

Virtues and Vices of Tolerance

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I shall first examine the differing uses and meanings of the concept ‘toleration’, and how most of the uses fail to be instances of genuine toleration. Second, I will consider how it might be possible to understand tolerance (and intolerance) as a virtue. And last, I consider whether ‘virtuous tolerance’ could be a viable possibility in public life.

KEYWORDS

tolerance, virtues, religion and public life

In our contemporary Western societies we cannot avoid discussing themes that would have seemed totally foreign and even peculiar to our culture not long ago.¹ The mindset of our societies is to a large extent consensual but the reaching of consensus seems increasingly more difficult as the plurality of views and practices within them progressively grows. John Rawls described the situation in *Political Liberalism* this way:

¹ Interestingly, Raimond Gaita has suggested that one sign of moral maturity in a society is what it is *not* willing to discuss. Gaita uses as an example the dispute over the torture of captured soldiers in USA. He thinks that it is not a good sign that we are willing to seriously and publicly discuss whether torturing another human being could be justified. Podcast: Gaita on Torture, in *Philosophy bites*, iTunes.

A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens.²

It is possible to disagree on all kind of things, even after extensive debate—and including *after* political decisions have been made in favor of some particular view or other.³ Decisions to change current policies or adopt completely new ones are very likely to leave some segments of the population disgruntled, which then will form new minorities, since Western societies make laws to satisfy the views of the majority of the population.⁴ This, of course, can create frustration and tension. The questions of Rawls and many others is that how we are able to create and sustain stable and just society that consists of citizens divided by their basic beliefs and values. Recently an Onion comedian paraphrased the situation as follows: ‘The truth is, this nation can never be united as long as it is home to people other than myself.’⁵

The presence of a stranger—people whose values, lifestyle and beliefs differs from ours—in our midst raises the question of toleration, and what we should *not* tolerate. In this article, I shall first examine the differing uses and meanings of the concept ‘toleration’, and how most of the uses fail to be instances of genuine toleration. Second, I will consider how it might be possible to understand tolerance (and intolerance) as a virtue. And last, I consider whether ‘virtuous tolerance’ could be a viable possibility in public life.

1. DISCOURSES OF TOLERANCE

The concept ‘tolerance’ is used frequently in both popular and political discourse. Nevertheless, the concept can have various meanings and it can be used to embody various public attitudes. As a working hypothesis, I refer to a general definition: tolerance is ‘the deliberate decision to refrain from prohi-

² John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1996), xviii.

³ For example, Habermasian discourse ethics should enable sustainable ways of reaching communal, majority decisions. However, reaching a decision does not necessarily end the disagreement (meaning that the minority party still holds on to their views).

⁴ Of course, our societies sometimes make laws precisely to protect the minorities against the majorities or other minorities.

⁵ <http://www.theonion.com/articles/we-will-never-be-united-as-a-nation-as-long-as-the.17764/>

biting, hindering, or otherwise coercively interfering with conduct of which one disapproves, although one has the power to do so.⁶ Tolerance thus needs three coexisting components:

- T₁ Genuine disagreement
- T₂ The power to hinder the conduct of the other
- T₃ Deliberate refraining from hindering

I will revisit this formulation later but for now it can function as working hypothesis, which illuminates some crucial, but not necessarily all, elements of genuine toleration. In order to test this definition, I will distinguish between six different *uses* of the concept, which are as follows:

- tolerance as self-congratulation – or despising attitude towards – the other
- tolerance as relativism
- tolerance as vice
- tolerance as approval
- tolerance as negligence
- tolerance as virtue

Using this simple taxonomy I shall criticize the major public uses of the concept since they fall short of the virtuous goal, which they are clearly trying to reach. Tolerance is quite often used in a laudatory way, and I take this to mean that people have a very high regard for tolerance. Oddly, few people are willing to say that they are modest, humble, patient, generous, and loving etc., but it is more common and socially acceptable, for some reason, to vaunt oneself as tolerant. From the observer's point of view, if someone says that he is humble, we usually take this as a proof of his pride but we seldom act in this way in the case of tolerance. Maybe it is so because tolerance is so easy, at least for a set of relatively non-controversial cases, for example, when the objects of tolerance are not that different. However, it is important to keep in mind that people do in fact consider tolerance virtuous.⁷ Later, I will

⁶ See, e.g., J. Horton, 'Toleration,' in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 9, 1998; A. J. Cohen, 'What Toleration is,' *Ethics* 115 (2004): 69; Paul Ricoeur, 'The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable,' *Diogenes* 44/4 (1996), 189. T.M. Scanlon, *The Difficulty of Tolerance. Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003), 187.

