

Introduction

PHILOSOPHY AND THE QUESTION OF INTOLERANCE

Were we to compile a late twentieth-century list of virtues, tolerance would equal or surpass in prominence the more ancient and traditional, such as justice or wisdom. But we will not find the word or any approximate synonym on any lists dating from a time when it was more common for philosophers to compile them.

Although the technical terms may fill only a small space in the Western philosophy of the past two centuries, the problems are problems of the human condition. They have been and continue to be encountered by our kind and to be dealt with—not always very successfully—in all times and places. And the ongoing practical problems are ongoing problems of reflection, not resolved by the mere recognition of toleration as a positive value.

Toleration works its way into the vocabulary of ethics in early modernity, around the time of Locke's often cited *Letter concerning Toleration*. The first recommendations to be tolerant are negative ones. The word's Latin root is *tolero*, to bear, endure, sustain; it is cognate to *tollo*, to lift up or carry, and derived from the Indo-European root *tela*, to lift or weigh. To tolerate is to endure, to put up with the objectionable, to bear a burden. One tolerates as one shoulders a burden. Like the burden, the persons or actions tolerated are neither pleasant nor welcome. Consequently, toleration is valued only as a means, not an end. Even as a means, toleration, negatively conceived, is not, like a vaccination, the painful means to a future good, but rather a means to accommodate the least objectionable among objectionable alternatives. Thus, for example, Locke does not endorse toleration because toleration is good in itself, but only because the consequences of intolerance are a greater evil than

the evil that is tolerated. Even so, toleration is construed narrowly: Locke, for example, extends tolerance to those whose faith requires different practices, but not to atheists, who have no faith. Only recently has it become common to find toleration as the principle of mutual acceptance and the embrace of diversity represented as intrinsically desirable. Although Locke's and other writings of his period on toleration were confined to a religious context, his argument embraces at least two principles central to later less restrictive and more positive conceptions of toleration. Locke's advocacy of religious tolerance is closely tied to his epistemology with its critical emphasis, anticipating Kant, on the limits of human knowledge—because of those limits, unshakable confidence in one's own faith does not grant the epistemological certainty to justify persecuting another. It is also closely tied to the modern conception of society as modeled on a contract, viewing the structure of society as the coordination of atomic individuals, whose interests may overlap, but who are essentially separate and private. Insofar as a person's religion is a private matter, it is to be tolerated, since one person's private errors are not another's concern. However, if that faith requires foreign allegiance, then it is in Locke's view a public concern that need not be tolerated.

In the present-day West, the question of intolerance is, of course, much broader and of greater scope than the question of religious tolerance alone. In many parts of the world where distinctions between the public and the private and between the sacred and the secular are not drawn as in the West, the suffering inflicted by religious conflict is a frightening reality. In the secular West, too, the problem of religious tolerance has not vanished, nor have episodes of violence, although the outbreak of religiously motivated warfare seems remote. More common are tensions and conflicts short of war, even if wistfully dubbed by some "culture war." Yet this is indicative that even matters of religious toleration are much connected with secular affairs in the contemporary West. In such situations, proponents of more liberal and of more conservative sides of an issue generally share a view that certain matters of belief and of behavior fall under private concerns but are at odds over where that line between private and public concern is to be drawn. And this is a concern to religious and nonreligious alike.

Insofar as religion per se still occasions questions concerning toleration specific to religion, it has become to a great extent not a problem of public action, but one of private religious conception: how can the individual reconcile faith in the absolute truth of her own tradition with her acceptance of the proposition that one should be tolerant; how can one remain religious while being tolerant, not whether one can remain tolerant given the truth of religion.

That questions of religious toleration often take this form in the West is a manifestation of the scope of concern for intolerance. It is generally accepted as a good that one should be tolerant not only of the faith of others,

but of all other varieties of cultural and social activity. With the uncritical assurances of the brief overview, we might say that the Lockean principle that private matters are private matters has contributed significantly to secularizing and broadening the understanding of questions of intolerance in the West.

