

## (Don't) Just be Nice: Broadening the Moral Vocabulary of Students

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“Just be *nice* to each other!”

Ms. Simmons’s tone is slightly exasperated as she serves as the mediator between Steven and David, who are yet again squabbling over who gets to play with the newest—and hence, most popular—stuffed animal in the classroom. Such interactions between the two are typical, and Ms. Simmons is tired of trying to curb the selfishness and pettiness. “I wish they would grow up just a little bit!” she thinks to herself.

The anecdote is fictional, but it rings true. “Just be nice!” is undoubtedly not an uncommon phrase to hear sprinkled throughout the admonitions of teachers tasked with overseeing the social interactions of young students. Niceness is ubiquitous, and it is interesting to note that KIPP’s twofold exhortation to students—“Work Hard, Be Nice”—makes straightforward use of the language of “niceness.”<sup>1</sup> But why is this type of language so common? What about it might be problematic? Is it the best educators can do when faced with the unavoidable task of the moral formation of their students?

In this paper, I suggest that the language of “niceness” ought to be replaced with a richer moral vocabulary in educational contexts.<sup>2</sup> To lay the groundwork for this claim, I comment on a few possible reasons why the language of “niceness” might be all too ubiquitous when it comes to the moral formation of children. With this background in place, I offer two main reasons to think that the language of “niceness” is problematic. First, “nice” is an anemic and ambiguous moral term that offers little in the way of action-guidance in complex situations. Second, being “nice” is sometimes *not* an appropriate response to a situation, particularly a situation in which a real moral wrong is being perpetrated. As a result, encouraging niceness can sometimes work against the development

of children into moral agents who can recognize, judge, and respond to such situations well. Having problematized the language of “niceness,” I argue that the alternative educators should pursue is to cultivate a richer moral vocabulary with and for their students, and I offer a couple of practical thoughts as to how this might be implemented in educational contexts.

### The Reign of Niceness

Why do we tell children to “be nice”? Of course, tact, decorum, and appropriate social behavior have been valued across times, places, and cultures, but often these values were maintained with a more robust sense of meaning and a clearer articulation of how they fit into the broader moral realm. Even in the eighteenth century, when social graces and tact were as highly valued as perhaps they ever have been, philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith offered detailed taxonomies and descriptions of the social virtues.<sup>3</sup> Hume, for example, praises such character traits as “delicacy” and “wit”—terms that sound foreign to modern ears but that carry with them substantive meaning that has the potential to inform action and to provide guidance for someone seeking to form himself into a person of good character. And although these sorts of traits might seem to blur the lines between morality and mere etiquette, eighteenth-century philosophers offered articulate views as to why these sorts of traits are morally salient and when they ought to be superseded by other concerns. The contemporary marked absence of these sorts of distinctions, particularly in educational contexts, bears some attention. In this section, then, I outline a few reasons why the language of niceness often seems to reign supreme.

First, and perhaps most obviously, it is *easy* to tell children to be nice. “Be nice!” is short and sweet. It demands no explanation. Few people, even small children, will push back on the idea that they ought, generally, to be nice. Granted, children—and many adults—might respond with a “But he started it!” or an “It’s not fair!” but these exclamations reflect not so much the idea that we do not need to be nice as the idea that the other person involved in the situation failed in *his* obligation to be nice, leading to an unjust asymmetry in the interaction.

Saying that it is easy to tell children to be nice, of course, does not explain how it *became* easy to tell children to be nice. What factors contributed to this appeal to niceness becoming a default mode of moral exhortation? A full defense of any sort of genealogy of niceness would require much more space than what I have in this paper. Accordingly, I draw on Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of the ways in which the advent of pluralistic liberalism has contributed to a situation in which moral discourse must remain at a general, and hence unobjectionable, level.