⁷ Thus, among others, Ricoeur, 'Erosion of Tolerance,' 189.

make some comments about changes we should make to our current understanding of tolerance in order to make it *truly* virtuous.

The aforementioned case illustrates some aspects of the first use of the concept. Tolerance can be used to express self-congratulation, which has as its counterpart a despising attitude towards those who think differently (E.g., ‘I am tolerant, while you people are closed-minded bigots’). It is questionable whether this counts as genuine tolerance, because it seems that if it were in one’s power to stop the others from acting according to their views, one would do so. The elements T₂ and T₃ are thus missing. Of course, the person may let the other go about her business, thus meeting T₂, while she expresses verbal resentment but refrains from physical hindering.

The second use is another example of careless use of terms. We may use the term ‘tolerance’ to express imprecise relativist attitudes. Here the concept works as a slogan, as when one says vaguely ‘We need to tolerate difference’. The odd thing is that nobody actually ‘tolerates’ unqualified ‘difference’. There is no generic ‘difference’ we can tolerate. Secondly, ‘toleration’ does not here mean toleration but something like putting everything on a par. It is almost like saying ‘we do not have to tolerate because everything is the same after all.’ This attitude thus excises and hides the actual differences, leaving nothing left to tolerate.⁸ It is not clear that there is any disagreement at all, and when the disagreement is absent there is no need for toleration. All the aforementioned elements of tolerance are thus missing. Here the meaning of tolerance is the same as that of acceptance. This particular conceptual slide is a complex issue, which I cannot engage with in this paper. I only note that the laws that are meant to protect subaltern groups, both religious and secular, from discrimination can cause heuristic problems when the categories of acceptance, tolerance and critique are not carefully fleshed out. If it is legally required that you must ‘tolerate’ some group, it often seems to indicate that you must accept them and their ways as well, and in effect, *public* expressions of disagreement become sanctioned. This is a result of our modern legal culture where it is only social contract and consequent positive law that draws the line between right and wrong. Legality and morality is basically the same

⁸ This problem has been pointed out by, e.g., Peter Jonkers, ‘Can Freedom of Religion Replace the Virtue of Tolerance,’ in: *From Political Theory to Political Theology. Religious Challenges and the Prospects of Democracy*, Peter Losonczi and Aakash Singh (ed.), (London: Continuum 2010), 74–76. On similar criticisms made by Slavoj Žižek, see Marcus Pound, *Žižek. A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2008), 96–97, 134–137.

thing when there is no longer anything behind human procedures of legislation that could be used to evaluate and critique the laws.⁹

The third use of the concept is tolerance as vice. When the other is something we want to proscribe we say something like ‘This cannot be tolerated!’ The elements T₁ and T₂ are present but T₃ is not. Here tolerance appears as something negative because it is feared that giving room to those who disagree with us will enable them to grow in numbers and turn against us. The difference between the first and third use is that in the third case one actually uses his or her power to hinder something. The concept is used, but it points to something that is in fact vicious in that particular context, making intolerance the virtuous course of action in certain given situations.

The following two examples are interesting because they involve all three elements but still fail as virtuous tolerance. The first of these is complacent approval (‘Let them do what they like, it is not that bad really if you think about it’). For example, in northeast Finland it is common for rich Russians to buy land and build cottages on Finnish soil. Against the background of two bloody wars with Russia, Finns can be expected to have critical reactions towards this financial enterprise. An aggravating factor here is the fact that Finns are not allowed to buy land on the Russian side, not even from the occupied territories. However, even if some have strong feelings against this endeavor, some yield to it if the financial compensation is good enough. Nevertheless, they think that there is something problematic about this, and they could stop it, but they let this happen; they approve it.

The second way is somewhat similar but it expresses more clearly neglect and lack of interest. For example, a significant number of citizens of major European cities are generally OK with prostitution, as long it does not take place on their street. By ‘generally OK’, I mean that they think that there is something not quite right here but for some reason they are not willing to engage the issue in detail, and put it out of mind.

