

Abstract

This paper is an in-depth philosophical account of niceness. It examines what it is to do nice acts and be nice people, if we have a moral obligation to be nice people or to do nice acts, and if there are cases where the nice thing to do conflicts with the good thing to do. I use concepts such as caring about others and responding to the expected feelings or desires of others to construct definitions for the nice person and the nice act. I use a case study and some non-traditional accounts of the supererogatory to determine that it is not morally obligatory to be nice or to do nice acts. I then use my definition of nice acts and nice people to explain why it is sometimes wrong to be nice.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF NICENESS: IS IT GOOD TO BE NICE?

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CHAPTER 1: WHY STUDY NICENESS?

Consider the following statements: It's good to be good. We ought to be good. We ought to do good things. Statements about goodness matter to people. People talk about goodness in their day-to-day lives and tell their children to be good. Philosophers also care about goodness, and ethicists have been studying goodness for thousands of years. There has been a lot of philosophical work done on goodness.

Now consider these statements: It's good to be nice. We ought to be nice. We ought to do nice things. Statements about niceness also matter to people. People talk about niceness in their day-to-day lives and tell their children to be nice. Yet philosophers haven't been studying niceness for thousands of years. In fact, as far as I know, there isn't any philosophical literature on niceness.¹ I think that niceness is a concept that warrants philosophical study. It is my hope with this paper to provide an in-depth philosophical account of niceness.

What will this entail? First, I will define niceness. But niceness is a broad and rather vague concept. When we discuss goodness, we both think about what it is to be a good person and what it is to do good acts. Thus, I will consider the question of what it is to be a nice person and what it is to do nice acts. Then I will determine if we have a moral obligation to be nice or to do nice acts. Finally, I

¹ Granted, the scope of philosophy is very wide, so it's possible that there is philosophical literature on niceness somewhere. For example, after I already constructed much of this thesis, I found a short piece (date and author unknown) from *The Philosophers' Mail* titled “‘Privileged’ Lily Collins as a guide to being nice.” However, the piece is under 700 words, and I am not discussing it in this paper.

will consider cases where being nice conflicts with being good and consider what this means for the role of niceness in our lives.

Before I do any of this, I want to explain why niceness is worth studying in the first place. Someone might worry that niceness is not worth studying. In this chapter, I want to address two concerns that someone might have with devoting this much space to this topic.

First, someone might wonder, why study niceness? What is it about niceness that makes it philosophically interesting to study?

There are two broad reasons why studying niceness is interesting:

- 1) The question of whether or not we are morally obligated to be nice is puzzling. (I'll explain below.)
- 2) There is a tension between niceness and goodness.

Second, someone might wonder why I'm studying niceness instead of some other virtue.² There are many virtues that seem similar to niceness: civility, tolerance, etiquette, kindness etc. And other philosophers have already written accounts of these virtues. We might think that if we understand these, then there's nothing left to study with respect to niceness. And in this case, studying niceness would be pointless.

I disagree. I think that niceness is its own distinct virtue. To be nice is not just to be civil or kind or some combination. In order to demonstrate this, I will

² Many people associate virtues with Aristotle, whose theory of virtue ethics is well known. When I say virtue, I am using the term loosely, not in the Aristotelian sense. I am referring to a generally positive personality or moral trait that one can have.

explain the research that already exists on these nice-like virtues. While I will not be defining (and explaining) niceness until later sections, I hope to show that while these virtues overlap with niceness, none is synonymous with niceness. Once I explain these points, I hope I will provide adequate justification for two points:

- 1) Niceness is a valuable concept to study.
- 2) There is this independent virtue “niceness” that I can study.

First, I will explain why I am choosing to study niceness.

1.1 Why Niceness?

As I’ve stated above, there are two reasons why niceness is interesting:

- 1) The question of whether or not we are morally obligated to be nice is puzzling.
- 2) There is a tension between niceness and goodness

1.2 Reason One: Considering our Moral Obligation

Are we morally obligated to be nice? We should care about this question because we should care about our moral obligations.

But the answer to this question is unclear. On the one hand, it seems strange to say that we *have* to be nice, especially when we compare nice acts to acts that are morally obligatory such as keeping a promise, telling the truth, or avoiding harming someone. If we fail to do these morally obligatory acts, then we deny someone something he is owed (a promise, the truth, safety, etc.). But on the other hand it seems we do not owe it others to be nice to them (examples of being

nice could include giving someone a compliment, giving a stranger candy, or smiling at someone). And if we fail to be nice, there will not usually be horrible consequences for anyone.³ On the other hand, it also seems strange to say that we never have to be nice or that we are completely exempt from being nice. Niceness seems like it's important, so it's weird to think that it's okay to always and completely forgo being nice.

To resolve this puzzling question, in Chapter 3 this paper will include a detailed discussion of the supererogatory (a category of acts that we are not morally obligated to do but that are morally good to do). Studying niceness will help us gain a better understanding of the supererogatory and our moral obligations as a whole.

1.3 Reason Two: Tension between Niceness and Goodness

On the one hand, it seems good to do nice things. Sometimes, however, if you are nice, then people will walk all over you. Consider: We generally think of niceness as a good thing and a virtue that we want ourselves and others to have. In this respect, niceness seems good. On the other hand, sometimes being nice is associated with being wishy-washy or boring or failing to give others the full truth. Furthermore, sometimes people advocate for a cause, but they are shut down and told they ought to be nicer. So in this respect, niceness seems bad. If being nice can sometimes interfere with what is good, then it seems there is a

³ Compare that to failing to save a life. Even if we say that we do not owe a dying person our time, if we fail to save someone who is dying, then they die, which is bad. But (generally) no one will die if we fail to be nice to them.

tension between niceness and goodness. I want to examine this tension. Consider these four claims:

- 1) Niceness is a virtue.
- 2) Niceness's status as a virtue is controversial.
- 3) Niceness can conflict with doing the good thing in a way that is particularly interesting to study.
- 4) The expectation that people be nice can be used to harm people.

Notice that while the first claim does not strictly contradict the others, there is a tension among them. Let me give a brief overview of these claims here.

1.4 Niceness is a Virtue

Generally, we think that it's good to be nice. We like nice people. And there are some people that we think definitely ought to be nicer. In this sense, niceness is a virtue. But there might be some aspects of niceness that don't seem so good.

1.5 Its Controversial Status as a Virtue

Alexis is not what we'd call nice. Her sense of humor is dark and slightly offensive. She is abrasive and brutally honest. She won't exchange pleasantries, if she doesn't feel like it. However, if she is pleasant to you, then you know that she genuinely likes you. Her tough demeanor helps get things done. And she's a funny person to be around.

Some of us have known people like Alexis. We might admit that she's not the nicest person, and she might admit this too. On the one hand, we think that people generally should be nice. But on the other hand, we might also think that it's okay that Alexis isn't nice. If Alexis were to be nicer, she would lose some unique

personality traits that make her herself. Furthermore, it seems there's something rather admirable about her. We might not want *everyone* to be like her. It's good to have people in the world who are nicer than she is. Still, we might admire certain personality traits of hers, and we don't want to live in a world where no one is like her.

We admire Alexis's assertiveness, independence, and the fact that she doesn't care what others think of her. And oftentimes, we might associate niceness with a lack of these virtues. As I stated earlier, we might think that nice people fail to give us the full truth or that they are wishy-washy or lacking in some way or will let people walk all over them.

Because of this, even though we generally view niceness as a good thing, sometimes we don't value it. Therefore, its status as a virtue is somewhat controversial. People disagree on the extent to which niceness is valuable. I will provide an account of what I believe niceness is and what its value is, but I imagine some will disagree with my account. This controversy itself is a good reason to study niceness.

1.6 How Niceness Conflicts with the Good Thing to Do

Niceness can conflict with the good thing to do. Consider:

A journalist is deliberating on whether or not to write a scathing article painting an incompetent politician in a bad light. On the one hand, this is how she views the politician, and she recognizes the benefits that bringing these issues to the attention of the public would have. But on the other hand, the article would not be nice. It would be insulting, and it would hurt the politician's feelings as well as her family's feelings. The journalist decides that she wants to be nice, so she does not write the article.

I will argue that there is something morally problematic about the journalist failing to write this article because of a desire to be nice. Intuitively, it seems that sometimes it's necessary to tell hard truths for the good of society or for the good of another person. These hard truths are often not nice, but they can be good. If the desire to be nice stands in the way of the desire to be good, then it seems the nice thing to do can conflict with the good thing to do.

We might think it unsurprising or unimportant that the good thing to do can conflict with being nice. After all, it seems that many virtues, if displayed at inappropriate times, could conflict with the good thing to do. For example, loyalty is a virtue. But being loyal to your abuser isn't good. The workaholic parent is hardworking, but this seems problematic if she neglects her children. Telling the murderer at the door that your friend is hiding upstairs might be honest, but most people would agree that you shouldn't do it. It seems for most virtues, you could think of a case where doing an action that corresponds with said virtue conflicts with doing the good thing.

But I think that studying the way that being nice conflicts with goodness is particularly valuable. One reason for this is that niceness often conflicts with virtues such as justice or honesty. Take the journalism case above. There seems to be some conflict between being nice and being fair and honest. On the one hand, it seems that niceness is good. But on the other hand, getting the truth out to the public and aiding people in making informed decisions also seem good. This

raises greater philosophical questions. Is it better to be concerned with justice or with the feelings of others? Is it better to be concerned with honesty or with the feelings of others? Or, are there some times in which we ought to prioritize being honest and just and others where we ought to prioritize being nice? How do we determine this?⁴

One could object to the value of studying niceness by arguing that the supposed tension between niceness and goodness does not seem philosophically puzzling at all. Perhaps niceness is simply like Vitamin A. It is important and good, so long as it is in the right dosage. If this is true, we might not think that this is an important philosophical puzzle.

But I think this analogy actually helps to explain why this project is so important. Imagine that it was controversial in the scientific community exactly what Vitamin A was, in what dosage it was beneficial, and in what dosage it was harmful. Surely this would warrant greater scientific study! I think that niceness works the same way. There is not a philosophical consensus or a social consensus on when to be nice and when not to be. Therefore, far from serving as a counterexample, this explains exactly why studying niceness is relevant. Niceness in its right dose might be key to a person's moral health. But if niceness in its

⁴ Note that Aristotle would consider the answer to this question simple. For Aristotle, virtues are necessarily good. For every virtue, there is an extreme and a deficiency: an extreme being too much of the qualities and desires that made up that virtue and a deficiency being too little. So bravery is a virtue. Cowardice is a deficiency of bravery and is not the same thing as bravery. Likewise, brashness is an extreme of bravery and is also not the same thing as bravery. For Aristotle, if someone was too nice or was nice at an inappropriate time, she would not be being nice. She would be being whatever the extreme of niceness was. I will not be talking about virtue in an Aristotelian sense. If you take an Aristotelian view, then you will disagree with some of what I say. However, it is still valuable for you to read this paper, because it could help you determine when niceness becomes its extreme (which would be when I consider it bad to be nice).

right dose is key to a person's moral health, we do not know what that dose is.

Furthermore, we do not even know what niceness is. This should further give us cause to define it in more depth.

1.7 How Expectations of Niceness Harm People

Sometimes people are jerks, and we have a right to expect that they be nicer. But other times, the expectation that people be nice can harm people. The pressure to be nice could harm anyone but often is used especially to harm women and other minority groups. Consider the following case:

Women are often told to smile by strangers in the streets. Smiling is viewed as nice and therefore as something women, especially, ought to do. Kristin Stewart, the actress who plays Bella Swan in the *Twilight* franchise, has been severely criticized by the media for not smiling while on the red carpet. Smiling *does* seem like a nice thing, but it seems wrong to expect it.

We might think that it is merely the sexism that is problematic in this case and not the expectation that people be nice. Perhaps everyone really should smile, but the problem is that we seem to disproportionately require this of women. Perhaps we ought to expect smiling of women and men equally. But I don't think this is true. Consider an analogous case: Objectifying women is bad. But the solution to objectifying women is not to objectify men. Similarly, I do not think the solution to imposing this obligation on women is also to impose it on men. Anyone should have the right to walk down the streets without smiling and without being harassed for failing to smile.

People also sometimes criticize various activist groups for not being nice.

Consider the following case:

Members of a social justice activist group are ardent in supporting their cause. They leave pamphlets everywhere, protest a lot, and they don't shy away from expressing their anger. These actions might be ethical, but they don't seem like nice things to do. Several people tell them that while they have a good point, they ought to be nicer about expressing it.

It seems wrong, in my opinion, to tell this activist group to be nicer. It seems that they have a right to advocate in the way they see fit. Again, we might think that it is merely the racism, sexism, or other form of oppression involved in this that is the problem. For example, if this is a group of African-Americans protesting Ferguson, we might think that the only reason people tell them to be nicer is because of racism. And we might think it's the racism that is the issue, not our conceptions of niceness. I do believe that racism would be a factor in people expecting that this group be nicer, and certainly racism is an important issue. But I also think that niceness and our conceptions of niceness are important to understand. If we understand niceness, we will understand broader philosophical and ethical principles that will help us to explain why telling someone to be nice in certain situations could be ethically problematic.

Some people believe that it is always better to be nice than to cause social unrest, even if the social unrest can lead to good. This belief seems to lead to harm because it causes people to shut down social justice activism, if the social justice activism isn't what we think of as nice. And it might make some people hesitant to fight for what they think is right for fear of not being nice.

Thus, it is valuable to examine how we ought to think of niceness and whether we can expect it of others.

1.8 The Bottom Line

There is a tension between the fact that niceness is a valuable virtue and the fact that it can harm people and conflict with other values. Because of this, niceness can constitute a moral puzzle, one with deeper philosophical issues, and one that I want to solve.

But we might wonder, why study niceness specifically? There are virtues that are similar to niceness, which might also have conflicts, and some of these virtues have been studied before.

1.9 What Makes this Virtue Different from all other Virtues?

In my research, I have come across many accounts of virtues that seem similar to niceness. These virtues include civility, tolerance, and etiquette. Likewise, kindness is also considered to be similar to niceness. We might wonder whether or not niceness is really its own distinct virtue. Perhaps it's just a part or a mixture of all these other virtues. If this is true, then studying niceness would be redundant.

But I will argue that niceness is its own virtue. To demonstrate this, I will explore the research that already exists on these virtues that are similar to niceness. I hope to show that while there is overlap between these virtues and niceness, niceness is distinct from these virtues, and it is not enough to merely study all of these other virtues.

Furthermore, niceness is a rather new area of study. Since, as far as I know, there is no philosophical literature on niceness, understanding similar

concepts will help us to ease into discussing niceness. And studying niceness could help us to better understand some of these virtues.

The first virtue that I will discuss is civility.

1.10 Civility

Some might think that being nice is just another way of being civil. I, however, think that civility and niceness are different from one another. Just like I am arguing that niceness is its own distinct virtue, Calhoun (2000) argues that civility is its own distinct virtue. Furthermore, she argues that it is a moral virtue, meaning that it's a trait that's morally good to have. Examples of civility include compromising with somebody, hearing someone out, or “restraining” what one says and refraining from insulting those that you disagree with (p. 258). These are also examples of nice acts.

Calhoun argues that, “what makes being civil different from being respectful, considerate, or tolerant, is that civility always involves a display of respect, tolerance, or considerateness” (p. 260). In other words, civility is how we demonstrate respect or tolerance for others. It is less about actually feeling respectful or tolerant and more about demonstrating respect or tolerance. Calhoun believes that civility is important because morality is a social endeavor. Much of it is based on our relations with one another, and we want to come to some sort of moral agreement as a society (p. 269).