One of MacIntyre's most forceful articulations of this worry appears in a statement of his view on the impossibility of public moral education. Although MacIntyre's position here is quite extreme, his underlying reasons for the position bear consideration:

[T]here is no non-controversial stance to be taken on the virtues, and that is so in a way and degree that makes it impossible for there to be a single shared public system of moral education with determinate and substantive moral content.<sup>4</sup>

MacIntyre's claim here falls out of his position regarding the way in which moral viewpoints and conceptions of the virtues are developed within particular traditions.<sup>5</sup> On MacIntyre's view, because a liberal society lacks a shared tradition, and hence a shared conception of what the virtues are and how they ought to be related to each other, a liberalist public will never be able to agree on a justification for a system of public moral education.<sup>6</sup> MacIntyre sees the problems that liberalism poses for moral education as extremely similar to the problems it poses for religious education: the very attempt to remain neutral between religious standpoints leads to a positive endorsement of irreligion, and, likewise, the attempt to remain neutral between different moral traditions results in the teaching of a morality that is vague, indeterminate, and vacuous.<sup>7</sup>

One symptom of this situation is an emptying-out of moral vocabulary. MacIntyre starts his essay with a discussion of political rhetoric, observing that

the liberal political condition impoverishes political rhetoric:

In order to function effectively, that rhetoric must be able to make use of sentences that both command widespread assent and yet which are at the same time available for the expression of sets of quite different and incompatible moral judgements.<sup>8</sup>

In a political world fragmented by incompatible and incommensurable notions of justice, the good life, and the role of the state in promoting both of these, politicians must choose language that is appealing to everybody in order to accomplish their ends. But if that language is to appeal to everybody, it cannot convey too much—individuals must be able to read into the rhetoric what they wish to hear.

The diagnosis of the impoverishment of moral language is similar (and, of course, closely related to political rhetoric). Any moral stance, any virtue, upon which a liberal society can agree will be devoid of substantive content. So, when teaching children how to behave, teachers in a liberal society do not tell them to “Be benevolent,” or “Be humble,”—they tell them to “Be nice.” Niceness, it seems, is something upon which most people can agree regardless of their individual moral preferences, but niceness is also an indeterminate, vague idea, offering little in the way of guidance for action or significant moral challenge. When a liberal society seeks to engage in public moral education, then, it can move no further than these sorts of anemic recommendations.

MacIntyre’s analysis here points to a second possible reason why educators often fall into unreflective use of the language of niceness: it is viewed as *uncontroversial*. Niceness, because it is rarely cashed out in any substantive detail, is something that just about anybody, regardless of the moral tradition from which he comes, can endorse in most situations. In fact, niceness can be viewed not as something that carries with it any binding moral force but rather as a kind of “social lubricant,” a quality of personal interaction that smooths

over situations that might otherwise destabilize relationships or undermine social cohesion. These effects, of course, have a moral dimension, but they can also be evaluated in fairly simple utilitarian terms: generally, everybody is better off when people work together and get along, and niceness is something that makes this joint effort more successful. Niceness, it might be argued, provides a *bridge* upon which people from different moral traditions can meet and share common ground. This might be all well and good—if the bridge can actually support the weight. In the next section, I will argue that it cannot.

Although there are undoubtedly many more possible explanations as to why the language of “niceness” has become so prominent, the story sketched in this section provides at least some reason to think that the reign of niceness is supported and sustained in part by a need for ease and in part by a desire to avoid controversy. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of why these features of the language of niceness are problematic when considering moral education.

#### From Niceness to Moral Richness

What’s so bad about being nice? Usually, nothing. Especially if we conceive of niceness as a social lubricant, or, more substantively, as the basic idea that people ought to avoid hurting other people and generally treat them decently; niceness will function as a useful and valuable quality in many situations. In this section, though, I argue that there are at least two reasons why resting content with teaching children to “be nice” ought to bother educators. First, I suggest that “nice” is an anemic and ambiguous adjective, which results in a problematic lack of action-guiding power in its application. And second, I argue that, especially in social contexts in which injustice is present, a focus on niceness can actually work against the cultivation of more important character traits.

The discussion in the first section of MacIntyre’s critique concerning public moral education highlights the anemic character of the language of “niceness.” “Niceness” is a “thin” moral concept, which, although evaluative, does not contain substantive descriptive content. Whatever “niceness” means, it can be cashed out in a variety of different ways. This stands in contrast to “thick” moral concepts, such as “generosity” or “courage,” which are both

evaluative and richly descriptive.