The difference between these two is that while the first expresses general approval, the other is merely negligent about the matter. However, it could be argued that the component T₁ dissolves when nobody cares about the disagreement anymore, and these two examples thus also fail to represent tolerance.

⁹ For discussion see, e.g., Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), 225.

2. SUPPLEMENTING TOLERANCE

This finally brings us to the crux of the matter. It seems that the aforementioned components are not able to sustain the attitude I call virtuous tolerance. As we saw in the previous examples, the problem of tolerance is that it easily backslides into negligence or approval, or fails otherwise to sustain the critical attitude. Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes this predicament as follows:

Toleration... is not in itself a virtue and too inclusive a toleration is a vice. Toleration is an exercise of virtue just in so far as it serves the purposes of a certain kind of rational enquiry and discussion, in which the expression of conflicting points of view enables us through constructive conflict to achieve certain individual and communal goods. And intolerance is also an exercise of virtue when and in so far as it enables us to achieve those same goods.¹⁰

In other words, tolerance should be acted out so that it creates a space for sustained encounter and discussion between disagreeing parties. Thus I suggest that our earlier definition of tolerance needs the additional principle:

T₄ Maintaining a critical attitude and public conversation

T₄ helps to realize the presence of T₁. When there exists a genuine disagreement about a certain matter, it is not virtuous to pretend that it does not exist, or that we should just let it be, nor is it virtuous if we engage the other party with disrespect or simple hate. Virtuous tolerance entails keeping up the public conversation and the public expression of critique.¹¹

The first example of the use of tolerance illustrates a case where the critical attitude remains but it is motivated by scorn and disdain. Of course, when we do not recognize the other as our epistemic peer or when the opinion seems just bogus, it is hard to avoid this. For example, the neo-atheist critique of religion displays this kind of attitude: religion is a delusion, and

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Toleration and goods in conflict,' in A. MacIntyre, *Politics and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 223. See also John Bowlin, 'Tolerance among the Fathers,' *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26 (2006), 8–10.

¹¹ Ricoeur, 'The Erosion of Tolerance,' 201. Likewise, Rawls's (*ibid.* xxii) model of liberalism does not try to 'attack or criticize, much less reject, any particular theory of truth of moral judgments'. Thus, his model does not aim at consensus but conviviality. He believes that disagreements, when handled well (that is, when they follow 'public reason'), can be instructive and cultivating for societies. My argument in this paper is only to make a footnote to Rawls's theory, by proposing explicit virtue language as one possible way of giving visible form to Rawls's aims.

people who defend it are mad, evil or intellectually substandard. Clearly, the plea for rational encounter and dialogue seems to be in vain, if you a priori regard the other as incapable of rationality. That is why we need a fifth component:

T₅ Conversation and dialogue has to express intellectual virtues.

By intellectual virtues, I mean such qualities as discretion, humility, wisdom, interpretive sensitivity, prudence, coachability, tenacity, open-mindedness, honesty and the like. Tolerance is not usually listed among intellectual or moral virtues. The reason for this may be its ambiguity, and also that the goals of tolerance can be gained through other virtues, such as patience, truthfulness and open-mindedness.

But how intellectual virtues help us understand the nature of tolerance? Of course, there is no necessary connection between these two. It is easy to come up with examples where an action is not virtuous (getting drunk on Friday nights) but tolerable. On the other hand, some actions are made and argued with philosophical rigor but they are still cruel and possibly illegal (a postmodernist performance artist tortures a living animal in order to expose the nihilist vocation of our society).

Virtues as such do not give a solution to the question what can be tolerated. However virtues might give us guidance about how we should live and act with the disagreement situations, or how we should reach the decision what can be tolerated and what not. This is a somewhat simplistic answer to a highly complicated issue but I think that the language of virtues could offer a reasonable way of *communication* in pluralistic societies.