For example, if gender equality is important, it is not enough that I believe in equality. We should want everyone to believe in equality, because an equal

society is a morally better one. And we want our society to be morally better. If we are not civil, then we are unlikely to listen to each other and to be heard. We might be able to grow as individuals, but if we don't listen to each other, we can't learn from one another, and we won't grow with each other. But if we are civil, we can work together and become morally better as a society (p. 269).

What is key to remember about civility is that it is about displaying these virtues, not necessarily about having these virtues. There is a distinction between displaying something and having something. You can display respect without actually being respectful.

Imagine that someone expresses an idea. They look at a dress and decide that it's black and blue, while you know that it's white and gold.⁵ You think their idea is stupid. You do not respect their idea. We could even stipulate that you don't even respect them. You think that anyone who views the dress as black and blue could not possibly be worthy of respect. Still, you do not tell them that you think they are an idiot. You ask them why they think their position is right and try to explain why you think your position is right. You tell them you see where they are coming from, even though you don't. In this case, you don't actually respect them. But you are displaying respect. So you are being civil.

The important thing to take away from this is that civility is a display of certain virtues. If you display these virtues, you are being civil. It is also true that

⁵ This is a reference to the dress controversy where people across the internet could not agree on whether a dress was black and blue or white and gold. Incidentally, the dress was discovered to be black and blue, although it looked white and gold to most people, according to a (2015) CNN article (Ford "What Color is this Dress?").

if you don't display these virtues, you are not being civil. The following case will demonstrate this.

Imagine that you make an anonymous donation to charity where you don't know the recipient (p. 261). In this case, you are doing something considerate. But because there is no social interaction involved, you cannot display this consideration (p. 261). While your actions aren't uncivil, they aren't civil either because civility requires a *display* of consideration (or other virtues). And the lack of interaction between you and the other person makes it so you cannot display consideration (p. 261). You need social interaction in order to be able to display something. So even if you have the virtues in question, if for whatever reason, you do not or cannot display them, you cannot be civil. This is important because it highlights how essential the display of these virtues is to civility. It also highlights the fact that you need social interaction in order for civility to be a factor.

Note that what counts as a display of respect or tolerance might vary from society to society and from culture to culture (p. 263). If we lived in a society where clapping your hands before speaking was considered respectful, then clapping your hands before speaking would be considered civil. Outside of this society, however, clapping your hands before speaking would not be considered civil. Therefore, Calhoun argues that compliancy with social norms is a key part of civility (p. 263).

Some people might think that niceness is similar. We might think that niceness is about acting pleasant and acting good, but not really about being pleasant or being good. And in this case, niceness might just be another word for civility, in which case it would not warrant its own paper.

As I said earlier, when I look at niceness, I'll look at what it is to be a nice person and what it is to do nice acts. Let's consider both of these quickly compared to civility. While I haven't yet defined niceness, let's just look at ordinary language and how we intuitively feel about niceness and civility.

It seems doing civil acts and doing nice acts might be fairly similar. If I refrain from insulting someone that I disagree with or if I hold the door open for someone, I am doing a civil act. I am also doing a nice act.

But some nice acts are what I'll later call "little benefications." These are acts that seem to go above and beyond what is expected of us and that benefit the lives of others in some way. For example, giving candy to someone is a nice act, but it seems strange to call it a civil act. We said giving to charity when you don't know the recipient isn't civil because you can't *display* consideration to someone you don't know. But the act still seems nice. Nice acts don't seem to require this *display* like civil acts do. So we know there's at least some difference between niceness and civility.

But the difference between niceness and civility becomes even clearer when we ask ourselves: "what is it to be a civil person?" The civil person is disposed towards civil acts, so they are disposed towards displays of respect and

tolerance. But this does not entail that they actually respect or tolerate people.

They could simply pretend that they do.

Can we say the same for a nice person? Think about what it means if I say that somebody is a nice person. Perhaps someone is friendly, compliments others, and gives people candy. But if we later discover that she had ulterior motives and that she really hated everyone but was only acting nice to get what she wanted, would we still say that she was a nice person? It doesn't seem like it. We would be more likely to say that she was just acting nice or pretending to be nice. If, however, we discover that the civil person actually hated everyone, we would still say that she was civil.

So niceness is different than civility. Let's look at another virtue. Let's look at etiquette.

1.11 Etiquette

We sometimes think that niceness is very similar to politeness or etiquette. Etiquette and niceness share some features, but they are not exactly the same. To understand how they differ, we should first understand what etiquette is. Etiquette is actually fairly complicated, and once we understand this, we will see how it is different than niceness.

Martin (1985) argues that etiquette is central to civilization. She compares a system of etiquette to a language, arguing that just as communicating by spoken language without grammar or semantic rules would be difficult, it is difficult to behave without a system of etiquette (p. 14-15). In other words, etiquette is a

system of rules that helps us better understand what we should do. Although morality and the law might serve similar functions, etiquette is distinct from the law in that it is more flexible. Laws have to apply in all situations, but one can occasionally modify etiquette. For example, it is illegal to run a red light. If my sister is having a baby and I need to get to the hospital, I still can't run a red light (and with good reason). It is a breach of etiquette to cancel an RSVP. But most people would understand if I backed out of a party because my sister was having a baby.

It is important that etiquette be a system of rules because Martin wants to emphasize that etiquette is something that we learn and that it is not merely common sense. If it was merely common sense, there would be no point in developing a system of etiquette, or in learning what that system is.

There is another way that etiquette is similar to a language. Just like a language depends on the society that you are in and does not need to be a universal system, etiquette also changes depending on the society that you are in, and it does not need to be a universal system (p. 14).

Martin (1993) claims that etiquette has three functions, but I will only discuss two of them here.⁶ The first function is a regulative function. It is similar to the law in that they both regulate our behavior (p. 351-352). However, Martin asserts that the law serves to prevent larger wrongs, such as murder and thievery, whereas etiquette serves "to soften personal antagonisms and thus to avert

⁶ The third function discusses how etiquette can be important for rituals, and while interesting, it is not that relevant to this paper.

conflict” (p. 352). This means that an act can be legal but still be a violation of etiquette.

Freedom of speech, for example, is a legal right, but Martin believes that it is not good etiquette for people to go around saying exactly what they feel about everything, all the time (p. 352). As Martin explains, while it might indeed be someone’s opinion that a mother’s baby is ugly, informing said mother of that opinion would be a breach of etiquette. It would likely cause a lot of conflict, which etiquette seeks to avoid. Therefore, although the law does not prevent you from telling somebody that her baby is ugly, a system of etiquette does (p. 352).

That being said, one can imagine a society where people do not have an issue with being told that their baby is ugly. Perhaps they would respond “Well I’ve always thought she was gorgeous, but to each her own,” or, “Yes she is rather ugly. It’s a shame, but what can you do?” Because etiquette is culturally dependent, in this society, telling someone that their baby was ugly would not be a breach of etiquette.

Etiquette’s second function is symbolic. According to Martin, it involves a “system of symbols whose semantic content provides for predictability in social relations, especially among strangers” (p. 354). In other words, etiquette involves gestures that are meant to represent something else. Through society, we assign certain meanings to these gestures. One example of a symbolic gesture is shaking someone’s hand. This might be meant to convey friendliness or respect. Taken out

of context, the gesture of shaking someone's hand might be as arbitrary as the gesture of rubbing your cheek against someone's hand.

However, many societies have subscribed a meaning to the gesture of shaking hands so that it becomes a symbol of good will. Note that individuals have to learn what these symbols mean. If you came from a country where nobody shook hands and you didn't know what shaking hands meant, you wouldn't be able to understand the meaning of this particular piece of etiquette until you learned it.

These symbols are useful because they help us to understand what the other person wants to convey. For example, is he trying to convey goodwill or friendliness, or does he wish to convey hostility?⁷ Granted, somebody shaking your hand doesn't necessarily like you. Someone may shake your hand but harbor hostile feelings towards you. However, the handshake could convey that he is at least willing to display friendliness, which is good to know (p. 354).

So etiquette is a system of agreed upon rules that either serve to regulate our behavior or symbolize good will towards one another. It can be a guide to make encounters between both friends and strangers more pleasant and comfortable.

Etiquette might have been developed to make people feel more comfortable. We might think that niceness would also make people feel

⁷ Of course, there may be times when a person opts out of a symbolic expression of etiquette for good reasons. For example, someone might opt out of a handshake if they are religious and do not shake hands with people of the other sex or they have a cold and do not want to spread it around. Usually in these circumstances a person would provide an explanation, and the other party would be understanding.

comfortable. However, the person performing the etiquette does not have to intend to make people feel comfortable. Somebody could be a horrible person who hopes that people suffer but still be very polite. This makes the polite person different than the nice person, as the nice person seems like they really do have good motives. Otherwise, as we said earlier, we would be more likely to say they were just acting nice or pretending to be nice.

Furthermore, there are rules associated with etiquette. Etiquette is not intuitive; it's something we have to teach our children, because they could not perform it without learning the rules. While we might need to teach our children to be "nice" people, there are not rules of niceness like there are rules of etiquette. If you browse your local bookstore, there are plenty of etiquette guides. There are people writing rule books about how to follow etiquette. There does not seem to be the same attention devoted to niceness. Even in this thesis, while I am examining what it is to be nice and while I will provide a definition of the nice act, I am not telling you which specific acts are nice and which aren't.

So etiquette and civility are different than niceness. Now, I will take a look at a quality that seems more genuine than etiquette and civility. I will examine tolerance.

1.12 Tolerance

We might think that the nice person is understanding. The nice person seems less critical than the not-nice person. Another way of saying this is that the nice person is tolerant. Now I will consider Owens's (2013) account of tolerance.

Owens defines tolerance as the suppression of disapproval. Disapproval is what we feel when we condemn a person's actions and blame them for those actions. So tolerance is what happens when we recognize that somebody did something problematic, blame them for it, yet suppress this blame and avoid expressing this to them (p. 1).

There might be some cases where disapproval itself is not appropriate. Think of a vegetarian who refrains from eating meat for moral reasons, yet has many friends and acquaintances that do eat meat. Some people might question how she should respond to this meat-eating. The vegetarian might decide that while eating meat is wrong, her friends are not to be blamed for doing so (p. 2). Perhaps they are subject to societal or cultural factors or have health reasons for eating meat. In this case, while she might condemn the action of eating meat, she is not disapproving of her friends because she does not blame them. Blame is a necessary condition for disapproval (p. 2).

But there might be some cases where the vegetarian does disapprove of her friends. Perhaps she decides that her friends are capable of making the moral decision not to eat meat and that they are to blame for their meat-eating.

According to Owens, it still might be appropriate for her to suppress that disapproval, or to demonstrate tolerance. Owens explains why he believes that tolerance is important. In general, we value the good opinion and the approval of our friends. It matters to us what they think, so therefore *it matters* what they think (p. 6-7). According to Owens, if my friends or acquaintances think well of

me, I am better off, and if they think poorly of me then I am worse off. Even if somebody (who is an acquaintance or a friend) does not express their dislike of me, I am still worse off (p. 7). Just the disapproval itself can harm us; we generally would rather that people think well of us.

But in addition to these opinions mattering, we also care about the way that these people express their opinions. There is a difference between disapproval and expressing disapproval. Disapproval entails that you think somebody's behavior or character is flawed, and you blame them for it. Tolerance is primarily concerned with the expression of a person's disapproval. To explain this difference, Owens imagines that his colleagues mock him because they think him a horrible philosopher. He states that while he would be hurt by the fact that they thought this, he would also be hurt by the fact that they expressed it (p. 9-10). Owens argues that expressing disapproval actually does harm the person whom you are disapproving of. And furthermore, the expression of disapproval harms the person in a particular way in which merely disapproving does not. Thus, by failing to be tolerant, we harm people in these particular ways.

It seems that it is nice to be tolerant. But tolerance and niceness are not interchangeable. Tolerance seems primarily concerned with avoiding doing things that make people feel worse. But niceness also involves doing things that make people feel better. Giving people candy wouldn't be a "tolerant" act, but it would be a nice act.

Additionally, tolerance applies to some very specific cases. In order to be tolerant, you need to disapprove of people because otherwise there would be nothing to suppress. If you approved of everyone, tolerance would not be a factor in your life. But being nice could still be a factor.

Some of the ideas behind tolerance, such as this consideration for others, are important to keep in mind when we think about niceness. Even before examining tolerance, we might not have thought that tolerance and niceness were interchangeable. One quality, however, that some might think is interchangeable with niceness is kindness.

1.13 Kindness

When I've discuss the topic of this paper with others, one common response that I get is *what about kindness?* Some might wonder if niceness and kindness aren't just the same thing. Others might wonder why I have chosen to study niceness instead of kindness.

To begin to answer these questions, let's look at how we use ordinary language. Consider the following acts that seem like acts of kindness. A woman buys a homeless man dinner. A man bakes lasagna for his grieving neighbor. A teenager volunteers to tutor a child in math. These are all acts of kindness.

We should consider what these acts have in common. They all seem like good things to do. They all involve helping people. They are all a way of demonstrating care. Another thing to note, however, is that while we would likely

agree that these are kind acts, it also seems that these are nice acts. In fact, it's possible that all acts which are kind are also nice.

This means that only looking at kind acts won't help us to understand if there is a difference between kindness and niceness. So let's look at an example of a nice act to see if that will help us see a difference.

Consider the following case. A friend does something that bothers you. You don't tell her that you're upset because you don't want to hurt her feelings. In this case, you are being nice. But are you being kind?

I would say that you are not. You're not being unkind, but you're not being kind either. There are a couple of intuitive reasons why I think this is the case, which I will explain in the following paragraphs. First, I think that kind acts must help people. Second, I think that kind acts must be good for people.

My first intuition is that kind acts must help people. All of our agents, in the examples of kind acts, were trying to help others. In this case, you are not trying to help your friend. You are avoiding doing something that you think will hurt her. Avoiding doing something that will hurt someone might be a nice act, but it is not a kind act.

If we compare kindness to some other virtues that we've looked at, we can see how niceness differs from all of these virtues. Acts of civility and tolerance mainly involve avoiding hurting people. Kind acts mainly involve helping people. Nice acts can both involve helping people and avoiding hurting people.

But if you merely avoid hurting someone, it seems wrong to call the act “kind.” Avoiding hurting the feelings of your friend is a nice thing to do, but it is not a kind act.

My second intuition regarding why this is not a kind act is that kind acts have to be good for others. All of the examples of kind acts that I presented were good for the person that the agent was acting upon. In this case, although not telling your friend that what she did bothered you might be a nice act, it doesn’t seem like the best thing to do. It might be better for your friend if you told her the truth.

If these intuitions are right, then nice acts wouldn’t have to be good for others. Let’s look at an example from pop culture to further support this intuition that kind acts must be good for others.

In the (2015) live-action film, *Cinderella*, Cinderella’s mother tells her, “Where there is kindness, there is goodness.” This statement might make some intuitive sense. Typically when we think about kind acts, they are often a subspecies of good acts. It seems, however, that it would be strange to say “Where there is niceness, there is goodness,” particularly after going through the cases that I’ve presented earlier in this chapter.

Kindness might also be interesting to study. But because it’s necessarily good for a person (as I’m defining it), it will pose fewer moral puzzles than niceness. Our conflicting intuitions about niceness are what make niceness so interesting to study. We have fewer conflicting intuitions about kindness.

You might disagree with my intuitions about kindness, and that's fine.

Perhaps, in this case, a lot of what I'm saying about niceness would also apply to kindness. But this is my reasoning for why I believe the two are different and why I have chosen to study niceness.

This reasoning will become clearer once I define nice people and nice acts.

1.14 So Where am I Headed?

There are two popular ways to talk about goodness:

- 1) What is it to be a good person?
- 2) What is it to do good acts?

When I discuss niceness I will consider:

- 1) What is it to be a nice person?
- 2) What is it to do nice acts?