The broadening includes its extension from something negatively defined—toleration as enduring bad because it is worse to oppose it—to something positively embraced—toleration as embracing what is different and finding intrinsic value in diversity. Nevertheless, the broadening in our conception of toleration even to the extent of embracing toleration as a positive good does not resolve the fundamental problems. The line dividing private and public realms is fuzzy and floating; it is highly culturally dependent, constantly being redefined in public discourse, and consequently perceived differently from one individual to another.

Even if one uncritically accepts the principle that private matters are not the concern of another, the question of how to determine what is private still must be answered. Likewise, if we accept Locke's other principle that our knowledge remains severely limited even at its best, the principle still demands that we define the limits. The seemingly benign comfort of supposing otherwise can ease the path into further manifestations of intolerance, as a more specific form of intolerance gives way to a more general yet kindred form.

The more specific form, intolerance born of unquestioned and resolute faith, one might say, manifests a certain mental sloth. This is the complacency of the intolerance that rests in the self-assurance of the finite person's infallibility. Not only does this trespass on private ground, but it violates the principle of imperfect knowledge by taking the assurance of one's own beliefs as reason enough to act against another's, whether it be the demolition of a temple in India or the harassment of a child not wanting to pray in public school in Mississippi.

The mirror image of the intolerance of faith is an intolerance of indifference, reversed left to right, but not top to bottom. It, too, one might say, is born of unrealistic and self-serving complacency, the self-assurance of the finite person's fallibility: another way to release oneself from real and critical engagement in the society, and a way that may lead to analogous consequences.

One possible response to the principle demanding that we recognize limitations to our knowledge is the assertion that since no standards are infallible, at least not to the best of human knowledge, no standards apply. The rejection of all standards as anything but subjective may translate into a principle that any moral agent's wishes must be tolerated. While not practicable in this form, the proposition may be turned into the assertion that no judgements should be made or at least acted upon, that no action be taken

against anything that can be construed as private or against any desires that do not interfere with the desires of others. However, this is a principle without grounds. If we would not acknowledge standards for action, then on what footing do we assert the standard that one person's pursuits are tolerable as long as they interfere with no other person's? It is perhaps at best an uncritical remnant from social contract theory. However, if there are grounds for this principle of toleration, on what grounds do we demur from passing judgement on human end and purpose, both one's own and those of others?

Perhaps, one might continue, this principle has no grounds, but so what? Neither does any other principle, and, besides, is this not the essence of toleration? Two avenues lead on from this mental detachment, depending on how we draw our vague line between public and private. Perhaps we are called upon to tolerate everything, and, if we are to enforce absolute toleration, then we must curtail any beliefs or practices that can be construed as intolerant in any sense. This road circles back to absolute intolerance. Alternatively, one may under the guise of utter tolerance adopt the pretence of living in a vacuum—a tolerant monad of private interests, neither affecting nor affected by others. All of the cases converge in the refusal of considered and reflective engagement with differing ideas. If one dogmatically asserts infallibility, one asserts power without justification; if one rejects any legitimacy whatsoever, one implicitly acknowledges no other basis for action than the assertion of power. It is no accident that the contemporary West is so gripped by the discourse of power, nor that the discourse is so empty.

We are left with a situation reminiscent of the vying of dogmatism and skepticism described (in another context) by Hume:

The sceptical and dogmatical reasons are of the same kind, tho' contrary in their operation and their tendency; so that where the latter is strong, it has an enemy of equal force in the former to encounter; and as their forces were at first equal, they still continue so, as long as either of them subsists; nor does one of them lose any force in the contests, without taking as much from its antagonist. 'Tis happy, therefore, that nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding. Were we to trust entirely to their self-destruction, that can never take place, 'till they have first subverted all conviction, and have totally destroyed human reason.¹

This is a natural conclusion, if, like Hume, one is persuaded that no moral distinctions derive from reason. However, it is not an agreeable conclusion, since it condemns us, helpless against our own nature, to living in the balance of opposing forces of intolerance.