I believe that the language of virtue could provide the tools for dealing with disagreement situations since this provides us ways of paraphrasing what is wrong with the given situation. According to Rosalind Hursthouse:

It is a noteworthy feature of our virtue and vice vocabulary that, although our list of generally recognised virtue terms is comparatively short, our list of vice terms is remarkably, and usefully, long, far exceeding anything that anyone who thinks in terms of standard deontological rules has ever come up with. Much invaluable action guidance comes from avoiding courses of action that would be irresponsible, feckless, lazy, inconsiderate, uncooperative, harsh..., selfish, mercenary, indiscreet, tactless, arrogant, unsympathetic, cold, incautious, ...feeble, presumptuous, rude, hypocritical, self-indulgent, materialistic,

grasping, short-sighted, vindictive, calculating, ungrateful, grudging, brutal, profligate, disloyal, and on and on.¹²

The conceptual range of virtues and vices provides tools to engage all sorts of behavior in effective and understandable ways.

Of course, the rubber meets the road when we come across with something we do not like or agree with. MacIntyre distinguishes four attitudes towards the utterances of others. We may take the other perspective as reinforcing our views or helping us to reformulate our point better. Or it may compel us to adopt another point of view that differs from our previous views. The third option is that we can see no way of regarding the other view as beneficial for us, but we nevertheless recognize its force, so that we feel compelled to give due answer, for example, by trying to demonstrate the flaws or misunderstandings within the argument, or convincing the other that adopting my view does not have implications she should be afraid of. There is also a possibility that the opinion of the other is formulated in such a way that there is no alternative to excluding him or her temporarily or permanently from discussion. MacIntyre, however, immediately recognizes that the line between justified intolerance (the expelling of the other) and unjustified suppression of opinion is a line drawn in water.¹³

Ricoeur invokes in this context the concept of ‘harm’, which entails both physical and mental injury.¹⁴ But the concept is rather vague, since ‘harm’ can be extended to cover relatively civil discussion about a controversial topic if somebody ends up feeling hurt or discriminated as a result of the conversation. And in the cases of disagreement somebody will *always* get more or less hurt. In our current political climate, moral arguments can be used to ban discussion about delicate matters. An example of this is (in the end, temporary) firing of a Catholic professor Ken Howell at the University of Illinois for explaining the natural law argument against homosexual conduct because, according to the chair of the department Robert McKim, it made some students feel ‘uncomfortable’. What might be happening here is that the meaning of incitement to hatred is getting extended to include critical civil discussion about the nature of various ways of sexual conduct.¹⁵ Ricoeur seems to

¹² R. Hursthouse, ‘Virtue Ethics,’ In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

¹³ MacIntyre, ‘Toleration,’ 206.

¹⁴ Ricoeur, ‘The Erosion of Tolerance,’ 198, 201. See also Jonkers, ‘Freedom of Religion,’ 82.

¹⁵ For a report of the case, see Meghan Duke, ‘Fired, in a Crowded Theater,’ *First Things* 206 (2010), 24–29.

acknowledge this problem when he resists, and ask his readers to resist, the charm of consensus in moral matters. Instead, the wisdom, he claims, lies in being 'content with fragile compromises' and 'recognition of reasonable disagreements'. Additionally, we should not be impatient in reaching premature consensus in disputed matters (Ricoeur singles out abortion and euthanasia as concrete examples). In these kinds of cases, the conflict should be regarded as important and, for the time being, unsolvable, by mutual recognition of all parties to the dispute. Virtue language might prove to be beneficial in these kind of fragile situations.

3. THE VIABILITY OF TOLERANCE

How viable is this concept of tolerance? The critics of tolerance have claimed that it is inherently utopian and therefore not really possible for us. As a political principle it sets the bar too high; if we try to be virtuously tolerant we are doomed to fail. This view has some psychological warrant. Some studies suggest that living in a world out of joint takes up a lot of mental resources and requires a mentally and morally robust character, which is unfortunately rare.¹⁶ Additionally, intellectually virtuous belief formation requires philosophical acumen and familiarity with arguments, which requires time. And time is a luxury we do not have. An additional problem is that the traditions, like religions and political worldviews, that should provide us with needed virtues are not very effective in motivating us to virtuous action. Of course, people embrace their traditions to different degrees and in different ways, and only a small number of them can attain the level of perfect, or near perfect, virtue.

However, we should distinguish between the ideals that nobody can attain, and the ones most people cannot attain. Clearly, everybody cannot be virtuous but *some can*, and even those who cannot, can recognize virtues when they see them performed (although they might not necessarily appreciate them).¹⁷ Partly, the viability of virtuous tolerance hangs on the ability of at least some people to recognize and appreciate virtues, which is something

¹⁶ See, e.g., Steven Sandage & F. LeRon Shults, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2006), 153–186.