It is important to discuss both concepts. Sometimes a nice person might not do a particular nice act. And sometimes one can do a nice act without being a nice person. If I only were to define niceness, the definition would be too broad and too vague. But by breaking it up, I will be able to make my definitions more specific.

The next section will be devoted to understanding the nice person. To get a better understanding of the nice person, I will first try to understand the not-nice person. Philosophers have written papers on the asshole and on the arrogant person, so I will devote some time to defining these types of people. I will also consider what it is to be a mean person, and use these definitions to understand

some key characteristics of not-nice people. I will use these characteristics to understand what it is that defines the nice person. Through defining this, I will be able to explain why being a mean person or arrogant person or an asshole is bad and why being a nice person is good. I will then consider if there is such a thing as being too much of a nice person and if we must be nice people or if it's merely good to be nice.

After this section, I will consider what it means to do nice acts. After the defining a nice act, I will consider what, if any, our moral obligation is to do nice acts. I will then consider cases where it could be wrong to be nice.

In my final section, I will explain how my definitions, research, and arguments have given us the tools to understand and address the questions I've raised in this first chapter.

CHAPTER 2: ON BEING A NICE PERSON

When we say that someone is a nice person, what do we mean? Are we morally obligated to be nice people, or is it merely good to be nice? And what do we mean when we say that someone is too nice?

In order to answer these questions and to understand the nice person, I first want to consider what it means to be a not-nice person. There is a reason for this. As far as I know, there is no philosophical literature on being a nice person. But there is literature on what it is to be a not-nice person, particularly what it is to be an asshole and what it is to be an arrogant person. If we understand the qualities that make up a not-nice person, we can understand the qualities that make up a nice person. And if we understand why being an asshole and being an arrogant person are bad, we can understand why being nice is good.

Once I explain what it is to be a nice person and why it's good to be nice, I will consider whether there is such a thing as being too much of a nice person. I will argue that there is and explain why it's bad to be too much of a nice person. Then, I will consider whether or not we are morally obligated to be nice people and if we can be good people without being nice people. Note that there is a difference between being a nice person and doing nice acts. So even if being a nice person is optional, we could still be required to do some nice acts. In my next chapter, I will examine what it is to do nice acts, but here I am primarily focused on what it is to be a nice person.

In this chapter, I will defend the following statements:

- 1) It is bad to be a mean person (as well as to be an arrogant person and an asshole).
- 2) It is good to be a nice person.
- 3) It's morally problematic to be too much of a nice person.
- 4) One is not morally obligated to be a nice person.

2.1 On Being a Not-Nice Person

In the upcoming sections, I will examine what it is to be a not-nice person.

First, I will look at James's (2012) book *Assholes: A Theory*. James argues that the asshole is a person who allows himself to continually enjoy special advantages because of a mistaken belief in his entitlement to them and who then refuses to hear the complaints of others (p. 4). I will then examine the (1998) paper "Arrogance" by Tiberius and Walker. The arrogant person has a higher belief in her worth so that it defines how she treats others and she comes to believe that others have nothing to offer her (p. 382). (I will explain both of these definitions in more-depth in the upcoming sections.) I will explain what is wrong with being a mean person and argue that the mean person's disregard for the feelings and desires of others is problematic.

All of these not-nice people fail to value other people in some fundamental way. So I will argue that the nice person — in addition to doing nice acts and avoiding doing not-nice acts —values other people in some way. Since failing to value others is morally wrong, being a nice person is morally good.

But before we look at nice people, let's look at assholes.

2.2 Assholes

What is it to be an asshole? We can imagine such a person. He interrupts us when we speak. He cuts in front of us while we are waiting in line. He insults us. He cuts in front of us in traffic. But merely *doing* assholish things does not necessitate that a person is an asshole. James uses several of the cases above as examples of assholish behavior (p. 5). But James also delves into what makes an asshole an asshole and why being an asshole is problematic. James lays out the following separately necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being an asshole:

- 1) The asshole continually allows himself to enjoy special advantages.
- 2) He does this because he mistakenly believes he is entitled to them.
- 3) When he is called out on his behavior, he refuses to hear the complaints of others (p. 4-18).

The first condition is that the asshole continually allows himself to enjoy special advantages (p. 5). The non-asshole usually waits his turn. He listens to others. Perhaps on occasion he allows himself advantages — if there's an emergency he might cut ahead of someone, and on his birthday he gets special treatment. But the asshole enjoys these advantages *on a regular basis*. As James says, “If one is special on one’s birthday, the asshole’s birthday comes every day” (p. 16). These special advantages come at the expense of other people’s “normal” advantages. For example, people have a right not to be interrupted, a right to their place in line, and a right not to be constantly insulted. The asshole disregards

these rights in order to be able to speak whenever he wants and get whatever he wants. It is also important that the asshole does this on a regular basis. Someone who is having a bad day and interrupts us might be acting like an asshole, but he is not an asshole, at least not in the sense that James uses the word (p. 8). So being an asshole requires having the disposition or personality of an asshole.

But there is more to being an asshole than this. It is not enough that the asshole allows himself to enjoy these advantages. It's also important that the reason that he allows himself to enjoy these advantages is because of his mistaken belief in his entitlement to them (p. 5). There are two factors involved in this condition: the asshole's belief in his entitlement and the fact that he is mistaken. This sense of entitlement is important because it establishes that the asshole is somewhat morally motivated (p. 13). Just like we believe that we have the right to a fair share of the pie, the asshole believes he has a right to a bigger share. We could imagine that someone might allow himself to enjoy special advantages, but for other reasons. Perhaps he is simply oblivious and self-absorbed. Or he thinks that pushing others around is just the way that the world works and that everyone should act that way if they want a fair shot in life (p. 30). In this case, this person is not an asshole. He does not think that he is entitled to these advantages. Remember, being an asshole is a character trait. So while this person might have other things wrong with his character, he doesn't have the disposition that the asshole does.

Notice that it's also important that this belief is mistaken (p. 18). Some people might allow themselves to enjoy special advantages because they think they are entitled to them, but they might actually be right. For example, in the spring of 2014, the Pope visited Israel. Israel made many accommodations for the Pope. There was extra security, and entire streets were shut down in order to allow for that security, which misdirected traffic and blocked many pedestrian paths. The Pope allowed himself these advantages, and we could stipulate that he allows himself special advantages on a regular basis. So he meets one condition of being an asshole. He might have done this because he thought he was entitled to them. In this case, he would meet another condition. But in this case the Pope was correct. He really was entitled to these advantages because he is the Pope. So his belief in his entitlement is not mistaken. And the Pope is not an asshole.

The asshole's mistaken entitlement leads us to the third condition of being an asshole and explains why James finds the asshole particularly morally problematic. Often when we encounter an asshole we might react: "You need to wait your turn," we might tell him. Or, "what are you doing?" A normal person who has cut in front of us because he is absentminded would apologize. Or even a person who has done so because she thought she could get away with it might back down when confronted. This is not the case for the asshole.

Upon confrontation, the asshole will likely be indignant that we dare to question him. He will not entertain the idea that he could possibly have the same rights as everybody else. He will not listen to our complaints (p. 17). And because

of this, James says that he “poses a challenge to the idea that we are each to be recognized as moral equals” (p. 4).

Being recognized as moral equals is important to most people. It means that we hear others out when they are upset and that we too are heard. It’s a type of give-and-take relationship that we participate in, at the very least, on a very minimal level with others. The asshole refuses to partake in this relationship. The person who thinks that everyone should push ahead lest they get left behind might be willing to revise his view because he does not believe that he is specifically entitled to these advantages — he just think that’s how the world works (p. 32). And the person who is self-absorbed might be slightly abashed when called out or will at least modify her behavior. But the asshole doesn’t give us this small courtesy. He thinks that he specifically is entitled to these advantages, and he refuses to hear us when we complain.

So what is fundamentally wrong with the asshole is that he fails to recognize the value in others. He displays this by failing to respect some minor yet basic rights of others, by believing that he is entitled to do so, and by failing to hear others out when they are upset with him. What the asshole conveys is that the hurt feelings of others mean nothing to him. There is something wrong with being the kind of person who doesn’t care about the feelings of others.

Perhaps from looking at the asshole, we could begin to examine what it generally is to be not-nice and then what it is to be nice. But I don’t want to limit us to only one form of not-niceness. Part of what makes the asshole a problematic

person is that as a necessary condition of being an asshole, he takes things he's not entitled to. This means that he infringes upon the rights of others. Since I am discussing what it is to be a not-nice (and a nice) *person* in this section, I don't want us to think that it's merely these assholish actions that are problematic. You could be not-nice in a problematic way without infringing upon the rights of others. In my next section, I'm going to examine arrogance. The arrogant person is not as bad as the asshole, and she does not necessarily infringe on the rights of others. But there is still something morally wrong with being arrogant.

2.3 Arrogance

In order to explain why arrogance is a vice, Tiberius and Walker first set out to define what arrogance is. Some people think that arrogance is having a high opinion of oneself, but they do not think this is sufficient. After all, someone might be right to have a high opinion of herself (p. 379). In this case, arrogance fails to be a vice. And it is important to their argument that arrogance is a vice. Others might think that arrogance is having a false high opinion of oneself. But they also disagree with this (p. 381). They think that this definition fails to capture what really is the issue with arrogance. This is because they want to focus on how the arrogant person relates to others. They argue that there are two key components of the arrogant person.

- 1) The arrogant person believes "he is a better person according to the general standards governing what counts as a successful human

specimen” (p. 382). In other words, he thinks that he is better than other people.

- 2) Because of this, he thinks that others do not have anything to offer him or “enrich his life” (p. 382), and this belief affects how he treats them. Thus, the arrogant person does not believe he is arrogant. If told so, he would not respect the teller because he does not think that the person could offer him anything (including insight).

Although Tiberius and Walker believe that arrogance has a negative impact on others and society, they primarily discuss how it is problematic for the arrogant person. Because the arrogant person does not believe that others can offer her something, she will likely not have close friendships with others. In addition to acknowledging the intrinsic value of friendship, they invoke Aristotle’s thoughts on friendship and argue that friendship provides “a mirror to the soul” (p. 387). Because self-knowledge is difficult to gain on one’s own, friends allow us to gain insight into ourselves. The arrogant person doesn’t have many friends (because of the way that she treats and regards others) or if she does, she wouldn’t take her friends’ opinions into account. Therefore, the arrogant person forgoes something morally valuable. The asshole would also forgo this, so being an asshole is also bad for the asshole.

They present Henry Kissinger as an example of an arrogant person.⁸ As a professor, Kissinger taught on what he felt like talking about regardless of what was on the syllabus. He made students wait weeks for appointments and then would show up hours late. Kissinger was arrogant (p. 380). As Tiberius and Walker say:

Kissinger's behavior with students indicates that it is an act of magnanimity and grace on his part to stoop to meet with them, and to address himself to their petty concerns. They certainly have no right that he should do so; for a student to demand that he attend to them would be an affront, an act of the greatest impertinence. He has nothing to learn from them (p. 381).

In other words, Kissinger is so arrogant that he has no regard for his students, and he thinks that they cannot offer him anything.

Someone could argue that what is problematic about Kissinger is his assholeish behavior. But the arrogant person doesn't have to be as bad as Kissinger to be arrogant and for their arrogance to be problematic. Someone can be arrogant without acting like an asshole. Imagine a woman who is very intelligent and rightly believes that she is more intelligent than other people. Because of this, she considers others beneath her and doesn't believe that she could possibly have an interesting conversation with the vast majority of persons besides herself. So while she will talk to people, insofar as she is required to for her job, she would turn down any invitations for social encounters. According to Tiberius and Walker's definition, this woman is arrogant. While she is not cruel to

⁸ Note: I have not met Kissinger personally and cannot attest to his motivations. I think this is a good example, but we should not take any statements about him in this paper to necessarily apply to the actual Kissinger.

others, she assumes that they have little to offer her and acts accordingly because of her belief in her superiority.

In this case, she hasn't violated anyone's rights like Kissinger has. (Kissinger has violated his students' rights to be taught well and to be met on time.) Still, her behavior is problematic. She is not denying anyone their rights, but like the asshole, she fails to recognize people's value. So far, both the asshole and the arrogant person make a moral error, or they get some fact about morality wrong. It is necessary that the asshole's high opinion of his worth be false. He makes the judgement that he is entitled to more than others, and this is the wrong judgement. The arrogant person can actually be as brilliant as she thinks she is and still be arrogant. But by thinking that others have nothing to offer her, she too makes a moral error.

Even if she has a right to do this, she denies herself valuable insights, ideas, and interactions. Additionally, others would be rightly offended should they learn the reason behind her behavior. Many people dislike the idea of someone thinking of them as worthless. Although she isn't an asshole, there is something wrong with her character. Even if she doesn't go out and murder others, she denies the fact that others have value. And by doing this, she denies herself the ability to be as good of a person as she ought to be. A good person should recognize the value in others.

2.4 Meanness

But what if a person is simply mean? She does not infringe on anyone's rights, so she is not an asshole. She does not think she's better than anyone, so she's not arrogant. She enjoys insulting other people, although she doesn't harass others. (It might be fair to say that people have a right to not be harassed, but I'm not so sure people have a right to not *ever* be insulted.) She is often unfriendly. When she communicates with others, she does so in a way that is snide. All of these traits make her a mean person.

This person does not hold herself to some different standard than others. If someone is mean to her, she does not feel wronged, even if she gets upset or disagrees. In her view, she is not responsible for the feelings of others. We might wonder if there's something wrong with this kind of meanness. And if so, what?

I do think there is something wrong with this kind of meanness. First of all, I do not think that a good person could possibly be a mean person. The reason for this is that good people should view other persons as persons. This entails viewing them as individuals who have a backstory, desires, fears, and people that they love. Even if a good person does not know what these desires and fears are, or is not always thinking about the fact that they have these desires and fears, she knows that other people possess them. And if someone regards others with that awareness, then she could not be mean. If she has that understanding of others, then it would be strange for her to look at someone and be inclined to be critical for the sake of it.

Note, this does not mean that we have to be morally perfect to be good. People make mistakes. Good people sometimes do bad things, so a good person might sometimes do mean things. Furthermore, even though it's not good to be a mean person, it is possible that there are occasional mean acts that are morally acceptable to do. There is a difference, however, between doing mean acts and being a mean person. Even if it's okay to occasionally do mean acts, being a mean person is morally problematic.

There is a reason for this. Even though the mean person might believe that others have rights and value, she does disregard something important about them. That is their feelings and desires. By saying mean things, she demonstrates a lack of regard for the feelings and desires of others. She disregards the fact that the things she says will make people feel bad and that they likely would rather that she didn't say such things.

And people's feelings are a part of them. The mean person might claim that she is not responsible for the feelings of others, but if we can avoid acting in a way that would make people feel worse, why wouldn't we? By displaying a serious lack of regard for the feelings and desires of others, the mean person displays a serious lack of regard for their wellbeing and for them as persons.

Once again, the mean person fails to value something important in a person. And this is problematic.

So thus far we have established the first point that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

- 1) It is bad to be a mean person (as well as to be an arrogant person and an asshole).

Let's establish the second point, namely that it's good to be a nice person.

Now that we've discussed what it is to be not-nice, let's take a look at what it is to be nice.

2.5 Being a Nice Person

So there is something that not-nice people have in common. They fail to value something morally significant about a person. The asshole doesn't recognize a person's right to be heard. The arrogant person doesn't listen to others because she does not recognize that they could have anything to offer her. The mean person does not value the feelings or desires of others. The nice person, on the other hand, does value others. Particularly, I would say that the nice person cares about others. (Caring about others is a way of valuing them.) However, this is not exclusive to the nice person; there might be other virtues that involve valuing others. And there are a lot of different ways to recognize somebody. We need to determine the specific way that the nice person values people.

