

Kevin Timpe, Calvin University, Alice C. MacLachlan, York University, “What’s Wrong with ‘Nice’?: How the Call for Civility is Leveraged for Social Dominance”

We grant that civility is very often a political good that characterizes too little of our social and political spaces. Nevertheless, calls for civility can be used in problematic ways. There are times where calls for civility function as calls to ‘be nice’. Civility is sometimes taken to include the value of suppressing public expressions of disapproval (e.g., Owens 2015). Both niceness and civility are taken to be “behaviors that symbolically demonstrate prosocial values” expressed through norms of local etiquette (Olberding 2019, 9). In this paper, we explore calls for civility where those involve expectations of ‘niceness’ in interaction with other another, even when the others’ behavior or attitudes are problematic. We explore how the expectation for people to ‘be nice’ sometimes function as demands that we accommodate and tolerate others’ actions and attitudes. Drawing on a virtue theoretic framework (as do, e.g., MacLachlan and Olberding), I briefly argue that sometimes being nice can be in accord with virtue, even if not virtuous itself. Fulfilling the expectation that we ‘be nice’ often shows that we respect and have good will toward others (MacLachlan 2021, 177). But the call for someone to ‘be nice’ can also be morally problematic. As Aristotle famously says, virtue involves the disposition to respond “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way” (Nicomachean Ethics 1106b20-22). Following Catherine Denial, I think that “niceness, in contrast to compassion is often unkind, a Band-Aid we’re urged to plaster over deep fissures in our institutions, wielded as a weapon instead of a balm” (Denial 2024, 1f).

On some occasions, the insistence that we ‘be nice’ or ‘be civil’ is as much a function of who is saying it as it is about what isn’t to be said or done, at least not in public. We argue that the insistence that people ‘be nice’ sometimes requires us to tolerate or ignore structural injustices, and thus that on these occasions being nice is actually an expression of vice rather than of virtue. In particular, we think this happens in cases where people occupying positions of social dominance use the calls for niceness and civility to ignore or reinforce unjust social structures and relationships. Such calls can thus function to reinforce injustice within a community.