One of the important implications of the “thin” nature of the concept of niceness is that it is not sufficiently action-guiding, particularly in challenging contexts. Niceness can serve as a guide when the situations at hand are easily navigated or when the stakes are low. In many uncomplicated situations, niceness can get us to a good course of action, but it does not serve as a sufficient motivator when things get more dicey. Of course it is “nice” to apologize to another student after pushing her on the playground, but such an action also requires humility and some degree of courage. It is less obvious that niceness will motivate a person to apologize to a boss after spreading a rumor about her behind her back—humility and courage are certainly necessary here. Of course it is “nice” to share your stuffed animal and give it up to another even though you *really* wanted to play with it, but such an action also requires generosity and some degree of self-sacrifice. It is less obvious that niceness will motivate a person to give of financial resources in a way that might impact the duration of his next vacation—generosity and self-sacrifice are certainly necessary here. In these more challenging scenarios, niceness on its own is not sufficiently action-guiding either in its ability to indicate a good course of action or in its capacity to motivate.

One reason, then, to question the language of “niceness” is that it is not sufficiently action-guiding. Another reason to push back against overuse of the injunction to “Be nice!” stems from the fact that it sometimes can be *too* powerful in guiding action. For niceness, as appealing as it might sound, is *not* the disposition we want people to exhibit in every morally fraught scenario. Particularly in situations in which injustices are being perpetrated, niceness might actually work against the courses of action people ought to pursue. Sonia Nieto, for example, discusses how falling back on the comforting claim that “I’m a pretty nice guy” can serve as a cover for possible undercurrents of racism and stagnate progress being made toward the elimination of racially charged injustices in educational contexts.<sup>9</sup> These sorts of situations call not for niceness but for courage, humility, integrity, and compassion. When real wrongs are committed, when real people are suffering, the superficiality and complacency

of the injunction to “Be nice!” becomes starkly apparent. Failing to develop students’ sensitivity to the times at which “niceness” is inappropriate might be as problematic as failing to sensitize them to the times when it is.

These worries provide some good reasons to question the value of the language of “niceness” in educational contexts. As an alternative, I suggest that educators should seek to provide students with a rich moral vocabulary: a vocabulary that can inform their thought about moral decision making and that can thereby contribute to their formation as moral agents. In addition to the negative concerns raised above, there are also positive reasons why educators should seek to equip their students with a moral vocabulary made up of “thick” moral concepts, reasons that are related to the idea that education should be a process of broadening and deepening students’ understanding of the world and their place in it. Expanding moral vocabulary fits extremely well with this sort of overarching view concerning the aims of education. And, hopefully, helping students acquire a rich moral vocabulary will enable them to grow not only intellectually but also relationally, contributing also to the social aims of education.

### Educating Beyond Niceness

Moving from the language of “niceness” to a rich moral vocabulary is not necessarily an easy task. As discussed earlier, it is pretty straightforward to tell children to “Be nice!” but sharing with children a richer moral vocabulary involves much more careful thought and disciplined attention on the part of educators. In this section, I discuss some potential ways to meet this challenge.

First of all, direct discussion about the nature and value of different virtues has a place in educational contexts. With the upsurge in interest in virtue-based approaches to character education, some schools have begun to initiate these sorts of direct conversations. Unfortunately, though, these discussions often seem to stop at a superficial level, manifesting themselves in a “virtue of the week” approach in which students are supposed to think about and try to practice a different virtue for short periods of time before moving on to the next. Discussions of virtues on this model can often become sim-

plistic or one-dimensional, just one more thing to move through as part of the curriculum. And, more importantly, it seems implausible to think that focusing on a character trait for the duration of a week will have any significant effect on a student's dispositions, habits, or ways of behaving toward others. The "virtue of the week" model might not, in and of itself, be a bad thing, but it is certainly incomplete.

Expansion of moral vocabulary, then, needs to occur in a context broader than isolated conversations about virtues and vices. This language needs to permeate the culture of the school and classroom. I see two reasons for this comprehensive influence. First, varied and consistent exposure to thicker ways of articulating how people should interact with each other helps habituate students into making use of these concepts for themselves. Second, as mentioned above, isolated discussions of thick virtue concepts can all too easily become one-dimensional and removed from the real experiences of students both as they navigate childhood and as they transition to later periods of life. Using thick virtue language to describe possible ways of acting in and responding to the actual situations that students confront in school life can help them develop a sensitivity to both the most important considerations in such encounters as well as to the nuances that can make moral judgment so challenging.