We might think that the nice person values others' feelings and desires. After all, the mean person disregards others' feelings and desires. So it would seem that the nice person cares about these things. This seems more specific. The problem with merely saying this, however, is that we could have someone who cares about people's feelings for the wrong reasons. Consider a person who cares about people's feelings, but only because it inconveniences her when they are

upset. She has a better time when she's around happy people, so she wants people to be happy. If she had a better time when she was around miserable people, she would want them to be miserable. This person does not seem like a nice person.

I think when we consider what the nice person values, we have to take into account both the fact that she values others' feelings and desires and the fact that she values them as people. Particularly, she cares about their feelings because she cares about them. Thus, the nice person is required to be genuinely nice.

Somebody could argue that this isn't the case and that the nice person does not have to actually care about others. Imagine a case where someone cares about others' feelings but for some reason other than caring about others. She cares about others' feelings only because she wants to be liked. She thinks that people will dislike her unless she cares about their feelings and acts in a way that demonstrates this. So she cares about others' feelings, but this is solely for the purpose of wanting people to be her friends.

Someone might think it's plausible that this person is nice. After all, wanting friendship is a good thing. If she also acts nicely, we might think that even though her motivation for acting nicely isn't a care for others, it does not disqualify her from being a nice person. There are some motivations that might be different. We decided that the person who cares about people's feelings because their negative feelings inconvenienced her wasn't *really* a nice person. But if we see a person who cares about others' feelings only out of a desire to be liked, we

might think she is still a nice person. We might even feel sorry for her. If this is true, then caring about others is not a necessary condition of the nice person.

But I do not think this is true. A nice person could be partially motivated to care about others' feelings because she wants to be liked. But in this case, wanting to be liked is this person's sole motivation. If something is someone's sole motivation, there is an implication that if it were not for that sole motivation, they would not do whatever their motivation is motivating them to do. This suggests that if she could be liked without having to care for others' feelings (or acting in a way that demonstrated this care), she would not care about their feelings.

So the nice person both has to care about others and care about their feelings and desires.

Note that so far, I have only discussed caring about *others* and caring about the feelings of *others*. We might wonder if the nice person is required to be nice to herself, in order to be a nice person. Consider a person who puts herself down constantly and doesn't let herself enjoy anything. She does not care about her own feelings or desires and does not care about herself. However, she generally cares a lot about others and their feelings. This person fails to display care for her own feelings or for her own wellbeing. She fails to be nice to herself, but does this detract from her being a nice person?

I do not think it does. We might tell her to be nicer to herself, but her actions do not detract from her being a nice person. This should seem intuitively

right. We generally don't tell people who treat themselves badly that they aren't nice people.

On the other hand, if a person treats someone else badly, we might say that she isn't a nice person. Imagine that someone is generally nice, but she's really mean to her neighbor. She puts this neighbor down and tries to stop this neighbor from enjoying things. This, we might think, does detract from her being a nice person. The reason for this is that the essence of a nice person is focused on the feelings and desires of *others*.

But it is not enough that the nice person care about people and their feelings. The nice person also must act in a certain way.

Specifically, she should be disposed towards nice acts and disposed against not nice acts.

To demonstrate why this is the case, let's go through two examples. The first example will be of a person who meets all of the conditions listed above except being disposed towards nice acts. The second example will be of a person who meets all the conditions listed above except being disposed against not-nice acts. If either of these people is nice, then the acts we are disposed towards or against would not be necessary conditions of the nice person. I believe that these are necessary conditions of the nice person, so I will argue that these people are not nice people.

First, imagine a person who cares about others. And because she cares about others she cares about their feelings. She is disposed against not-nice

actions. She hates gossiping about people and will never speak cruelly to others. We might think of such a person as a nice person. However, she is not disposed towards nice acts. So she lacks one of the necessary conditions of a nice person that I've given. She is not inclined to compliment someone, give someone a piece of candy, or help someone carry their things. She might do nice acts on occasion, but she is not disposed to do them.

It might seem plausible that this person is a nice person. Since many people gossip and say cruel things, the fact that she is inclined not to might seem admirable. She dislikes doing anything offensive, and she might even do nice acts occasionally. Some people will look at this case and intuitively say, *this is a nice person*. If she is a nice person, being disposed towards nice acts would not be a necessary condition of being a nice person.

But I think that it is necessary that one must be disposed towards nice acts in order to be a nice person. To understand why this is the case, let's think about one of the key features of the nice person. The mean person, if you'll remember, disregards the feelings of others. The nice person does not disregard the feelings of others; she wants others to feel good. She values the feelings of others. We could think it is sufficient that she merely avoid hurting people's feelings. But I do not think this thought holds up when we think about what it means to value something.

Let's look at a parallel case. Consider a person who values human life. Clearly this person would not kill people. He would also avoid doing acts that put

others' lives in danger. He would be disposed against ending people's lives. But he should also take action to preserve life. If he came across a child drowning in a shallow pond, he should save him. Furthermore, if he truly values human life, he should be inclined to give to charities that prevent suffering and dying. If a person cares about life, he will not only be inclined to avoid ending it, but also should be inclined to preserve it.

Likewise, it is not enough that the nice person merely avoids hurting people's feelings. If she values people's feelings, she should also be inclined to act in a way that makes people feel good.

So it is necessary that the nice person is disposed towards nice acts. Now, let's imagine a case where a person is disposed towards nice acts and is disposed towards these acts because she cares about others and their feelings. She compliments people, gives people candy, and helps old ladies cross the street. She really does care about other people. However, she is not disposed against not-nice acts. She is disposed to gossip and say cruel things to others. If she is a nice person, then it is not a necessary condition of the nice person that she be disposed against not-nice acts. But I think this is a necessary condition, and this is not a nice person.

To make this clear, once again consider what it means to be a person who values human life. In this case, our agent cares about human life. He donates a lot of money to charity and works as a doctor, so he can save people. He is disposed towards actions that save lives. However, he also murders people and is disposed

towards actions that end lives. It is absurd to say that this person values human life. Furthermore, he doesn't seem to be a coherent person. It makes no sense that he tries to save lives because he cares about life but then goes around ending life. Similarly, one cannot be a nice person while being disposed towards not-nice acts. So it's necessary that the nice person is disposed against not-nice acts.

The conditions that I have just outlined are what I will call the *primary conditions* of the nice person. There are a lot of things traditionally associated with being a nice person that I haven't mentioned. For example, we might think the nice person smiles a lot, is cheerful, is non-confrontational, etc. We might think then that the conditions I've outlined are not sufficient for being a nice person. But I do not think this is the case. I would call characteristics like cheerfulness or being non-confrontational *secondary conditions* of the nice person. One could be a nice person without possessing these secondary conditions.

I mention these secondary conditions because people often have a misconception that they are necessary to being a nice person. I want to clarify that they are not. Additionally, these will be important later on when we discuss the idea of being too much of a nice person. (They will also be important when we discuss feminist concerns with nice acts.) Let's consider the secondary conditions I've outlined. There may be more, but these are the ones I want to focus on because I think these are common.

- 1) The nice person is cheerful and pleasant. She smiles a lot.

- 2) The nice person is non-confrontational. She is less likely to stick up for herself or confront others. (Perhaps she does not get offended in the first place, or she does not consider the matter important enough to raise a fuss.)

Happy people are pleasant to be around, and they often put us at ease. Since the nice person cares about our feelings and desires, we often think that she would be happy. But this is not a necessary condition of being a nice person. You could have somebody who is very sad but still nice. Perhaps a nice person will smile because smiling is a nice act. But one can be disposed towards nice acts without being disposed towards every nice act. One can be a nice person without smiling and without being cheerful. Furthermore, some people can't do these things. Some people are socially awkward and cannot put others at ease. Some people cannot be happy, but this doesn't mean they can't be nice. Thus, these acts are not necessary for the nice person.

Second, we often think of the not-nice person as aggressive. They are active in making our lives worse and are not afraid to do so. Conversely we might think of the nice person as non-confrontational. We might think that she will avoid conflict or avoid raising a fuss. This is not necessarily the case, however. While the nice person is generally going to phrase her complaints in a more diplomatic way, it is not necessary that she be non-confrontational. It is possible that the nice person is non-confrontational, and that this is a way that she expresses her niceness. She might not want to upset others and might avoid

confronting them as a result. But this is not a necessary condition of the nice person.

So, we've established that the nice person is disposed towards nice acts, disposed against not-nice acts, cares about others' feelings and desires, and cares about others. This is a form of recognizing that other people have value. In the previous sections, we determined that part of the reason these not-nice people were problematic was because they failed to recognize the value in others. Not valuing people is a bad thing. And the converse is true. Valuing people is a good thing. The nice person values others, which suggests that the second point I outlined at the beginning is true.

2) It is good to be a nice person.

Most people would have agreed that it was good to be a nice person before reading this thesis. But as I outlined in my introduction, while we intuitively think being a nice person is good, we sometimes think it's possible and bad to be too nice. In my next section, I will consider what being too nice could mean and explain why it's bad to be too nice. This will help us to understand just how nice we ought to be.

2.6 Being Too Nice

Now we have a definition of the nice person. There are many people in our lives that we can identify as being nice. But sometimes we run across somebody who seems too nice. The too nice person does care about the feelings of others, does care about others, is disposed towards nice acts and is disposed

against not nice acts. But sometimes, we think, she goes too far. She'll volunteer for everything, even if she winds up neglecting her own health. She lets people treat her badly because she does not want to be rude. If a waiter brings her the wrong dish at the restaurant (even if it's a dish she detests), she will eat it, tip well and not complain, because she doesn't want to make a fuss.

It's good to be a nice person. But being too nice seems bad.

Part of the reason that being too nice is bad is because an excess of anything can be dangerous, even being too good. In her (1982) paper "Moral Saints," Wolf explains why she would not want to be a moral saint (someone as good as she possibly could be) and why she would not want her friends to be one either. I want to explore Wolf's concept of the moral saint because I think it will help us understand what's morally problematic about being too nice. The person who is too nice will have some of the problematic features of the moral saint. Furthermore, because niceness is different than goodness, she will have additional issues of her own. But first, let's look at what Wolf has to say about moral saints.

Wolf defines the moral saint as a person "whose every action is [as] good as it could be" (p. 419). She argues that a "necessary condition of moral sainthood would be that one's life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" (p. 420). So, the moral saint has to constantly be thinking of being moral. This means that the moral saint will always try to look for the best in others and be forgiving towards them. She will "be patient,

considerate, even-tempered, hospitable, charitable in thought as well as in deed” (p. 421).

Different philosophers have different ideas of what it means to be moral. The utilitarian thinks that one ought to do actions which maximize happiness and minimize pain. The deontologist thinks that there are certain moral rules that one should follow and that these rules apply to everyone in all cases, even if following a particular rule causes more pain than pleasure for society. Different people might have different ideas of what a moral saint would look like depending on the moral theory they subscribe to. But most moral theories allow for the idea of a moral saint, even if they disagree on what exactly the moral saint does.

Wolf presents two examples of moral saints: the loving saint and the rational saint. The loving saint’s happiness is genuinely intertwined with the welfare and happiness of others. It makes her happy to make others happy. Wolf suggests that the utilitarian would like this moral saint, since she brings a lot of happiness to the world: both the happiness she brings others and the happiness she gets from helping others (p. 420).

The rational saint’s happiness is more similar to the average person’s. Perhaps there are times when he would genuinely rather be selfish than to do the most moral thing that he could do, and being selfish would make him happy. The rational saint, however, chooses to ignore these feelings in order to be the best

person that he can be. The deontologist would likely prefer this saint because he does what he does strictly out of a sense of duty (p. 420-421).⁹

While the thoughts of a loving saint and rational saint might be slightly different, both their desire to do good and how they live their lives are the same (p. 420-421). They value moral goodness over all else. And this is problematic, according to Wolf. Because the moral saint is so consistently focused on good, she might be unable to focus on other non-moral virtues and valuable traits. A non-moral virtue is a characteristic that does not have moral worth but has worth in some other way. A gourmet cooking ability or excellent artistic skills are examples of non-moral virtues. One is not a better person for being an excellent artist. But it is still worthwhile to be an excellent artist. Because every action of a moral saint must be as morally good as possible, she cannot devote significant time (or even any time) to these talents. There is likely something morally better that she could be doing than gourmet cooking or art (p. 422).

Moral sainthood could also conflict with things that aren't necessarily virtues but still make up important aspects of who we are. Such things could include being a baseball fan or enjoying fantasy novels.

Wolf acknowledges that we might be able to find a moral saint who is also an excellent artist (p. 425). Perhaps a person developed a talent for art before deciding to be a moral saint. She might find that she could use her art to do good,

⁹ Note that loving sainthood and rational sainthood are both character traits. While the loving saint has the trait of getting joy from helping others, the rational saint has the trait of being drawn to duty. It is important to emphasize that they are character traits since character, or the nice person, is the focus for this section.

and it's absurd that moral sainthood would require her to give up something which could help others just because it brings her joy. Wolf, however, does not believe that this objection is decisive. Wolf's problem with this objection has to do with how the moral saint values things.

There are two ways to value something. First, you can value something as a means to an end. Money is something you might value as a means to an end. You value money because of the security it gives you or because it can buy you things that you want. But if money couldn't give you security or get you things you want, you wouldn't value money. You only value money because it gets you something else. So you value money as a means to an end. Another way to value things is as an end. A person is valuable as an end. You might value a person in part because she makes good grilled cheeses or tells funny jokes. But even if she didn't feed you or make you laugh, you would still recognize that she is valuable and value her. In this case, you value her as an end.

Wolf argues that even if the moral saint comes with a talent for art, she can only value the art as a means to creating joy or helping people and not for the art's sake. She can only value art as a means to an end, and not as an end itself (p. 425). And Wolf thinks this is problematic. Wolf thinks that people should value art and things like it for their own sake. But the moral saint cannot do this.

Wolf's response answers another potential objection that people might have to her argument. So far, we have implied that the moral saint is very focused on others. But many moral theorists argue that there are moral duties to the self.

Part of being a good person, these theorists say, is fulfilling these duties to the self. So we could think that the moral saint necessarily would take care of herself. But even if this is true, there is still something problematic about being a moral saint. She wouldn't value herself for her own sake but rather for the sake of morality. And Wolf would likely say that she should value herself for her own sake (p. 429). The moral saint still would be lacking something that the person who valued herself for her own sake would not lack.

So while one certainly could live a flourishing life without art and without gourmet cooking, a life without any non-moral virtues could be problematic, or at least not something that we should strive for.

Additionally, moral sainthood could conflict with some desirable personality traits, such as having a certain type of humor. Wolf argues that “a cynical or sarcastic wit, or a sense of humor that appreciates this kind of wit in others, requires that one take an attitude of resignation and pessimism toward the flaws and vices to be found in the world” (p. 422). This would conflict with the mindset of a moral saint. A moral saint should believe the best in people and the best of the world. She should view these vices as problematic and desire that people get better. Therefore, she would be unable to appreciate this humor. (p. 422).

One might argue that the moral saint could develop these traits anyway. Perhaps if she is concerned with putting others at ease, she would learn how to develop certain personality traits in order to make others feel comfortable.

However, even if she did this, her personality would be very calculated, and she would be different from a person who genuinely had those traits. And the traits would be means to an end and not ends themselves (p. 425).

Certainly, one could live a fine life without having a cynical sense of humor. But once again, a life without any non-moral personality traits is void of something. And even if it's not, we would not want to live in a society where everyone lacked these traits.

We might wonder if moral sainthood is something that is bad for everyone to aspire to or whether it is bad for anyone to aspire to. In other words, is Wolf arguing that a world in which every single person aspired to be a moral saint would be a world that we would not want to live in? If this is the case, individuals could still be moral saints. Or is she arguing that anyone who aspires to moral sainthood is harming herself in some way? If this is the case, no one should be a moral saint. Wolf states:

In pointing out the regrettable features and the necessary absence of some desirable features in a moral saint, I have not meant to condemn the moral saint or the person who aspires to become one. Rather, I have meant to insist that the ideal of moral sainthood should not be held as a standard against which any other ideal must be judged or justified (p. 435).

