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# *Niceness*

*the  
genesis  
of  
a value*

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Why do so many people, consciously or not, elect “niceness” as the main or ultimate value, above truth, justice, reason, beauty or others? This is how children are taught from an early age the obligation to be “nice”, to be “good”. A vague morality, which usually implies being obedient, being polite, being not bothersome, pleasing others and not hurting their feelings. A minimal value that shows that you are not “ill-mannered”, that you are able to function in society, that you are not focused exclusively on yourself. And if we are “nice”, others will be grateful, it will be beneficial to us.

It would hardly be a problem if this formal and distant moral minimalism did not stand in the way of other, more demanding values, such as courage, justice, reason, beauty or truth, which precisely involve disturbing the established order and challenging ourselves. A significant obligation which ends up inhibiting any real dialogue, which prohibits all authenticity. So we can wonder about the motivations for such behavior, the origins of such an “ideal”. Fear of loneliness, desire for manipulation, complacency, self-denial, inertia, social pressure, so many reasons

that can be identified in the genesis of this "niceness". Thus, during a workshop, we examined and discussed the various roots of this banal ethical imperative, so widespread and rarely criticized. Here is a report on the information we collected.

**Goodness** One of the first reasons for being nice is kindness, a desire to do good, to be good toward others, driven by a certain sympathy towards our fellow human beings, which can also be called altruism, humanity, benevolence, or simple good will. Kindness can be contrasted with niceness, however, because the latter can involve being harsh, severe or punitive towards someone when it seems right or appropriate; it necessitates some courage. For these reasons, the reception of goodness is much more uncertain than the reaction to kindness, which is less demanding to exercise. Niceness can be called a behavior ethic and goodness a character ethic. The former is concerned with developing pleasant social skills, while the latter requires to live according to fundamentally generous principles and moral rigor.

Hamlet (Shakespeare): "I must be cruel only to be kind. Thus bad begins and worse remains behind."

**Reward** The inter-relational rewarding is rather easier, faster and more secure. When we are nice to others, others are nice to us. Niceness brings gratification: we are paid back, in words and deeds, people like you, we feel loved, we are recognized and thanked. Niceness is a sort of social pact where one gives to others what pleases them, in exchange for others to do the same.

**Tranquility** With being nice there is no confrontation, as there is with truth, justice or reason. You don't need to struggle or to be strong, so it doesn't create anxiety, conflict and worries; human beings in general primarily try to avoid uncomfortable psychological states. One has therefore the impression that everything is a priori fine and peaceful.

**Satisfaction** Niceness satisfies immediate needs. Being nice brings a feeling of safety and recognition, which is more basic and more immediate than what

“superior” values provide, implying a dimension of struggle. Satisfaction from accomplishment or self-realization is more demanding, it will appeal to less people, anxious or fragile, who don’t have their primary needs already satisfied.

***Immediacy*** A result is better achieved, in a more evident and rapid way. When you are nice to others, you get a result right away, since you provide them with what they ask or want. While with truth, beauty or justice there might be no visible result at all, or it will be postponed in time.

***Manipulation*** When we are nice to others, we get what we want more easily, with less effort. Niceness is efficient, economical, detached. We can calculate and manipulate better: our actions flatter others and please them naturally, they will want or feel obligated to pay us back. We will also notice that the “nice” person can completely stop being nice and break the pact, when others will not be “nice” to him, or to persons to whom he identifies, that is to say when the other person’s behavior will no longer conform his

given expectations, no matter how legitimate is this shift. Depending on the degree of necessity and involvement, the manipulator will just move away, become formally polite or get upset.

**Acceptance** Niceness is accepted by everyone, when in fighting for justice or reason one will necessarily be confronted with some rejection and provoke antagonism. Being nice is not frowned upon by most people, it provides in general an external approval.

**Social pressure** Very early on, children are told to be nice as a moral imperative. Otherwise one will be shunned from society. This moral correction is an obligation which, if not respected, engenders guilt, shame and makes one an outcast. To be nice is therefore to be obedient and compliant, and vice versa, which implies a certain corruption of the subject, a loss of authenticity.

**Fear of loneliness** Humans fear isolation which implies a lesser chance of survival; being nice mini-

mizes this peril. Survival instinct is gregarious: it dictates that one is better with a group of people than on one's own, it is safer, physically and psychologically. Being nice is a guarantee for increased social interaction and therefore support.