At this point there is a worry that ought to be addressed, a worry related to the previous discussion of the ways in which pluralistic liberalism can problematize substantive moral education. Might it be the case that *any* substantial discussion of issues related to virtue and the good life is out of place in a public educational context?<sup>10</sup> Concerns about indoctrination and oppression underlie this worry.<sup>11</sup> Is it possible for teachers to introduce discussions about substantive moral issues without deliberately or even inadvertently seeking to form their students according to their own particular moral tradition? If such a scenario is not possible, then liberal society faces a situation in which *any* attempt at public moral education will fall prey to indoctrination, manipulation, oppression, or all of the above and in which "niceness" might really be the best we can do.

In response to this concern, it is important first to remember that moral education happens whether educators will it to or not. Choosing to avoid conver-

sations about happiness, virtue, and the good life—even if complete avoidance were possible—itself conveys a message to students about the nature of these concepts. In addition, teachers will unavoidably model various character traits for their students; even if a teacher can purge her speech and explicit acts of teaching from the vocabulary and assumptions of her own tradition, she cannot separate her actions and the ways in which she relates to her students from that tradition. As long as human beings serve as teachers for other human beings, moral education will occur, and not from a completely neutral vantage point.

The recognition that moral education is unavoidable, though, does not render vacuous the worries about indoctrination and oppression when such moral education is taken up, whether implicitly or explicitly. What educators need to seek out, then, is a mode of moral education that exposes children to substantive ideas about happiness, virtue, and goodness without seeking to indoctrinate them. In other words, educators need a way to prepare students to navigate what might be called the “ethical environment” of contemporary liberal society in all of its pluralism.<sup>12</sup> Just as a person cannot successfully navigate a cultural environment without knowing the language of the place, so a person cannot navigate the ethical environment without having learned the language used within it. And, because the ethical environment is composed of a range of traditions in pluralistic liberal societies, children will need to become familiar with a broad and rich moral vocabulary to be successful in navigating such an environment. Navigating the ethical environment will involve learning to build bridges between different conceptions of virtue, but we are in search of a bridge built on a more solid foundation than mere “niceness.” How, then, do educators provide children with this sort of moral vocabulary without manipulating them into one corner of the ethical environment, as if that corner were the whole world?

This question gives rise to a third way that I think educators can seek to move away from the language of “niceness” and engage their students with a more robust moral vocabulary: participating with their students in attention to narrative and story.<sup>13</sup> It is within narratives and stories that different visions of happiness, virtue, and the good life are articulated, and different traditions

can offer different interpretations of the same narrative. Through narrative and story, then, it is possible to enter into a picture of virtue and the good life as articulated by a particular tradition. In this way, stories can serve as bridges between disparate moral traditions, helping students understand how the moral dimensions of the world might look from a different perspective.

Stories can be extremely helpful in extending vocabulary with respect to any area of life, but it seems that they are even more so when considered as tools for enriching moral vocabulary.<sup>14</sup> I suggest, then, that story can enrich moral vocabulary in two primary ways. First, for the moral language that tends to be used, albeit in an indeterminate fashion, in liberal society, story can give those same terms a determinate meaning within the framework of a narrative. Children, through these stories, can then gain an understanding of the force different concepts carry and how these concepts are related to others within rival traditions. This first function of story with respect to moral education enriches by *deepening* the moral sensibilities of children. Second, there is some moral language that simply does not enter into contemporary public discourse very often but that is nonetheless central for understanding particular traditions; consider a virtue term such as “benevolent.”<sup>15</sup> Story can help reintroduce children to these terms, thereby *expanding* their moral vocabulary, bringing to light considerations that they might not have otherwise encountered, and giving them a fuller picture of the ethical environment.

Stories, then, allow people to step into the tradition of another, but in a way that does not directly threaten their own traditions, serving as a stable bridge between two ways of seeing the world. In this capacity, stories amplify the ability of people to interact with people from different and even incompatible traditions.<sup>16</sup> This expansion and enrichment of moral vocabulary in terms of narrative is essential not only to the student in his future role as a member of liberal society and a navigator of the ethical environment but is also invaluable to him as he comes to ask questions about the structure of his own life.<sup>17</sup> In a unique way, then, moral education through story can accommodate both the demand of pluralistic liberalism that public moral education not indoctrinate students into the moral framework of any one tradition as well as the thought

that moral education should enable students as individuals to grow in their understanding of the good life.

