

Helena Drescher Kluth, University of Copenhagen, “Moral Civility as Communicative Accountability”

This paper addresses recent discussions of civility in political and social theory on civility and moral politics. Working within non-ideal theory, I theorize how a moral conception of civility can contribute to discussions on rapid changes in social norms as well as the role of morality in the everyday practice of politics. I propose that a moral conception of non-violent civility can be a prudent confrontational way to create social change and community in a society inhabited by different and, at times, conflicting identities, moral values, and situated experiences. Building on the scholarship that argues civility to be a communicative virtue and the framework distinguishing between civility as politeness and civility as public-mindedness, I argue that in moments where justificatory civility or civility as politeness may conflict with our morality or unduly limit or exclude some from civil participation, moral civility should structure social interactions. Yet, more conceptual work needs to be done on what kind of communication practices moral civility entails. Moral civility, I suggest, ought to be understood as a form of communicative accountability where we hold each other and ourselves morally accountable through communicative practices.

I suggest three communicative practices that make up moral civility: 1) Creating conditions of candor that make it possible to hold people accountable to the ways in which they conceive of and embody morality, 2) encouraging engagement by engaging not only your own moral ideas and arguments, but engaging others' moral ideas and arguments and responding to them as expressions of moral agency, 3) and curiosity, by staying curious on other peoples' moral reasonings, and trying to understand them even if you do not accept them. In arguing that these three practices constitute morally civil interactions, I draw on feminist theory to show that civility should not be misunderstood as comfort but rather that we ought to embrace discomfort as a fundamental premise within civil society, as dealing with others is not always a comfortable exercise. Mobilizing affective theories of discomfort, I show how moral civility is preferred to justificatory civility in instances where the latter results in avoidance and civility as politeness when social norms of proper conduct become exclusionary or hinder social change. Furthermore, I argue that discomfort has epistemic value for organizing a shared civil society as it creates affective awareness of others and our own positionality in the current social organization. Therefore, discomfort can orient us toward each other in empathic ways. Ultimately, I propose that moral civility, as opposed to justificatory civility and civility as politeness, is not about creating a comfortable social life but a shared one, however uncomfortable that might show itself to be.