***Togetherness*** A human being has an easier time with fusion rather than separation. Being nice brings people together, it doesn't pose dilemmas, doesn't create contradictions, doesn't impose choices. There is an impression of a protective collective bubble, by protecting us from more confrontational values such as honesty or truth. As a consequence, any "not-nice" person, qualified as mean or evil, will be considered as a threat, a person to be excluded, ignored or to be fought.

***Simplicity*** Being nice is a state that is straightforward and not dialectical. Pursuing a more superior value, for example, like the good, implies contradictory actions, as you need for example to be bad to a particular person in order to do good to the society. With higher order values, actions and decisions will

vary according to circumstances and can even be opposite to each other, which makes action more complex. That is why being nice is the main value taught to children, for its simplicity, which principally implies to follow the rules and to be (be) obedient.

***Primitive*** Being nice doesn't request thinking, it basically demands to act according to established social norms: it is immediate, reflection is minimal. Formally, one knows what to do at every moment, there is no pondering about it, no dilemma, even though of course one might have other reasons not to be nice. For nice people, the explanation of the world is raw: on one side the nice persons, our people, on the other side the mean people, the others, all easily recognizable. A pleasant alternative that avoids any ambiguity or complexity, contrary to legitimacy, courage or originality.

***Concrete*** Being nice involves simple and obvious human interaction, while pursuing superior values means dealing as well with some more abstract concepts, like justice or beauty, which are less tangible

and graspable. Being nice exists on a more particular level, more individually determined, rather than referring to general principles.

**Person** When you are nice, you exist as a particular and self-evident person, as everyone does in this type of relationship. When dealing with truth, beauty or justice, in a way one evaporates, disappears in the width or transcendence of the value: one identifies for example to the whole humanity, or reason, thus the subject becomes the mere means of this value, an instrument of a higher goal. With being nice, one is an end in itself, its own finality.

Being nice makes a person an end in itself, he is his own purpose : his comfort and well-being are his priorities.

**Inertia** It is easier to follow some general accepted imperative. One is told to be nice, thus one is nice, to the extent possible. Pursuing truth or justice requires much more personal energy, already because it necessitates to critically assess the world and soci-

ety, and to persevere in one's actions in spite of the external resistance.

***Education*** In order to pursue higher values, such as truth or beauty, one has to be rather educated, morally and intellectually, in order to perceive something else beyond obvious interactions with others. One would need to read, think and expand one's horizon. Otherwise only the evident and the common are visible, deemed useful and interesting.

***Good conscience*** A common general moral rule is that a human being is good by being nice, thus giving the impression of accomplishing something. Such a behavior secures a place in earthly paradise, and one can think he is better than others, the mean people, looking down on them. It therefore provides identity and value, a sense of being on the right side. It allows one to fabricate a better self-image.

***Fear of power*** When you pursue higher values, one must take difficult decisions, and often have to confront others, which implies responsibility

and courage. Such behavior can indeed provoke stronger effects, but it requires more power. Being nice can easily constitute a weak and passive attitude. Moreover, the obligation of niceness is articulated through many prohibitions, which protects us from daring or demanding choices.

***Self-denial*** Low self-worth is a common psychological inclination, which prohibits self-affirmation, depriving us of truly ambitious goals. In order to pursue reason or justice one has to think himself worthy of defending something wide and noble in order to partake in those values. By feeling small and puny, one resorts to just being convenient for others: one is not good enough to stand for something greater. One has doubt about his own legitimacy, about one's own right to determine a higher value, to create values and stand for them, a doubt that implies a form of self-denial. We allow self-corruption in order to please others.

***Complacency*** When one is nice to others, he is nice to himself. If one doesn't challenge himself, he won't

challenge others and they won't challenge him. Such an attitude implies a lack of rigor, a lack of the effort and training that pursuing superior values implies. Being nice makes one feel easily cozy and satisfied. To be nice implies the dissolution of more solid values, a type of lazy relativism prohibiting any critical thinking or confrontation of ideas: any requirement of heroism becomes unwarranted and superfluous.

***Excitement*** Being nice engenders some excitement, some delight, because of the feedback you are getting, and the impression of being on the right side of things. It provides a sense of enthrallment about social relations, since we feel so good together. It protects us from the sobriety and distance that self-challenge necessitates. It can evoke the romantic nostalgia of the lost paradise.

***Fear of existence*** Coexistence, bonding, is considered primary in relation to individual existence. There is a sense of shame about standing out, about being visible. It feels safer to please others and integrate a group in order to be, engendering a form of

codependency. As well, being nice protects us from decision-making, from commitment and responsibility, which psychologically is comfortable and very "tempting."