### Conclusion

I have suggested that the common language of “niceness,” although appropriate in many situations, is inadequate as a source of substantial moral education. Instead, educators should strive to equip their students with a rich vocabulary of thick moral concepts: concepts that have the potential to develop their moral sensibilities, build bridges of understanding that allow them to enter into the moral viewpoint of others, and ultimately bear the fruit of action in their lives. Ms. Simmons, our exasperated teacher, does not face a hopeless situation. If she is able to help her students broaden their moral vocabulary and deepen their moral understanding, she might have recourse to more than a simple injunction to “just be nice!”

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1 For a discussion of this motto and its place in the story of KIPP, see Jay Mathews, *Word [should this be “Work”?] Hard. Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2009).

2 I owe thanks to an audience at NEPES 2019 for many insightful questions and comments and especially to Jacob Fay for extremely helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

3 See especially sections 7 and 8 of David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. DD. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Inc., 1985).

4 MacIntyre, “How to Seem Virtuous without Actually Being So,” Centre for the

Study of Cultural Values [Is this a print publication or a website?] (Lancaster: Lancaster University, 1991), 11.

5 MacIntyre's position here is representative of one of two main strains of thought regarding the origination of virtue concepts, on which virtues can only be understood within a particular social framework or tradition, which means that the conflict that arises among various views of the good life arises from the incompatibility of these traditions. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 218-225. Other virtue theorists, however, maintain that virtues are not features of social construction but are rather features of human life as such; for example, see Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1988), 32-53. Scholars in the second category, such as Nussbaum, often worry that MacIntyre and others who endorse the position of virtues as socially constructed fall prey to charges of relativism. Others have defended MacIntyre from such accusations, arguing that, with some alterations, MacIntyre need not be seen as a relativist; see John Haldane, "Virtue, Truth, and Relativism," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 155-168. For the purposes of this project, I do not intend to enter this debate, accepting MacIntyre's position as my starting point.

6 Scholars who endorse a view of the virtues as being common features of human experience must still explain the conflicts that arise among moral virtues, and one way this tension might be explained is to say that there is tension among the virtues themselves rather than among different conceptions of the virtues within particular traditions. For a defense of this sort of a view and a

discussion of how it connects to moral education, see David Carr, "Literature, Rival Conceptions of Virtue, and Moral Education," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51, no. 2 (2017): 1-16.

7 MacIntyre, "How to Seem Virtuous," 11.

8 MacIntyre, "How to Seem Virtuous," 5.

9 Sonia Nieto, "Nice Is Not Enough: Defining Caring for Students of Color," in *Language, Culture, and Teaching: Critical Perspectives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 264-68.

10 See Alasdair MacIntyre and Joseph Dunne, "Alasdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 10-11. For a similar concern, see Kenneth A. Strike, "Trust, Traditions, and Pluralism: Human Flourishing and Liberal Polity," in *Virtue Ethics and Moral Education*, ed. David Carr and Jan Steutel (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999): 234.

11 See Nancy Snow, "Virtue and Oppression," in *Current Controversies in Virtue Theory*, ed. Mark Alfano (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015): 49-58.

12 I draw on terminology here coined by Graham Haydon. See Haydon, *Education, Philosophy and the Ethical Environment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 15.

13 For a thorough discussion of the role of story in character formation and some practical suggestions for how this might be done in a school environment, see David Carr and Tom Harrison, *Educating Character through Stories* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2015).

14 Adam M. Willows, "Stories and the Development of Virtue," *Ethics and Education* 12, no. 3 (2017): 345.

15 Sophia Vasalou discusses the relationship between mastery of moral language and acquiring virtue, suggesting that a robust moral vocabulary is a necessary

condition for the development of virtue itself. See Vasalou, “Educating Virtue as a Mastery of Language,” *Journal of Ethics* 16 (2012): 67-87.

16 Brian Boyd elaborates on this idea in *On the Origins of Stories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 192.

17 This ultimately seems to be the goal of education for MacIntyre. See MacIntyre and Dunne, “Alasdair MacIntyre on Education,” 10.