Still, the awareness that our human meagreness, with all its limitations is assurance enough that we will never exhaust the supply of problems to solve, does not directly lead to the narcissistic inference that we cannot meaningfully and rationally address those problems. Blind faith and simple indifference are two forms of complacency, whereas genuine respect for differing standards implies not uncritical acceptance, but awareness of the limitations of one's own insight and awareness of the necessity to continually re-examine one's own standards.

We may continue to debate the utility of talk about virtues and debate whether toleration should be counted as one. Yet perhaps, though the term *toleration* is a relatively recent entry into the vocabulary of ethical discussion, its essence is captured by Plato's Socrates, who was so concerned with virtue: "The unexamined life is not worth living." What follows in this volume is an excursion into that examination.

RELIGION AND THE QUESTION OF INTOLERANCE

Is it in the nature of religious truth to be intolerant? This is one of the central questions which has been examined extensively in the religion section of the present work. Whereas various perspectives have been presented by different authors, we would like to argue that tolerance, and the attainment of an "appreciative mind" regarding those values that are different and often threatening, requires an ongoing rational discourse and engagement with an alien value system. Also, we would like to argue that a rational approach to the question of religious truth allows a person to maintain the integrity of his belief in a religious truth while allowing for various other religions to make truth claims of a different nature. Whether religious beliefs are rationally justifiable is not the aim of this inquiry.

Religions in and of themselves produce neither tolerance nor intolerance; it is how one encounters religious truth which determines the outcome. Let us examine the following three mind sets and their respective outcomes as a starting point: (1) intolerant, (2) tolerant, (3) appreciative.

The intolerant mind is convinced that it knows the truth and is certain that this truth is obvious and self-evident. Those who do not share this self-evident truth, according to the believer, are naturally wrong for refusing to accept the obvious. The intolerant mind whose "faith" makes the content of his belief self-evident then is angered by those who "choose" not to see "the truth." The anger is directed toward the person who does not want to be a conformist and submit to someone else's perception of reality, as well as her underlying principles and belief system. The intolerant mind, convinced of the evil intention of those unlike itself, rejects the person as much as his

“false religion,” a classical case of *ad homenum*. The rejection of the message and the messenger partially stems from the insecurity and vulnerability of the intolerant person who is intimidated by nontraditional values. Religious truth, for the intolerant mind, therefore not only is absolute in a personal sense but also is universal in nature. It is not sufficient for a person to know the truth, according to the intolerant person, but everyone else must accept his world views as well. In fact, the obsession to convert others and the intellectual imperialism resulting from certainty becomes the salient feature and the focal point of an intolerant mind. The intolerant person lives for his cause.

Although tolerance compared to intolerance is a virtue, since it implies enduring an undesirable phenomenon, it falls short of being an inherent virtue. For a tolerant individual, religious truth even if it is held in an absolute sense for the individual who adheres to it, does not necessarily entail intolerance. All it does claim is that this truth for me is a binding one whereas others need not follow it. The problem occurs when one claims that religious truth not only is true for him but everyone else ought to accept it as well.

Tolerance, though it is the necessary condition for having a civil society, does not go far enough. It remains passive and accepts reluctantly what is different. It is this passivity of tolerance which, while acceptable, is not sufficient. Enduring and tolerating is different than being actively engaged in what is different, foreign, alien, and therefore threatening to one's *weltanschauung*.

It is therefore reasonable to infer from the above that there are two senses of tolerance; passive and active. In the passive sense, the tolerant individual maintains that although his position is true, he chooses to ignore those concepts and values that are different or even contrary to his. It can be said that a tolerant mind is one which affirms the truth of his own views but holds a noncommitted view regarding those of others. Since for the tolerant person the focus is on himself and not others, he does not engage in value judgments.

What distinguishes the two types of individuals is precisely the position each one maintains with regard to her engagement with what is threatening to the order of her world view. Whereas the intolerant individual rejects the other and their notion of truth (for him there is only one Truth, that of himself), the tolerant mind holds a position of neutrality and makes no value judgment regarding it. In this regard, the tolerant person is halfway between the intolerant individual and the individual who appreciates what is different.