**Seduction** By being nice with others, we give them pleasure. Either by satisfying some desire they have, or by making them feel appreciated or loved. It represents one of the classical forms of seduction, and the most elementary one, as being practiced early on in the parental relation, by both parents and children.

**Mistrust** To be nice is motivated by the sense that others cannot be trusted. Either they are weak and fragile, so they will be troubled, hurt or crushed by any authentic behavior. Or they are strong and dangerous, and they will represent a threat to us if we displease them.

**Safety** Being nice means to play safe in social interactions and in relation to ourselves. We don't take risks, we don't make anyone uncomfortable. Through smiling, small talk and pleasant behavior, we create a

smooth atmosphere, deprived of any tension, free of any challenge. We reduce the likelihood of aversive reactions, others are less threatening.

***Fear of nothingness*** Being nice seems to compensate for an existential lack: the emptiness of the self, the sense and fear of nothingness. The game of mutual approval practiced among them by the “nice people”, against the “brutes”, seems to fill this lack or to calm this fear by providing the illusion of a consistency of the self. Without any other criterion than the simple similarity with others, by their assent, by their gratitude, by their tacit or effective recognition, we feel momentarily fulfilled. Furthermore, we exchange niceties galore, or some other form of formal courtesies, to deny the emptiness that actually connects us to others.

***Survival*** One has to be nice as a means or strategy for survival, greed or ambition, in a situation of weakness or powerlessness. In order to obtain assistance, to satisfy one’s needs or desires, to gain self-confidence, to get psychological support. Once

those goals are realized, when those basic necessities are satisfied, or when one can build up sufficient self-esteem and manage autonomously, the behavior towards others is modified: either they are then ignored, or there can be resentment against them, since they represent and remind the person of its past vulnerability and dependency. Although this resentment as well occurs if the need for others remains permanent and strong.

***By default*** When people have no goal nor any ideal, when no particular project drives them, when they feel fragile or depressed, all that remains is niceness, a form of courtesy, as a modality of relationship with others. This constitutes a form of minimal social behavior, short of no longer wanting or not being able to maintain interpersonal relations, or to become a misanthropist.

***Humility*** More rarely, kindness can be motivated by a strong sense of humility. Thus some people, moved by a certain modesty, seek above all to please those around them. This feeling of not being better

than others, or even worth less than them, encourages them to act in such a way as to meet the expectations of these others, as much as possible, avoiding anything that could generate tension, discontent or confrontation. This self-denial or self-sacrifice can here be viewed in the positive sense of abnegation, as a form of altruism. Serving is generally the leitmotif of the humble, based on the immediacy of perceptible or perceived expectations in others, although their thoughtfulness or consideration can sometimes be illusory or invasive.

***Repetitive*** Niceness is quite ritualistic, since the expression of this behavior largely consists in a number of actions and speeches one does not have to reflect upon. “Magical words”, as we teach children, such as “Thank you”, “Please”, “Good morning”, “Have a nice day”, weather talk, and the perpetual smiling, are crucial elements of this expected behavior. In this sense, as any ritual, this etiquette is easy to apply, safer and more comfortable. To be good to someone implies a larger diversity of actions, even opposite types of dialogues and interactions, one has to be

more creative, since we have to fit the circumstances in a context of an expanded scale perspective.

**Sexism** The feminine gender is very often associated with gentleness and kindness, a "nature" which in fact becomes a psychological and moral obligation for women. Many young girls are educated to be welcoming to others, especially men. They can even be threatened with bachelorhood if they don't comply to this norm, a statute which for the woman is supposed to represent an existential failure. This gendered education goes so far as to induce a certain principle of obedience and servitude, especially in traditional societies. Thus, when it is said of a boy who asserts his personality and independence that he has character, it is said of a girl that she is unpleasant, bossy or that she is a shrew. Any woman who does not manifest these "feminine" values will be easily denigrated. Nevertheless, certain post-modernist currents try to institute and generalize these principles of kindness, mutual attention and concern for others, each as a distinct and specific individual, into a new morality, the ethics of "care", where these

"feminine" values must replace the traditional moral values, considered masculine, since more abstract, heroic and categorical.

### ***Nice, not-nice***

One characteristic feature that comes out very clearly and seems loaded with importance in the social functioning of certain cultures, is the fact one has to be nice. And as an individual, you get the strange impression that if you step out of line on this issue, we won't be very nice to you... For it quickly seems to you that there are people who generously and selflessly pose themselves as the dubbed knights of nicety, bearers of the order of the happy face or heralds of the nice thinking, who sort of ensure that you will be nice. In order to do this, they won't hesitate to use the appropriate means. They will push courage and devotion to the point of readily giving up being very nice as soon as some unconscious brute seems or threatens to break the established code. The problem with these good willed persons is that there are so many not-nice people around, that the poor fellows don't even have the time to be nice

anymore; they have to spend their time and energy being not-nice with the not-nice people. And they are so caught up in their responsibility, so committed to rooting out all not-niceness, that they catch a sort of disease linked to this professional activity: they are not-nice.