In other words, Wolf does not commit to the strong position that nobody ought to be a moral saint — rather she focuses on pointing out flaws with moral sainthood. These flaws should cause us to broaden our focus on what being a good person is. A good person should be moral, but she should not only be moral.

I too am hesitant to condemn moral sainthood as necessarily bad for anyone. I do believe that being a rational saint is harmful. While it is the case that there are some acts that we ought to do whether or not we gain pleasure from them, constantly and continually sacrificing our own ends for the sake of others is wrong. I could see someone living a good life as a loving saint. Given that it does bring her happiness to make others happy, she might be able to live a fulfilling and happy life while being a loving saint. Despite this, her life seems lacking somehow and it seems that she would be missing certain qualities. I think that it is okay to leave the question of whether anybody should be a moral saint open for now. Most people wouldn't gain happiness from never thinking of themselves and therefore could not be loving saints anyway.

One might fault Wolf's argument for being rather "straw man." By this I mean that it seems unrealistic that anybody would be the moral saint that she describes. Even though there are people who are too self-sacrificing and there are people who are incredibly good, Wolf's idea of a moral saint is so extreme that it could be seen as irrelevant. I agree that I would have a difficult time envisioning a person being a moral saint to the extent that she describes. But I do not think this means that Wolf's argument is without value. There are reasons for this.

First, the point of Wolf's article is not to show that there are actually people like the moral saint that she describes. Rather, she demonstrates that the moral saint is not an ideal. Furthermore, she argues that we ought to restructure our ideas of how to live to allow for non-moral virtues and actions. According to

Wolf, in their ‘perfect’ forms, our existing moral codes could be problematic, and there ought to be more to life than morality (p. 419-439). So her argument is valuable.

So being as morally good as we could possibly be might not be the best thing for us. Now I want to consider if being as nice as we could possibly be could also be harmful for us. I will argue that being too nice is bad for us.

The nice saint, or the person who is as nice as she possibly could be, could face the same issues as the moral saint. She would be too nice to have personality traits like a cynical sense of humor. An ordinary nice person could be cynical, while still being nice. But the nice saint is always going to be as nice as she can be. So she cannot. And if being nice is the most important thing in her life, then she won’t value certain non-moral virtues, or at least won’t let them interfere with her being as nice as possible. By being too nice, she denies herself access to certain pleasures and other character traits.

To make this clearer, let’s examine the following case. Devorah and her friends are teenagers who are really passionate about art. A very temporary exhibition is at a nearby gallery. Devorah’s little sister wants to hang out with them, and it would make her really happy to do so. But if they hang out with her, they can’t go to the gallery because the subject matter would be inappropriate for her. They decide to go to the gallery.

In this case, it would have been nice for them to include her. But their passion for art is also valuable. It is good for the girls to be nice people. But it is also good for them to be artistic people.

Not every decision has to be moral. By going to the gallery, the girls have not done the “nice” thing. But they have made a worthwhile choice. It might be strange to praise them for this choice, but there is value in the fact that we don’t have to. There is value in the fact that part of life involves making decisions that are not moral decisions.

Recognizing this is important. It’s important to consider whether or not we ought to be the type of people who would give up the art exhibition. Wolf, I believe, would argue that we needn’t be. And I am arguing the same. Devorah and her friends are not lacking in character because of their choice. They do not need to be that nice. And while hanging out with the sister might have been praiseworthy, always allowing niceness to trump every aspect of their lives would be bad.

When I defined niceness, I discussed both the primary conditions and the secondary conditions. I maintained that the secondary conditions were not required for being a nice person.

But when one is too nice, one (often) feels forced to take on the secondary conditions. One feels like she must do every nice thing she could possibly do, so the secondary conditions become a lot more important in the mind of the agent than they actually are. This is why people sometimes accuse nice people of being

wishy-washy or complacent. When people are too concerned with niceness, they are afraid to do anything that isn't as nice as it could be.

There are four different kinds of nice saints that I want to consider:

- 1) the person whose niceness drives them to take up secondary conditions
- 2) the person who takes up secondary and primary conditions of niceness but for reasons other than caring about others
- 3) the person who takes up primary conditions out of a care for others but secondary conditions out of a fear of being disliked
- 4) the person who doesn't take up secondary conditions but is still too nice.

First, like I've said, sometimes a person cares so much about being a nice person that she wants to do everything possible to be nice. In this case she will take up secondary conditions, but she will feel like these conditions are primary. She won't confront others because she doesn't want to hurt them. She will always smile, even when she's sad, because she wants to always make others feel at ease. She won't return her wrong dish at the restaurant because she doesn't want to bother the waiter. And she doesn't want to upset these people because she cares about them and their feelings. All of these things are nice acts. Still, this can be problematic because she treats things that aren't necessary to being a nice person as if they are necessary and does them in excess. She is too nice, and this is bad.

Second, sometimes someone could take up these secondary conditions for reasons other than niceness. Consider the person who is just really, really afraid of being disliked. If it weren't for the fact that she could be disliked, she would

gladly not do any nice acts, and she wouldn't care about others' feelings. But she is so afraid of being disliked that she makes sure always to smile, never to confront someone, and to let people walk all over her. We might think of this person as being too nice. However, she doesn't actually meet the criteria for being a nice person. This example is important because some people that we think of as being too nice aren't actually nice people. This person should stop letting people walk all over her. But she should also care about others.

Third, we can imagine a person who is a nice person. He cares about others' feelings, cares about others, and does and avoids nice and not-nice acts because of this care. However, he is also afraid of being disliked, and as a result takes on many of the secondary conditions of the nice person and feels that these are obligatory. He thinks that if he's not always smiling, not always complacent, and doesn't always let people walk all over him, then people will hate him. If he wasn't afraid of being disliked, he would still be a nice person, but he would take care of himself a lot more. This person is a nice person. However, because his more problematic actions and character traits come from a fear of being disliked and not a care for others, we would not say that he was too nice a person. We can say that he exhibits many characteristics of the too nice person and perhaps that his actions are too nice, but we cannot say that he's too much of a nice person.

Finally, while the too nice person usually takes on the secondary conditions of the nice person, there could be someone who is too nice without doing this. Imagine that there is a "grouchy" nice person. She isn't always

smiling, and she might confront someone if need be. However, all of her actions and thoughts are devoted to making others happy. This nice saint shares many problematic features with the moral saint. She will be unable to focus on non-moral virtues, be unable to value passions for their own sake, and her life will be dominated by a care for others. She does not focus too much on the secondary conditions of the nice person, which makes her different than most people that we think of as being too nice. But she still is too nice, and this isn't the best thing for her.

There is another consequence of being too nice that could apply to all of these cases. If there is a difference between being nice and being good, being a nice saint might push a person away from certain morally good things. For example, if niceness conflicts with honesty and justice, the nice saint might not be as honest or as just as she should be. If there is an injustice in society or an uncomfortable truth that needs to be said, the nice saint is going to be more focused on making people comfortable than she would be on fixing the injustice or saying the truth. If she is only focused on being nice, then she might not have room for other good things in her life. So there are some ways that being a nice saint could potentially make someone a worse person. This leads us to our third point.

- 3) It's morally problematic to be too much of a nice person.

2.7 Must we be Nice People?

Wolf's article also suggests that there are people that we admire for non-moral reasons, and we are right to admire them for these reasons. Many people have talents that have nothing to do with being nice. Someone might be a fantastic cook, talented basketball player, or an excellent artist. And we would be right to admire them for these qualities.

But we might wonder what happens when the fact that someone isn't that nice contributes to their overall valuable personality. Consider Alexis whom I mentioned in my introduction.

Alexis is not what we'd call nice. Her sense of humor is dark and slightly offensive. She is abrasive and brutally honest. She won't exchange pleasantries if she doesn't feel like it. However, if she is pleasant to you, then you know that she genuinely likes you. Her tough demeanor helps get things done. And she's a funny person to be around.

We've established that it's good to be nice. We might wonder, however, if we are obligated to be nice. Alexis does not seem like a nice person. Perhaps she doesn't completely disregard the feelings of others like the mean person, but it doesn't really seem that she values them either. And considering that she's brutally honest and abrasive, we might not be able to say that she's disposed against not-nice acts. If we have to be nice people, then Alexis should change her personality and be a nicer person.

However, Alexis isn't a bad person. She just isn't nice. She has a lot of valuable personality traits. Furthermore, were she to be nicer, she might lose some

of the traits that make her herself. Her humor, honesty, and productivity are tied to her disposition towards certain not-nice acts. On the one hand, we might be inclined to say that Alexis doesn't have to be nicer. But on the other hand, we've established that being nice is good, and we want nice people in the world.

That being said, I will argue one is not morally obligated to be a nice person. There are other virtues that we want in the world but that we don't think are required for everyone. One example is musicality. Music is valuable to our society. Most people are glad that they live in a society with music, and musical ability is something that we admire in people. People might even argue that we should have more music in the world or better music in the world. Despite this, most people would not argue that we are obligated to be musical, even though we want music in society. Musicality is something that we like in our society but do not require everyone to have. Being nice is the same.

It is good to be a nice person. It is good that there are nice people in the world. The world might be worse if there were fewer nice people. The world might be better if there were more nice people. But that does not mean that every person is obligated to be a nice person. So the fourth statement I listed earlier is true:

- 4) One is not morally obligated to be a nice person.

2.8 Wrapping up the Nice Person

I have now argued for all four statements that I said I would argue for. As a reminder they were as follows:

- 1) It is bad to be a mean person (as well as to be an arrogant person and an asshole).
- 2) It is good to be a nice person.
- 3) It's morally problematic to be too much of a nice person.
- 4) One is not morally obligated to be a nice person.

In addition to arguing for these statements, there are several things we can take away from this chapter.

First, we have a definition of the nice person. This definition has allowed us to begin to analyze the role of being nice in our lives. Furthermore, we can build on this definition to define the nice act.

Second, we have an understanding of several interesting moral concepts. We know what it is to be an asshole and why this is problematic. We know what it is to be arrogant and why this is problematic. We know what it is to be a moral saint and why even this is problematic.

And third, we have begun to address the tension that there sometimes is between being nice and being good.

Now that I have explored the concept of a nice person, I want to explore the concept of a nice act. In my next chapter, I will define the nice act. I will question what our moral obligation is to do nice acts and question whether there are cases where we shouldn't do nice acts.

CHAPTER 3: ON DOING NICE ACTS

In my previous section, I discussed what it was to be a nice person. I explained that the nice person is disposed to do nice acts. In this section, I will explain what it is to do nice acts.

But what are these nice acts? Must we do them, or is it merely good to do them? And could it ever be bad to do them?

There are several factors that we will need to discuss in order to answer these questions. Before I begin writing, I am going outline the general structure of this chapter. First, I will need to define what a nice act is. I will argue that a nice act is a positive response to the expected feelings or desires of others.

To determine whether or not we are morally obligated to do (morally good) nice acts, I will examine supererogatory acts, acts that are not morally required but are still good to do. We typically think of supererogatory acts as completely optional or fully morally elective. But there are two subcategories of the supererogatory that aren't completely optional. These are common decencies (acts that any minimally well-formed moral agent would perform but that are technically supererogatory) and MPMMNTD (acts that it would be a morally permissible moral mistake not to do).¹⁰ Both of these categories contain many examples of nice acts.

I will then consider the flipside of nice acts. Sometimes it is not good to do a nice act. I will consider examples where a nice act can harm the self and other

¹⁰ I will explain these terms later.

examples where the nice act is not what is best for society. Furthermore, I will argue that the demand that people do certain nice acts (such as demanding that women smile) can be harmful.

Understanding this will help us to better understand how there can be a tension between doing nice acts and doing good acts.

But first, let's look at what a nice act is.

3.1 The Nice Act

When we discussed the nice person, we said that the nice person:

- 1) cares about others,
- 2) as a result of caring about others cares about their feelings,
- 3) *is disposed towards nice acts*
- 4) is disposed against not-nice acts.

So in order to fully understand the nice person, we have to understand what a nice act is.

Another reason for understanding the nice act is that there is a difference between doing a nice act and being a nice person. This should make sense. When we think about goodness, there is a difference between doing a good act and being a good person. Someone could do a good act without being a good person. For example, perhaps I like to go around killing people, but one day I decide to save someone from a burning building. Even though I am a serial killer, and not a good person, saving that person was still a good act. Likewise, someone could do a nice act without being a nice person. I could go around mocking people and

interrupting them and generally refusing to do anything to benefit them. In this case, I would not be a nice person. But perhaps one day, I give a stranger a lollipop. Even though I am not a nice person, giving the stranger a lollipop is a nice act.

Since the nice person is disposed towards nice acts out of a care for the feelings or desires of others, there must be some relation between the nice act and the feelings or desires of others. The nice act must react to or respond to these feelings or desires in some ways. Thus my definition of the nice act is as follows:

The nice act is positive response to the expected feelings or desires of others.

There are several features of this definition to note:

- 1) You can either respond to the feelings *or* the desires of the other person.
- 2) The nice act does not have to come from a care for others.
- 3) The response must be positive.
- 4) The agent responds to the expected feelings, not necessarily the actual feelings.

I will go through each of these features and explain why each is important.

First, note the ‘or’ in this definition. The nice act is a response to the expected feelings *or* desires. It does not have to be a response to both. For example, let’s say I believe that giving people candy generally makes people happy. So I go around giving people candy. This is generally a nice act because it

is a positive response to the expected feelings of others. Alternatively, my friend is sick and depressed. Nothing I do can make her happy. Still, I go to visit her, believing she would want me there, even though my presence won't make her happier. In this case, this is not a positive response to her feelings, since I cannot change those. But this is still a nice act because I am responding to her desires.

Second, remember that the nice person must be disposed towards these acts because they care about others. However, someone who does a nice act does not have to care about others. While the nice act is a response to someone's feelings, an agent could be responding to someone's feelings for a variety of reasons. Perhaps, someone wants to take over the world. She gives people candy because they'll be happy, and she knows if they are happy, she will have a better opportunity to take over the world. So in order to take over the world, she does nice acts. While this person would not be a nice person, the act of giving people candy is still nice. In order for an act to be nice, one does need to intend to make someone feel good or give them something they would want. However, she does not have to do this because she cares about them.

This might make some intuitive sense. When children are being difficult, their parents might tell them to "be nice." This seems different than telling their children to be ethical, genuine, considerate people. Rather, they want their children to act in a certain way. (They might also want their children to be ethical people, but the specific command to be nice seems to focus more on surface actions than genuine goodness.)

The third feature of this definition is that the response must be positive. By this I mean the act attempts to make people feel good or give them something that they want. If the response didn't have to be positive, then a nice act could be one that hurt the feelings of others. After all, hurting someone's feelings is also a response to them. Clearly it is not nice to hurt people's feelings, so nice acts must be positive responses.

Fourth, note that a nice act is a positive response to the *expected* feelings of others, not the actual feelings. A nice act does not actually have to make people feel better. But the agent must intend that the act will make people feel better. She is responding to the expected feelings, not necessarily the actual feelings. Let's look at the following case to make this clearer.

Imagine that you have a friend who feels really bad about himself. He recently wrote an essay, which was good. You want him to feel better, so you tell him what a great job he did on the essay. You tell him he's a fantastic writer and that he should feel really great about himself. You think that the compliment will make him happy. But instead it just makes him feel pressure to do just as well next time, which makes him feel stressed. For him, it would have been better if you had never brought the essay up in the first place. If doing nice acts required us to respond to people's actual feelings, then complimenting him would not be a nice act. But this seems wrong. It was nice of you to compliment him; it's just that you lacked certain knowledge and as a result didn't respond to his actual feelings.

