping away at those who attempt them under conditions that do not provide the extras in time, satisfaction, and relationships that would make common decency a freely given gift. In short, in most institutional contexts common decency is theft.

But even so, Calhoun makes a very strong case for the educational necessity of common decency. Indeed while I may be critical of the role of common decency in “disambiguating” social relations, there is an even more pressing need for sly common decency in a risky and educationally challenging classroom. And I would prefer to think about this more critical form of common decency that does maintain more of the ambiguous and spontaneous nature of gifts, while also troubling the problems of power that structure relationships. This kind of decency requires a strong recognition of the problems of power but also a hope to cultivate in that problematic context the intangible aspects of education that encourage vibrant and full relationships. Teachers need to provide students and themselves with a way to criticize a context in which “common decency” is only an individual attribute and not a structural practice. In short, they may have to verge out of the commonly decent and into the slyly critically decent, aware that their own excess of generosity is partially enabling the continuation of a context of inequality.

1. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 1995).

2. Homi K. Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 93-101.

3. Robert E. Park, “Introduction,” in Bertram Wilbur Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South: A Study in Social Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), xii.

4. Doyle, *Etiquette of Race Relations in the South*, 14. Doyle does point out that after Emancipation this older form of etiquette lost much, but not all, of its power and that “if [a black person] does use the forms, he plays at the practice, as at an amusing game” (168).