Well in a sort of way, it is not that they are really not-nice. In fact they have a common say, a four word expression, which saves them from equivocation, so we recognize who they are and do not mistake the nice not-nice person with the banal, brutish and usual not-nice not-nice person. This expression stands as a sort of short code, a password they use or a mantra they chant constantly, that reminds them who they are, even when they are caught in the middle of the permanent tornado of a such not-nice world. "Have a nice day!" "Have a nice day!" "Have a nice day!" do they say.

Furthermore, some became real professionals through their involvement in this just struggle: they have identified most of the premises and symptoms of not-nice thinking. They have defined them, outlined them, classified them and since this revelation

dedicate their life to pursuing, chasing and condemning these pathological thinking, sayings and behaviors. The profound and insightful understanding they have forged themselves into the arcane of not-nice thinking allows them a more in-depth work in their ongoing practice of rooting out the seeds of such undesirable ways of being. Their work has become a real art, very subtle and refined. For example they can recognize a mile away a not-nice person with a not-nice behavior and not-nice thoughts even if this person is very very nice. Because one should never mix up a nice not-nice person with a not-nice nice person. They resemble each other like the dog resembles the wolf, a very dangerous look alike!

Of course they have a lot of detractors. Some bad mouths go as far as to compare them to the inquisition, or claim their constant chasing of not nice thinking resembles the pursuit of not national or not social behaviors in other places or other times. But all these odious statements are typically the insidious type of arguments made up by not-nice people, a functioning which is quite revealing of their profound wicked selves, and rests the case on why they

should be chased after relentlessly and eradicated. One should not think these niceness lovers are irrational and extremist. All they say and think has been well and thoroughly thought out. And they are open to debate. The only difficulty is just that they haven't heard any argument yet that could really stick against their own positions, they have not encountered a single convincing, irrefutable or substantial evidence that could in any way restrain or weaken their theory. It is as simple as that.

Like with all schools of thought, you have the theoreticians and masters, the militants, and then the simple rank and filers who just trust their leaders, generally without always being totally conscious that their leaders are their leaders. They mostly take for granted what they hear, viewing as normal the injunctions they receive, rendering without any holding back the tone that has been set. Very often, these disciples have so well learned and absorbed the message that at any time they will readily and almost gladly give up truth or renounce to express whatever they think to be true, viewing this challenge as a wonderful opportunity to manifest the extent of

their sacrifice. For example – an experience which could be rich in teachings for everyone –, you could step on their toes and they would keep smiling at you in order not to hurt your feelings. They will go out of their way not to say what they think in order to avoid being not nice. This, by the way, is how you recognize a militant from a simple convert. The latter will always be nice unless confronted to a far extreme, when the previous will not hesitate a single second to be not-nice in order to make anyone be nice. Which is understandable, since he feels responsible for all the others to be nice, an altruistic behavior which is much less concerned with his own niceness than the one of society as a whole.

An undeniable attribute of nice people is that they are community conscious. Whether they will go out of their way in order not to contradict what the others say, or whether they are ready to fight with everyone in order to make them nice, ethics is a main part of their preoccupation. Pernicious minds would claim that the first category is coward and the second dictatorial, but once more this proves precisely our point: not nice people are libelous and villainous.

Unlike the three well-known wise monkeys, they see evil, they hear evil, they say evil. Which totally justifies the harsh means that guardians of niceness must sadly resort to. Which fully explains as well the irascibility of these poor guardians, having to put themselves in the kind of state that is absolutely unnatural to them.

But thanks God for the nice people, there are laws that can be written, and a justice to enforce these laws, so that niceness can become not only a moral but a juridical obligation for all citizens. Little by little battles are won, which oblige everyone to be nice. New initiatives come up, which define new ways one should be nice, brand new obligations which will not allow us to rest on already established and complacent niceties. To be nice is not a large avenue paved with flowers, with the smell of myrrh and incense, it is a demanding and strenuous path, an initiation we have to undertake even if it makes us miserable. So next time you indulge in being not nice, just think of the great fun you could have making yourself miserable. And if you feel in any way frustrated, you

can relieve your pain by forcing everybody else to be nice. You will definitely feel much better.