Your act of complimenting him is nice because you responded to his expected feelings.

The previous case might make some intuitive sense. Now I want to look at a case that will demonstrate that nice acts can be rather subjective and can depend on a person's intentions. Imagine a man who wants to do something nice for women. He knows that people generally like compliments. He deduces that women are people, so women like compliments. He notices that women (generally) have breasts and like their breasts. He decides that women must like getting compliments on their breasts. So he decides to compliment a woman on the street on her breasts. He believes this will make her happy. He is wrong, and it makes her uncomfortable. Furthermore, his act (which is sexual harassment) is morally wrong. But, this is still a nice act. It is a nice act because he responded to what he expected people's feelings to be.

Granted, it is unusual for someone's worldview to be this misconstrued. Most cases of sexual harassment are not nice acts. But the niceness of an act does depend on someone's view of the world, which is subjective.

This is part of the reason that we sometimes feel ambivalent about niceness. Nice acts are dependent on our intentions, so many acts which aren't good acts could be nice acts. By itself, this doesn't entail that nice acts are bad. It might be that the nice act simply isn't sufficient for being good. Even this is important to note, however. Part of the reason we might sometimes think that niceness is weak is that a nice act is not necessarily a good act.

But there is another feature of the nice act that is important to consider, which also explains why we are often ambivalent about niceness. The nice act demonstrates care for a person's feelings, and this is good. But while feeling good is generally good for a person, sometimes it isn't. The nice act is a response to a person's expected feelings or desires, but it is not necessarily a response to what is expected to be good for a person.

Some nice acts aren't good for people, even if they make people feel good. Imagine a child who asks for candy before dinner. The candy is not good for the child, but the babysitter gives it to the child because she wants the child to be happy. In this case, the act is nice. She knows this act will make the child happy, so she does it to make the child happy. But it's not good for the child.

It is important for us to note that nice acts aren't always good for people and aren't always intended to be good for people. If nice acts were always good for people, then nice acts would merely be a subspecies of good acts. If we understand that nice acts focus on feelings and desires, we can identify a unique feature of nice acts. And if we understand that this feature is not always good, we can understand niceness as different from goodness.

But despite this, some nice acts are good for people. In fact, many nice acts are good for people. We often think it's good to do these nice acts, and much of the time we are right. But we might wonder, are these nice acts simply good to do, or are we morally obligated to do them? The answer to this question seems unclear. On the one hand, it seems strange to say that we *have* to do nice acts. But

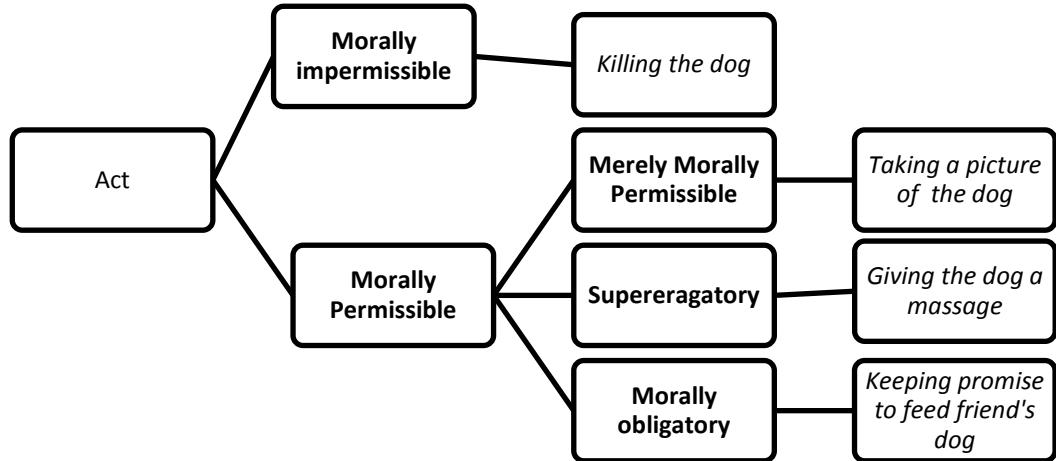
on the other hand, it seems strange to say that we are completely exempt from all nice acts. In my next section, I will explore the question of whether or not (and to what extent) we are obligated to do nice acts.

3.2 How do we Categorize Acts?

To understand the question of whether or not we are obligated to do nice acts, we must first understand moral acts more generally. To do this, I will categorize acts into groups depending on the extent to which we ought to do them or should not do them.¹¹ We can categorize acts as follows: Acts are either morally impermissible or morally permissible. Murdering a friend's dog is morally impermissible. If something is morally impermissible, then we must not do it. But if an act is morally permissible, we can do it. Within the morally permissible, there are three subcategories: the morally obligatory, the merely morally permissible, and the supererogatory. Feeding a friend's dog after you promised to is morally obligatory because keeping a promise is morally obligatory. If something is morally obligatory, then we must do it. Taking a picture of a friend's dog is merely morally permissible. It's not right or wrong to do; in fact it really doesn't have much moral weight at all. Finally, giving a friend's dog a massage might be supererogatory. Supererogatory acts are acts that we are permitted to do, that would be good to do, but that we are not morally obligated to do. There are no moral rules that state I must give my friend's dog a massage; nor are there moral rules that say I can't. But the dog will gain

¹¹ While I am not providing a citation for these categories, I did not invent them. They are considered general philosophical common knowledge.

happiness from the massage, so the act is supererogatory. We could also visualize this with the following chart.



Moral acts can typically be praised or criticized. We should criticize the act of killing the dog. We should criticize the act of breaking a promise. We should praise the act of giving the dog a massage. But because it is supererogatory, it seems we should not criticize the act of failing to give the dog a massage. In fact, it seems we should not criticize the act of failing to perform any supererogatory act. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a supererogatory act.

I want to classify most nice acts as supererogatory. The problem with this, as I have expressed earlier, is that we normally think we can't criticize someone for failing to perform supererogatory acts. But there seems to be something wrong with failing to perform certain nice acts. We generally think that classifying nice

acts as supererogatory means that we can't criticize the act of failing to perform nice acts.

Or can we?

3.3 Morally Permissible Moral Mistakes and Common Decencies

While traditionally it is thought that we cannot criticize the act of failing to perform a supererogatory act, some philosophers feel differently. There are two subcategories of the supererogatory that I discuss in this section:

- 1) MPMMNTD (acts that it would be a morally permissible moral mistake not to do)
- 2) common decencies.

A morally permissible moral mistake is a failure to do an act that is not obligatory but that all things considered one ought to do. A common decency is an act that is not obligatory but that any minimally well-formed moral agent would perform. These categories are important because they suggest some supererogatory acts might be less optional than we think. This means that even if nice acts aren't generally morally obligatory, we can still say a person should do them, and sometimes criticize the act of not doing them. In fact, I will argue that this is the case for many nice acts.

To begin, I will discuss Harman's (in press) idea of the morally permissible moral mistake.

Harman proposes adding a subcategory to the supererogatory — that of acts which would be a morally permissible moral mistake not to do (or

MPMMNTD).¹² Morally permissible moral mistakes generally refer to a failure to do an act that is supererogatory but that nonetheless, all things considered, one should do. And the reasons that one should do it are moral reasons (p. 1-6). This might seem strange. If an act is supererogatory, it seems that it is completely optional, and it shouldn't be a moral mistake not to do it. Harman presents an example to show why this is not the case.

She envisions a college professor named Amanda. It is 11 p.m. Amanda has a young daughter who will wake her up in the morning, and Amanda really wants to get to bed. Her student, Joe, has just emailed her a third draft of his paper, which is due the next day. She has commented on Joe's first two drafts, although she feels that Joe is close to a breakthrough. If Joe fails this class, he could lose his scholarship and be forced to drop out of college. Dropping out of college would have a strong negative effect on Joe's life. Amanda decides that all things considered she should look at the paper, and she does. According to Harman, she is right (p. 5).

Harman explains that had Amanda failed to look at Joe's paper, she would not be doing anything morally impermissible. After all, she is not morally required to give students comments on drafts at all, let alone three times (p. 5). Giving the comments is supererogatory. Still, given the facts presented, (and in Harman's view) she would be failing to do something that she should be doing all things considered (had she not looked at Joe's draft). Therefore, she would be

¹² Note that while the concept of 'morally permissible moral mistakes' is Harman's concept and terminology, 'MPMMNTD' is my terminology.

making a morally permissible moral mistake. This is important because it establishes that there are some acts that meet two criteria:

- 1) They are supererogatory.
- 2) They are MPMMNTD.¹³

It is important to note that when Harman focuses on moral concerns, she primarily is focusing on duties to others. She states that she will “use ‘moral reasons’ to refer to *other-regarding* moral reasons” (p. 3). She does not focus on self-regarding moral reasons or moral duties to oneself. In a later section, I will address potential problems that may arise as a result of this, but in this section I will leave the question of duties to the self alone, as Harman does.

Harman also considers the idea that a moral mistake might be praiseworthy yet still be a moral mistake. She presents a similar example to the one above. In this case, however, Amanda also gets an email from a student, Tom, who has sent her a second draft of his paper. She’s looked at Tom’s first draft, and he did fairly well, but he’s added an extra section. It will take her 10 minutes to look at Tom’s and 30 minutes to look at Joe’s. She can only look at one essay because she needs to go to sleep (p. 18). (To make this stronger let us assume that if she were to look at both she would be unable to focus on the second one and

¹³ Some readers might find themselves feeling a little lost because I am discussing two new terms: the ‘morally permissible moral mistake’ and the ‘MPMMNTD.’ If you understand the meaning of these terms, then there’s no reason to read this footnote, but if you don’t, let me elaborate here. In some ways the morally permissible moral mistake and the MPMMNTD are opposites. Amanda giving Joe the comments is an MPMMNTD. Amanda not giving Joe the comments is a morally permissible moral mistake. At this point, we understand that acts that are MPMMNTD are supererogatory and good. Morally permissible moral mistakes are morally permissible but problematic in some way. A simplistic way of thinking about this (at this point) is: MPMMNTD = Good, morally permissible moral mistake = Problematic.

then be unable to focus in class the next day, so it really is imperative that she go to sleep, even if we do not consider her own health important.) She chooses to look at Tom's.

This, Harman argues, is supererogatory because she was not morally obligated to look at either but still a moral mistake because all things considered, she probably should have looked at Joe's, and she didn't. Somebody might make the argument that the acts of failing to look at Joe's paper and of looking at Tom's paper are actually separate, and this is not a case of a morally permissible moral mistake being praiseworthy. Instead, they could argue, Amanda was doing something praiseworthy by looking at Tom's and making a moral mistake by failing to look at Joe's. These might seem like separate acts. If this objection is true, then there would be no one act that is both a moral mistake and praiseworthy.

But the fact is that looking at Tom's essay made Amanda unable to look at Joe's. We can't separate these actions because she could have only chosen one, and by choosing Tom's she eliminated the possibility of looking at Joe's. Still, looking at Tom's essay was praiseworthy because it was not something that she was morally obligated to do. Thus, in this case, performing a supererogatory act was a morally permissible moral mistake because it prevented the performance of a better, more urgent supererogatory act.¹⁴

¹⁴ This idea will be important later when I consider the idea that a nice act can be a morally permissible moral mistake.

So looking at Joe's paper in both cases is an MPMMNTD. It is also a nice act. So nice acts can be MPMMNTD. There are times when we are not morally obligated to do nice acts, but we should, all things considered.

There are some people who will intuitively disagree that giving comments is a moral mistake, even a morally permissible one. I even feel conflicted about this, as I will express when I discuss the idea that a nice act can be a morally permissible moral mistake. But I still feel that the category of the MPMMNTD is valuable. I will present one more case that demonstrates an act that is an MPMMNTD in the hopes that ambivalent readers will be inclined to agree that there is such thing as a morally permissible moral mistake.

There is an old stuffed tiger that you have at your house. You have a young neighbor who sometimes comes by your house. She adores the tiger, and simply being around it makes her feel good. You are considering giving the tiger to her. She does not have a lot of toys and is a rather lonely child, so if you gave her the tiger, it would mean the world to her, and she would treasure it greatly. You value the tiger a little bit. You like the way it looks on the shelf where you display it, and it's yours. Still, you don't value it nearly as much as the child would. You deliberate and decide to keep the tiger.

In this case, keeping the tiger was a morally permissible moral mistake. You are not morally required to give away your possessions to small children, and you have a right to keep your toys. But, considering how much this tiger would mean to the child, all things considered, you should have given it to her. Giving

her the tiger would have been supererogatory, but it would also have been an MPMMNTD.

It might seem like a strange idea that there are acts that are supererogatory and MPMMNTD. But now I'm going to argue that there are supererogatory acts that are even less optional than MPMMNTD. In her (2004) essay "Common Decency," Calhoun examines the importance of and definition of the category of common decencies. For Calhoun, common decencies consist of acts that are not morally obligatory, yet not fully morally elective either. Such acts might include holding the door open for a stranger carrying bags or giving the time to somebody who asks.¹⁵ We are not infringing on anybody's rights by failing to perform these common decencies, yet we would be failing to do something that any minimally well-formed moral agent would do. A minimally well-formed moral agent is an agent who does the minimum of what she needs to do to be a decent person.

One might think that if an act is not morally obligatory, then it must be morally elective, but Calhoun demonstrates why this might not be the case. In fact, common decencies differ from most supererogatory acts because common decencies are not fully morally elective. Calhoun argues that in order for an act to be fully morally elective:

1. Omitting the act is not morally criticizable.
2. No "ought" stronger than an "ought" of moral advice giving is appropriately used to recommend it.
3. Choosing the act is meritorious — something we commend or admire the agent for doing rather than take as owed or simply to be expected.

¹⁵ Calhoun also includes occasionally donating to charities on this list. I think that this is morally obligatory, so I am less inclined to include it myself.

4. Gratitude untempered by any thought that one has some moral title to the gift bestowed is the proper response to the act (p. 131).

So, if an act is fully morally elective, we cannot condemn a person for failing to do it. If a person did do this fully morally elective act, we would commend the person for doing the act and be grateful.¹⁶

The electivity of these acts depends partially on how easy and costly it is for an agent to do them. Typically, common decencies are fairly easy to perform and not costly at all. According to Calhoun, the common decencies do not meet any of the conditions of fully morally elective acts (we do criticize people for omitting the common decencies, they ought to perform them, we expect them, and while we might thank someone for performing common decencies, gratitude would be excessive) (p.131). The reason that this is the case is that any minimally well-formed moral agent should choose to perform common decencies. And so by failing to perform them, one fails to even be a minimally well-formed moral agent.

This list suggests that MPMMNTD are more optional than common decencies. Joe should feel grateful that Amanda took the time to give him the comments, and we should praise the act of giving him the comments. It might be the case that we would morally criticize Amanda for omitting this act, but we would not criticize her as harshly as we would criticize somebody for failing to

¹⁶ It is important to note that when Calhoun speaks of acts as being fully morally elective she is primarily talking about acts that involve moral considerations. Choosing to eat Frosted Flakes over Cheerios is a fully elective act, but this does not involve any moral considerations.

perform a common decency. And we might say that Amanda ought to give Joe the comments, but this is a weaker ‘ought’ than when we say a person ought to give a stranger who asks for it the time.

It is important to understand how Calhoun is conceptualizing the morally obligatory. She seems to define the morally obligatory as not infringing on the rights of others. For example, Charles Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge does not technically violate anybody’s rights. According to Calhoun, he does not “owe his nephew pleasantries, Christmas carolers something for their cheer, Bob Cratchit higher wages than agreed upon, [or] his debtors a grace period in meeting their debts,” (p. 129). Calhoun argues that Scrooge fails to be even a minimally well-formed moral agent because he does not perform any common decencies, but that Scrooge does meet his moral obligations. Common decencies are not morally obligatory.