¹⁷ For example, Linda Zagzebski argues that if disagreements are solved, the resolution takes place first between the wise, or practically rational, representatives (*phronimoi*) of the disagreeing parties. See Zagzebski, *Divine Motivation Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 378.

that can to some extent be improved by education and deeper understanding of our intellectual and religious traditions, which are tightly intertwined.

Of course, religions can be the source of both deep wisdom and utter stupidity, but that description fits equally well with ‘secular’ affiliations, and, for that matter, very few institutions are in fact completely evil or completely good. Interestingly, Robert Merrihew Adams argues that mid-level social affiliations (families, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, religious institutions etc.) and social roles (parent, friend, teacher, supervisor, citizen, etc.) are crucial components for the constitution of moral character and a virtuous way of life. However, he remains doubtful about the possibilities of the state being able to fulfill the functions of moral education and argues that moral development requires a church, or an institution that resembles a church by providing a space for sustained discourse on ethical issues and providing a context of mutual care between the members of the community.¹⁸ Adams’s model suggests that instead of pushing religion into the private sphere, churches and religions should be brought to the public sphere because they have the best possible sources and instruments for moral development. More particularly, because of its long history, including various moral successes and failures, and its venerable tradition of moral deliberation, the Christian religion has immense resources for internal critique, so that despite the abuses and betrayal of central Christian commitments the instruments needed for its correction are found *within* the tradition.

Nevertheless, tolerance is a difficult virtue, and the difficulties in achieving it lie not only in us but also in the structures that surround us and thwart our endeavors to reach towards the virtues. MacIntyre notes, for example, that the rhetorical modes of rational enquiry are profoundly at odds with the rhetorical modes of contemporary, commercialist political culture.¹⁹ Another structural problem can be stated briefly as follows: capitalist market economies have the genius of (1) harnessing human vices (principally, greed and fearfulness) to produce (2) desirable ends (high productivity, economic efficiency), but this in turn leads to (3) flagrant injustices and inequalities in the distribution of wealth. As G. A. Cohen notes, we are perennially tempted to

¹⁸ Robert Merrihew Adams, *A Theory of Virtue. Excellence in Being for the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon 2006), 138–143, 228–229. See also John Bowlin, ‘Nature, Grace, and Toleration: Civil Society and the Twinned Church,’ *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 85–104. Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lviii–lix.

¹⁹ MacIntyre, ‘Toleration,’ 223.

focus on (2), but put (1) and (3) out of mind.²⁰ The structural problem for the realisation of virtues in human societies can be stated as follows: capitalism (a) relies on the systematic cultivation (or at least permitting) of human vices, but (b) seems (so far as least) to be the only viable way of organising ourselves economically and politically. It looks like we simply have no idea how we could systematically organise our political life by harnessing virtues (such as generosity, cooperation, reciprocity, etc.) rather than vices, so a viable non-capitalist alternative is not on the cards. Once you have (a) and (b), things might not look very promising, unless one could make an argument that although capitalism systematically encourages vices, virtues can nevertheless flourish in certain spaces within our societies not dominated by the logic of capitalist exchange relations (family, friends, doctors, nurses, teachers, etc. and possibly even parts of the academy and other mid-level social institutions), and are not undermined by the general surrounding viciousness.

The future of virtuous tolerance looks quite grim. But what are the alternatives? Should we ditch the idea of tolerance because it is too hard? I think that the idea of virtuous tolerance has some benefits over its alternatives, which gives at least some pragmatic reasons for pushing forward towards the goal which may be in the end turn out to be beyond our reach. First, virtuous tolerance exposes the false view that the world is simple, uniform and easy. Second, it enables the critical movement and engagement with other stories that the strongly consensual systems are not able to provide, thus making the slide into apathy and complacency harder. Third, it takes pluralism seriously and forces us to understand the other from their point of view. And fourth, the alternatives effectively present either brute power or mediocrity as a moral aim.²¹

²⁰ See G. A. Cohen, *Why not Socialism?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2009).

²¹ I would like to thank two anonymous referees, who made helpful comments and Dr. David Leech for the extended dialogue that has helped me to improve my thinking about the matters of this paper.