It is also important to note that social and cultural norms often determine which acts constitute the common decencies. For example, it might be a common decency to hold the door open for a stranger with her hands full, but it would not be considered a common decency to tie that same stranger’s shoes (p. 138). This is due to cultural norms that we have regarding door-opening vs. shoe tying.

Many common decencies are nice acts. It is nice to hold the door open for a stranger, and it is nice to give the time to someone who asks for it.

If we think that both common decencies and MPMMNTD are part of the supererogatory, then perhaps supererogatory acts fall on a spectrum. If we

understand this spectrum, we will have a broader understanding of the supererogatory. Look at the image below. The acts on the left are the least optional and the acts on the right are the most optional.

Common Decencies _____ MPMMNTD _____ Saintly and Heroic Acts

The most optional acts are Saintly and Heroic acts. These are acts that are so good that (most of us) wouldn't expect anyone to perform them. An example of a Saintly Act might be giving up everything one owns to charity. An example of a Heroic Act might be risking one's life to save someone from a burning building.

But there is a subcategory that is missing from this spectrum of the supererogatory. We have seen that Common Decencies are more required than MPMMNTD. We should also look at acts that are less required than MPMMNTD, but less admirable than Saintly and Heroic Acts. There are some acts that align with what we typically think supererogatory acts are — acts that are good to do and really are completely optional. Montague (1989) argues that "little benefications" ought to be a part of the supererogatory. He uses an example of a person who gives a treasured toy model to a young neighbor. The agent really treasures the toy because it's a remnant from his childhood. But the young neighbor also really admires it, so he gives it to her to make her happy (p. 107). This isn't a Saintly or Heroic act. And we would not expect this person to do this, so it is not a common decency. And unlike the stuffed tiger case, the agent values the toy, so failing to do this would not be a moral mistake.

This is a completely optional supererogatory nice act. It is a little beneficiation.

Little beneficiations are also part of the supererogatory. The spectrum below will reflect our revised conceptions of the supererogatory. I am using B to denote a little beneficiation, an act that is supererogatory and is completely optional.

Common Decencies _____MPMMNTD_____B_____Saintly and Heroic Acts

In my introduction, I presented a puzzling question about our moral obligations. I thought that on the one hand it seemed off to say that nice acts are morally obligatory, but on the other hand it seemed strange to say that nice acts are completely optional and that we're completely exempt from them. Exploring the categories of the MPMMNTD and common decencies demonstrates that both intuitions are correct. While some nice acts truly are completely optional, others are supererogatory, but the act of failing to perform them is problematic. So we have an answer to this puzzling question.

Another puzzle that I have been exploring is this tension between niceness and goodness. If all nice acts were required, then there would be no such tension. We know now that not all nice acts are required, although many are good. In this section, we have focused on acts which are nice and also good. But we know that not all nice acts are good. What happens when it's not good to do a nice act?

3.4 Nice Acts as Morally Permissible Moral Mistakes

We can see why Harman might come to the conclusion that Amanda should look at Joe's paper. While the sleep that Amanda would lose is unfortunate, the consequences of Joe losing his scholarship could be devastating. This is a case where Harman believes choosing the self-serving action is a moral mistake. So far, acts that were morally permissible moral mistakes have tended to be somewhat self-focused acts. But what if the nice act was a morally permissible moral mistake? Swanton (2003) provides an example where this is the case.¹⁷

Swanton argues that whether or not an act is virtuous can depend on the situation and the context. Tim is at a philosophy conference, where there is a stranger, sitting by himself, forlorn. It turns out that the stranger is left out of the conversation because he is from another country and cannot speak English well. So Tim leaves the conversation he is having and goes to talk to the stranger, albeit having a less in-depth conversation than he would have liked to have had. He has made the conference a worse experience for himself but a better experience for the stranger (p. 253).

This is a nice act, and we might also think this is a good act. But imagine that Tim has made a habit out of this kind of behavior. He continually sacrifices his own happiness for that of others. He does this so often that he frequently finds himself miserable because he gives up things he values to please others. He has recognized that this isn't healthy for him, so he's made a promise to be more self-

¹⁷ Note that Swanton does not use the term "moral mistake." This is my application of Harman's terminology to Swanton's example.

protective. If we knew this, then we might not praise the act of going to talk to the stranger. Even though his act seems good, given our newfound knowledge of his history, we might question whether or not this really was good (p. 243).

In this case, talking to the stranger is a morally permissible moral mistake. It is not impermissible for Tim to go talk to the stranger. In fact, it might even be praiseworthy. (Remember, morally permissible moral mistakes can also be praiseworthy.) But by doing this act, Tim fails to be self-protective. Because of this, it would have been more praiseworthy for Tim to have had a great intellectual conversation and enjoy the conference than it would have been for him to talk to the stranger.

By continually failing to be self-protective, Tim is harming himself. This is bad. People are valuable. When one harms the self, one harms something valuable. Just like it's bad to neglect the well-being of others, it is also bad to neglect our own wellbeing.

Harman focused on other-regarding moral considerations. Another way of saying this is that she focused on what our moral duties to others are and what our moral reasons to act for the benefit of others are. But since self-regarding considerations can be moral, we should also think about self-regarding moral considerations when deciding whether or not we ought to do a nice act.

Let's look at Amanda's case in light of self-regarding moral considerations. Perhaps it's still true that Joe failing the class would be so harmful for him that Amanda ought to give him the comments, all things considered. But

there are additional ways that Amanda might harm herself, if she gives Joe the comments. Perhaps Joe will tell a first-year: “Professor Amanda’s so great! I emailed her at 11 p.m. the night before a paper was due, and she gave me comments.” Amanda might not want to acquire a reputation for being willing to give last-minute comments.

What happens if Joe is always on the brink of needing help? What if Joe will need this level of help throughout the semester? What if there are other students who also need this level of help? Suddenly, Amanda has resigned herself to many more sleepless nights. These potential consequences mean that she might be harming herself by helping Joe. Remember that Harman states that morally permissible moral mistakes can be praiseworthy and supererogatory. In this case, it might be supererogatory for Amanda to help Joe. But if by helping Joe she ignores more important self-regarding moral considerations, then she would be making a morally permissible moral mistake by helping him. Therefore she would be doing something morally problematic by doing something supererogatory. And she would be doing something morally problematic by doing something nice.

Harman acknowledges that there are some cases where doing a beneficiary thing is not the thing that one ought to do. She provides an example of a woman whose headaches often lead to migraines. The woman has a headache. To minimize the chances of a migraine, she needs to go lie down in a dark, silent room. Just then her young neighbor knocks on the door wanting to sing her a song. It would make him happy to perform the song, but she still should go lie

down (Harman p. 8). For Harman, this shows that there are some supererogatory acts that are mistakes. Whether or not this is a moral mistake, she seems to be leaving up to question. But I would argue that this is a moral mistake, that it is morally permissible, but that it's also morally problematic. So this is another example of a morally permissible moral mistake that is also a nice act.

I want to take a step back and look at the upshot of all of this. We established before that there is such a thing as an MPMMNTD. Before this section, we thought of these acts as other-regarding. We thought that a failure to do the nice act would be a morally permissible moral mistake. But here I have demonstrated that sometimes the nice act is a morally permissible moral mistake. So sometimes it's wrong to do nice acts. And sometimes the reason that it's wrong to do nice acts is that certain nice acts can harm the self.

Sometimes, performing a nice act is problematic. Other times, it's less the act itself that is a problem and more the pressure that one faces to do certain nice acts.

In my next section, I consider what is wrong with expecting that others be nice.

3.5 The Problem with the Expectation to be Nice

If someone is being an asshole, we might be right to demand that they be nicer. This is partially because the asshole denies us things we are owed. Likewise, we have a right to be bothered if someone fails to perform common decencies. While we might not be owed these common decencies, there are

several moral issues with someone failing to perform them. But if someone makes a morally permissible moral mistake, it is less clear the extent to which we ought to criticize them. And it seems absurd to criticize someone for failing to perform a little beneficition.

But sometimes we do criticize people for making morally permissible moral mistakes and for failing to perform little beneficitions. Women, in particular, sometimes face pressure to do certain nice acts. I think this pressure is morally problematic, and I want to explain why. I will consider two feminist concerns regarding expectations to do certain nice acts. These are as follows:

- 1) Women have the right to not always do nice acts, but this right is not respected.

To address this I will consider cases where people pressure women to smile in the streets and criticize women when they fail to do so.

- 2) Various activist groups, who choose not to be nice, often get criticized for not always being nice. This criticism is also problematic.

These are both problems that I discussed in my introduction. But now that we have a definition of the nice act, an understanding of the supererogatory, and an understanding of how being nice can be a morally permissible moral mistake, we have more philosophical background to go back and address these examples.

Let's look at the first feminist concern with nice acts. Sometimes the societal emphasis on being nice might cause people to put pressure on women to behave in certain ways. Oftentimes, complete strangers will tell women to smile.

Many feminists resent people telling women to smile and assert that women shouldn't have to always be smiling. In her (2013) article "Kristen Stewart and the Infinite Sadness: Film Actress's Frown Turning Gender Roles Upside Down," Harris points out that Kristin Stewart, an actress who plays Bella Swan in the *Twilight* franchise, often gets criticized by the media for not smiling and for frowning while on the red carpet. Meanwhile, male celebrities who don't smile do not receive the same level of criticism. The expectation, it seems, is that because Kristin Stewart is a woman, or even because she is a famous woman in a position that many would envy, she ought to show how grateful she is and show that she is happy to see everyone. Harris writes:

Brain-mapping research by the University of California-Los Angeles suggests that when we see someone smile, it sets off 'mirror neurons' that make us feel as though we, too, are smiling. Classic gender roles, however, arguably magnify the pressure on women to thusly put others at ease with a warm expression.

In other words, because there are benefits to smiling, sexism might make women feel as if they have an obligation to do it. This is because women are generally pressured to put others at ease.¹⁸

Smiling is not morally obligatory. By not smiling on the streets, women are not harming anybody.¹⁹ They are not violating anybody's rights. They are not

¹⁸ Smiling is often, but not always, a nice act. If you smile with the intention of putting someone at ease or demonstrating friendliness, you are doing something nice. On the other hand, it is not nice to smile to demonstrate that somebody's misery brings you pleasure. But there are times when it is nice to smile. It is these times that I am referring to when I discuss the pressure on women to smile.

¹⁹ If they were, it still would not necessarily follow that they would be obligated to smile.

denying anybody a resource that could significantly improve the quality of someone's life.

It is problematic to treat smiling as a morally obligatory act. This is partially because smiling is not a morally obligatory act. But we've established that a failure to perform certain supererogatory acts can still be criticizable.

So let's determine where smiling falls on the spectrum of the supererogatory. One might argue that smiling is a common decency. It is a common way to acknowledge someone. And some think that it doesn't cost the agent much. But while smiling once might not cost an agent much, smiling repeatedly could take a lot of effort. And people interact with and pass by so many strangers in a day that smiling at all of them really could take work.

Furthermore, there are ways to acknowledge others that don't involve smiling. In Snicket's (2014) book, *Shouldn't You Be in School?*, the character Lemony Snicket says goodbye to two incompetent police officers. He says: "As a good-bye, I gave them a nod I had practiced for quite some time in the mirror. It was polite enough that no one could complain but not so polite that the person receiving the nod would think you liked them" (p. 57). Perhaps a nod like this could be considered a common-decency level of acknowledgment, and perhaps women ought to practice this nod in the mirror.

We could think that smiling is an MPMMNTD (something that it would be a morally permissible moral mistake not to do). Perhaps it's not required, but it's something one should do all things considered. But in order for something to

be an MPMMNTD, failing to do it has to be a moral mistake. And in general, it seems wrong to say that one is making a moral mistake by failing to smile. If an act is something that one should do all things considered, we have to think about why one should do it. Oftentimes MPMMNTDs make a difference in the life of the person that one is acting upon. Smiling *can* sometimes make a difference. Perhaps if one comes across someone who is sad and suspects that she could make her feel better by smiling at her then, then smiling is an MPMMNTD. But we are not always in situations like this.

And even when we are, we do not have a right to demand MPMMNTDs of others like we might of moral obligations,²⁰ nor to expect them, like we do of common decencies.

Generally, smiling is a little beneficiation. It's good to smile at strangers (assuming there's no moral reason not to). But one shouldn't criticize the act of failing to smile at strangers. Additionally, we established in our previous section that one could be a nice person without smiling. So even if we think that we must be nice people, we still are not morally obligated to smile.

I want to remind the reader of an objection to this argument that I raised and addressed in my introduction. We might think that what is problematic about the demand that women smile is the sexism. We could think the reason it is bad that we put this pressure on women to smile is because it is a sexist pressure. Perhaps we should just demand that everyone smile.

²⁰ It might also be the case that we don't have the right to demand certain moral obligations of others.

But demanding that everyone smile would also be bad. Once again, the solution to discriminating against women is not to start also discriminating against men. It is wrong to demand that anyone smile.

Part of the reason the pressure to smile is bad is that smiling is not obligatory nor is it morally-criticizable. So by pressuring someone to smile, we are acting like there is a moral obligation that does not exist. We are treating a completely supererogatory act as morally obligatory. Even though we are not passing laws that require people to smile, there is a sense that we are restricting their freedom.

And this is problematic. The mean person fails to value the feelings of others. The nice person does value these feelings, which are valuable. But when we put pressure on people to be nice when there is no obligation or expectation to be nice, we put too much emphasis on feelings. In this case, we imply it is *so* important for us to feel at ease and good, that the actor is obligated to constantly watch herself so that we feel this way. It is important for us to feel good. But our feelings shouldn't trump her freedom.

Furthermore, we know the nice act is not necessarily good for us. It is not necessarily good for the actor, good for the acted-upon, or good for society. Our feelings are an important part of us, but not the only part. By creating this faux-obligation, we do not compel people to do what is good for us, but rather what feels good for us. Of course, even if all nice acts were good for us, it still wouldn't

be okay for us to expect that people smile. But it's important to understand just exactly what we're demanding when we do demand that people be nice.

Telling women to smile is just one way that the demand to be nice can be problematic. Let's look at another example. Consider a social justice group who wants to advocate for its cause. They are protesting racism in the workforce. Sometimes, members of the group do not use nice means to advocate for their cause. They might block traffic, protest, or get angry at people. These methods offend certain people. These people tell the social justice group that the group ought to be nicer.

In the blog, *Not Sorry Feminism*, Weedston (2014) wrote a post titled “Yet Another Post about Tone Policing.” The author is a feminist. She expressed her frustration with those who advocate for using the “niceness approach” to social justice instead of anger. Some people have told her that if she were nicer about her feminism, she might be able to have more male allies and to encourage more people to be feminists.

The author argues that telling a person who is oppressed to stop being angry is a form of oppression. People have reasons for being angry. When others tell them to be nice, the others often ignore those reasons. Her post illustrates a common concern of feminists and of others who care about injustices. Many people will get righteously angry and use that anger to express themselves, only to be told that they should be nicer.

Again, we might think that it's only the sexism or racism that is the issue in these cases. Perhaps it's not so much an issue that some people are telling others to be nice and more an issue that they are ignoring racist and sexist power structures. I certainly think that the racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are issues and are morally wrong; however, there is also something specifically wrong and specifically interesting about this expectation and demand to be nice. This is once again based in overvaluing certain people's feelings. Not only are we overvaluing feelings; we are overvaluing them at the expense of something that matters more: justice.

Justice is important. It is a part of goodness. It is intertwined with fairness. Injustice is unethical, and when we experience it or witness it; anger is a perfectly appropriate reaction to have. But when we value nice acts too much, we undervalue justice. Remember that the nice act is not necessarily good for us, even though it feels good. Overvaluing nice acts is a case of overvaluing what *feels* good over what *is* good. Sometimes what feels good is a part of what is good, and it's important to care about what feels good (as outlined by reasons given earlier). But being too focused on being nice can cause us to focus on what feels good at the expense of what is good. And this is problematic.

So far, however, we have primarily focused on what's wrong with demanding or expecting that people act in nice ways. We have argued that people are not obligated to act in these ways. But sometimes it's not only the case that people are not obligated to be nice, but also the case that being nice is

problematic. We discussed how doing some nice acts could harm the self. Now let's look at how the nice act sometimes isn't the act that's morally best for society.

3.6 When it's Good not to be Nice

I asserted in my last section that social justice activist groups have a right to organize in the way they see fit. But not only do they have a right; sometimes the not-nice way of organizing is better and is the morally good thing to do.

Reynolds, in her (1964) song about the civil rights movement titled, "It Isn't Nice," shares this sentiment. She sings:

It isn't nice to block the doorway. / It isn't nice to go to jail. /
There are nicer ways to do it. / But the nice ways always fail. / It
isn't nice, it isn't nice. / You told us once, you told us twice. / But if
that is freedom's price/ we don't mind.

It is difficult to address the claim that not-nice methods are more effective because it's more empirical than philosophical. I believe it is important to note this claim, however, because many people will say that nicer methods attract more people to a cause. For example, if people are against gay marriage, but you sit down with them, talk to them, smile at them, and explain why you think it should be legal, some would think that they would be more likely to see your point of view than if you disrupted traffic by marching for marriage equality. So some people would argue that even when fighting for something we believe in, we should still be nice because being nice will get more people to also believe it.

But while this might be true sometimes, I also think it's true that not-nice methods can enact change.

Historical examples suggest that disruptive methods have been and can be effective. Protests and anger attract attention, and attention can create awareness that something needs to change. These acts can fight injustice. Fighting injustice is ethical. Assuming that protesting, anger, and pamphlet-making are not morally impermissible, one is allowed to do these acts. So if these acts fight injustice, they are ethical, even if they aren't nice.

These acts might make some people uncomfortable, and they might hurt some people's feelings. But as I've stated before, feelings are not the only morally worthwhile thing. The change and the justice that the acts cause are more important than the feelings they might hurt.

Let's look at another example. Consider the journalist who writes a scathing article about a politician. The journalist believes that the politician is bad at her job, and she thinks the public should know. The article will hurt the politician's feelings, and it could also hurt her family's feelings when they find out that she is being smeared by the media. Thus, writing the article is not a nice act.

But it is an ethical act. The journalist has moral reasons to write the article. She might not be morally obligated to write it, but she should write it, all things considered. Failing to write the article would be a morally permissible moral

mistake. The concern for justice is greater and more important than the concern for the politician's feelings.

Perhaps, there are times when journalists ought to be nice. The journalist does have an obligation (both moral and professional) to get all sides of the story and portray people fairly. Furthermore, while a journalist might have a right to write mean things about people, oftentimes she shouldn't. For example, a journalist could write all her articles about how ugly a celebrity's clothes are. She might have a right to do this, but she probably shouldn't all things considered, and a magazine or newspaper would be better for not having such articles.

However, journalism also involves writing things that some people don't want printed. Much of journalism entails not being nice. If being nice were the most important moral concern, then many industries, such as journalism, could not function as they do or as they ought to.

A society where we value feelings over all else would be lacking in a significant way. Thus, sometimes, we have both moral and professional reasons not to do nice acts. And not doing the nice act can be good for society.

Let's look at another case where some people would argue that the agent ought to be nicer. Sometimes an agent has strong opinions. There might be a nice way that she could express these opinions and a not-nice way to express these opinions. If she has a choice between expressing something in a nice way and a not-nice way, some people might think she should express it in the nice way. But I do not think that this is always the case.

Consider Catharine MacKinnon. MacKinnon is a philosopher known for her anti-pornography views but also for the somewhat aggressive ways she expresses these.

MacKinnon (1984) argues that pornography portrays women and men as having complimentary desires. Men want to degrade women, and women want to be degraded by men. She thinks this is bad.

You can understand her argument from what I just said. You might agree or disagree, but you understand it, and the point is clear enough.

Now here's how MacKinnon phrases it. About pornography, she writes:

Men and women are perfectly complementary and perfectly bipolar. Women's desire to be fucked by men is equal to men's desire to fuck women. All the ways men love to take and violate women, women love to be taken and violated (p. 171).

This isn't a nice way for MacKinnon to express herself. The language she uses makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and many people would prefer that she didn't use it. Furthermore, we might think I just made the same point perfectly well. So people might wonder, why can't MacKinnon just be nicer?

It is true that MacKinnon and I communicated the same point, and that I was nicer about it. But there is a difference in the impact that the language she used had and the impact that the language I used had. In both cases, the reader understands the issue. But MacKinnon's language makes a person stop and focus on the language. It is easier to skim and forget the language I used than it is to forget what she used. Using strong language makes her argument more memorable. Just like protesting or getting angry might make people more aware

of a cause, MacKinnon's language can make people more aware of her cause.

And if her cause is good, then this awareness is good.

MacKinnon is not writing this to be nice. She is, however, thinking about what is good for people and what is good for society. Once again, she is acting morally, just not nicely. She sees a wrong in society and yearns to correct it. (And if she is right about her viewpoint, she is addressing an injustice in society.)

Once again, our feelings are important. But when we place so much value on feelings that we prohibit ourselves from addressing viewpoints or enacting change, there is something wrong. Either MacKinnon is right, in which case we should support her and advocate for her point of view. Or she is wrong, in which case we should refute her. But it's still good to be aware of this and acknowledge her argument, so we can refute it.

These examples demonstrate that sometimes the nice thing to do is not the good thing to do. Not only do we have a right not to be nice, but sometimes we have moral reasons not to be nice. And sometimes the nice act is a morally permissible moral mistake. Even if one also has a right to do the nice act, sometimes she shouldn't, all things considered.²¹

Someone could object that I am not giving enough attention to the idea that some of these not-nice acts could deter someone from participating in a cause. In my introduction, I discussed Calhoun's account of civility. Calhoun

²¹ We might wonder if a nice act could be morally impermissible. I think that this is possible. If we have a duty to act justly and we fail to meet this duty because we are concerned about doing something nice, then that nice act would be morally impermissible.

argued that civility was important because morality is a social endeavor. Since morality is something that we do together, we need to get along with one another (p. 269). If we aren't civil, then we might not hear each other out. If we don't hear each other out on moral ideas, then we can't learn or grow or make moral progress as a society. In order to make this progress, we need to be civil.

Similarly, we can say that nice acts help us get along with one another. If someone disrupts traffic or gets angry, then others might not want to work with her. Doing acts that aren't nice could impede our ability to get along with one another. And if morality is a social endeavor, then failing to get along could be problematic.

I agree that morality is a social endeavor and that we do want to work together to be better as a society; however, working together isn't only about talking gently with one another. Sometimes you have to agree to work together in the first place. But we live in a world where certain groups aren't heard. Sometimes these groups cannot be nice if they want to be heard. For example, since some people like porn and others dislike feminism, there are a lot of people who would simply ignore MacKinnon if she nicely told them that she was opposed to pornography for feminist reasons. People still might not engage with her, but at least she gets their attention. Sometimes one needs to be shocking in order to draw attention to an issue.

So even though the feelings of others matter, it is okay (and even good!) not to focus on these when they get in the way of justice or goodness.

3.7 Wrapping up the Nice Act

We now have an account of what it is to do a nice act. I defined the nice act as a positive response to the expected feelings or desires of others. I then questioned whether or not we were obligated to do nice acts. I presented an account of the supererogatory which included categories for acts that are not obligatory but that we should still do. Nice acts encompass a wide range of acts, but most fall somewhere on the supererogatory spectrum. There are many nice acts which we don't have to do but that we should do anyway.

Sometimes, however, nice acts can harm the self, especially when one is so focused on others that she neglects her own value and well-being. Nice acts can also harm others. The expectation that we do certain nice acts can be harmful sometimes. This pressure arises when we put too much value on people's feelings, which can be problematic. In particular, it is bad when we value feelings and things that feel good over justice and things that are good. Thus, sometimes the good thing to do is not the nice thing to do.

While this section has been crucial to developing my account of niceness, some of the research I have done also presents an interesting picture of the supererogatory, which is important to note. Calhoun's account of common decencies and Harman's account of morally permissible moral mistakes introduced the concept that there is a part of the supererogatory that is not completely optional. This is important because we normally think that all supererogatory acts are completely optional.

Now we have an understanding of the nice act. In the previous section I developed an understanding of the nice person. And in my introduction I explained why it is important that we study niceness. I now will tie all of these sections together, examine what the larger implications are of this paper, and see how we have been able to answer the questions that I originally posed in my introduction.

CONCLUSION

In my introduction, I explained why I thought niceness was puzzling and outlined the questions I had about it. To answer these questions, I covered a lot of philosophical ground. I discussed various forms of the not-nice person including the asshole, the arrogant person, and the mean person. I examined the moral saint, so I could construct a nice saint and then determine what was wrong with being too nice. I then looked at supererogatory acts, those which are good to do but not required. I examined some non-traditional subcategories of the supererogatory, MPMMNTD (acts that it would be a morally permissible moral mistake not to do) and common decencies. I then looked at cases where the nice thing to do was different from the good thing to do.

Now that I've explored these concepts, I can summarize and explain the significance of my results. I want to highlight how the work that I've done has answered the questions I presented at the beginning. To make this clear, I'll present these in question and answer form.

Q: What is niceness?

A: Talking about “niceness” is rather broad and vague. This is why I chose to divide this paper into discussing the nice person and discussing the nice act. The nice person is a person who cares about others, cares about others’ feelings and desires, is disposed towards nice acts, and is disposed against not-nice acts. These conditions are separately necessary and jointly sufficient to make someone a nice person. There are other qualities that we associate with the nice

person, such as being non-confrontational or cheerful, but these are *secondary conditions* of the nice person, and one can be a nice person without possessing these qualities.

A nice act is an act which responds positively to the expected feelings or desires of others. While the nice person must care about others, a person performing a nice act does not have to. Furthermore, the nice act does not have to be intended to be good for a person. Recall the babysitter who gives candy to the child before dinner. Rather, the nice act must be intended to make a person *feel* good or give them something they want.

We established that various forms of not-niceness are bad because they involve a lack of recognition for the value of others; particularly the mean person fails to value others' feelings and desires. She mocks people even if it hurts them. Niceness is a way of valuing these feelings and desires and demonstrating that they matter, which is why it often is good to be nice.

Q: Are we morally obligated to be nice?

A: Initially, the question of whether or not we were morally obligated to be nice was puzzling. On the one hand, it seems wrong to say that we're morally obligated to be nice. On the other hand, niceness seems like a good thing, and it seems wrong to say that we are complexly exempt from being nice.

When we speak of "being nice," we are sometimes speaking of doing nice acts and other times speaking of being nice people. While it's good to be a nice person, one is not obligated to be one. Some people can be good people without

being nice people, and sometimes the fact that they aren't nice people allows them to access other virtues more easily. They might feel more comfortable being assertive or getting things done if they aren't what we could classify as nice people. Being a nice person is similar to being a musical person, in the sense that while it is a good type of person to be, it is not necessary that everyone be one.

We generally aren't morally obligated to do nice acts. So it's supererogatory to do nice acts, assuming these nice acts are also morally good. However, the category of the supererogatory is complicated and varied. There is the concept of the MPMMNTD, acts that are morally permissible moral mistakes not to do. An example of an MPMMNTD is giving a child a stuffed tiger that significantly benefits her and that you only value a little. There are common decencies, acts that any minimally well-formed moral agent would do. An example of a common decency is giving the time to a stranger who asks for it. Then, there are little benefications, acts that are good to do and really are completely optional. Giving a stranger candy could be a little benefication. Even more optional than these are Saintly and Heroic acts. An example of a Saintly Act could be giving everything you own to charity. Nice acts can fall into all of these categories. Note that all of these things are beyond the call of duty, but failing to do some of them is worse than failing to do others.

What this means is that our conflicting intuitions about our moral obligation to do nice acts were both correct. We generally aren't obligated to do nice acts. However, we can be criticized for failing to do some nice acts that we

aren't obligated to do. Most (good) nice acts are supererogatory, but the electivity of the act depends on the act and where it falls on the supererogatory spectrum.

Q: Why can expecting someone to be nice be harmful?

A: If someone is being a jerk, then it seems right to expect that they be nicer. But other times, expecting that someone be nice seems problematic. Expecting women (or anyone) to smile, for example, is wrong. There are two reasons for this.

First, smiling is not a morally obligatory act. It is usually a supererogatory act, more specifically a little beneficition. Little beneficitions are optional, so it's wrong to expect them from others. If we expect smiling from others, then we act like something that is a little beneficition is morally obligatory.

Second, we established earlier that the mean person was bad because she disregarded the feelings of others. The nice person was good because she valued the feelings of others. But sometimes, when we expect nice acts from people, in cases where we shouldn't, we start to value feelings too much. While it's bad to value feelings too little, it's also bad to value them too much. In this case, placing too much of an emphasis on feelings can come at the expense of a person's autonomy and freedom. And this is problematic.

These two reasons explain why it can be bad to expect certain nice acts.

Q: Why is there a tension between niceness and goodness?

A: Generally, it's good to be nice. But sometimes the nice act is not the good act. It is good to write a scathing article about an incompetent politician, and

it is good to protest an injustice. Neither of these acts, however, is nice. Thus, there is a tension between niceness and goodness.

Because feelings are valuable, we do have moral reasons for being nice people and doing nice acts. But sometimes, other moral concerns outweigh our moral reasons for being nice. We noted that the nice act responded to the feelings or desires of a person, but not necessarily what was good for them. Thus, you can do something nice without doing something good. It is better to do what is good for someone than to do what is merely nice for them. While the nice act often is good for someone, this is not always and not necessarily the case.

Nice acts are important, but other concerns, such as justice, are more important. Justice is more closely linked with goodness and is necessarily good for people. So if there is a conflict between being nice and being just, we ought to do the just act. If we choose to do the nice act, then we are choosing what feels good over what is good.

This is why niceness can be morally problematic sometimes. We should choose what is good over what feels good. But if we place too much emphasis on niceness, we don't. And thus what is nice can get in the way of what is good.

This means that social justice groups have a moral right and moral reasons to advocate in a way that is necessary for justice. And the journalist should write her article about the politician (insofar that it's the good thing to do), even if it is not nice.

Conclusion

Now we have an in-depth philosophical account of niceness. We have a definition of niceness. We have a theory about our moral obligation to be nice. We have a theory explaining the tension between niceness and goodness.

Now that we have this account, as with all philosophical accounts, there is bound to be disagreement. Some might think my definition of niceness is wrong and that there is a key quality that I am missing or something unnecessary that I am including. Others might think that my account of the supererogatory is wrong and that we really are obligated to be nice people or to do nice acts. Some might deny that there is any tension between niceness and goodness, and might argue that niceness is more important than justice or other moral concerns. Some might agree with many of the principles but feel that my language or arguments contradict their moral theory, in which case they will need to adjust my language or arguments accordingly.

But whatever controversy there may be, I hope that I have made a solid case for why I have chosen to define niceness and its implications the way that I have. And I hope that if people feel my definitions and implications are inadequate or inaccurate that they will at least agree that niceness itself is worth defining and exploring and will seek to highlight why I am wrong.

In ordinary language and discussion, the question of niceness is very much a moral question. For philosophers who seek to answer moral questions, I hope I have demonstrated that it deserves a place in our philosophical framework.

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