An aspect of the tolerant mind is closely connected with what is known as the “perennial view.” Perennialists argue that all religious traditions are manifestations of the same Truth and their apparent differences are merely indications of their relative ignorance of Truth. Only the Absolute knows the

Absolute absolutely perennialists argue, the knowledge of all other beings of the absolute is only relative.

The model offered by the perennialists indeed does provide a framework within which one can be tolerant and appreciate other religions even if they are contradicting hers, since religions emanate from the same Source. The problem is that although such a model which has functioned in the traditional world—where most, if not all people have had a religion—is no longer able to respond to the challenges of the modern world. What would the perennialists say about the secular humanists, Universalist Unitarians, existentialists, atheists, and even those with a secular or nontheistic interpretation of a religious tradition? Perennialism, which in the traditional world was inclusive of almost everyone, in the secular world excludes a great number of people.

The remedy to this problem is to widen the ontological domain of the “acceptables” to the “untouchables” and that requires an *appreciative mind*, one that is willing to be open to all but not necessarily accepting all. Tolerance, in its authentic and positive sense, therefore, is opening oneself to the unknown abyss of the other. *Appreciation* is a better term to describe this mind-set than *tolerance* since it denotes the active role of the individual in the process of tolerance. Tolerance in its positive sense goes further to be engaged actively with despised values. The appreciative individual chooses a path of engagement and a constructive discourse with the foreign and alien world view and the values it espouses. From this active engagement and critical self-examination comes an inner enrichment of the appreciative individual. In this case, the person in question need not fear “conversion,” since examination of and being receptive to a different notion of truth can only stimulate a hermeneutical process resulting in a deeper understanding of one’s own religious tradition. The basis and the criterion for this engagement however, should be none other than the fruit of human wisdom, a rational process of discourse and reflection.

The person with an appreciative mind may argue that his views are correct, but he does not negate that others may be right as well regardless of how far apart they might be. In fact, he would go so far as to say that truth is not and cannot only be an exclusive property of a select number of people. Therefore, an appreciative mind would want to explore other traditions of wisdom either to choose amongst them the superior tradition or to enrich his own views. Such a view demands that the appreciative mind be in a constant dialogue with and in search of what is different and challenging to one’s intellectual and religious perspectives.

It should be noted that this type of relativism does not negate the truth of the individual traditions but can regard them as manifestations of a process of rationalization, intellection, reflection, and contemplation. The central

message, and the *core* of many religious traditions which have survived the test of history, contains a great deal of human wisdom which is not necessarily inconsistent with the principles of rationality. The subsequent development of religions has added layer upon layer of rituals and beliefs which ought to be weeded out by the sword of rational reflection in order to separate the wheat from the chaff.

One's active and rational engagement with other traditions and value systems does not have to take place to verify one's philosophical validity or to falsify one's claims. The purpose of such inquiry should be to understand alien values and concepts in a clear manner and in comparison to one's own tradition. A rational discourse can be more beneficial if it is not intended to examine whether religious claims can or cannot survive the scrutiny of reason. If this were the case, then once again truth becomes an enterprise exclusive to a select number of people, that is, rationalistic philosophers. Rationality in this sense only assumes that values different than mine have something inherently worth cultivating and therefore should be respected and explored.

It is only reasonable to conclude that, throughout millenniums, every society has had the opportunity to discover, develop, and cherish ideas, concepts, and values that are essential for the vitality and spiritual health of that society. However, maintaining a healthy society is only possible through a rational and critical examination of its underlying values. This necessitates that "our" value system be compared and contrasted with "theirs," a process that requires adoption of a rational framework within which there is room for truths, not only one Truth.

OVERVIEW

The body of questions mentioned above, together with its cultural, social, religious, and philosophical implications are addressed in the following chapters. Despite the inevitable overlaps that defy ordering, the contributions to this volume are arranged into four sections: philosophical roots of intolerance, religion, politics, and ethics. Earlier versions of each chapter were among the papers presented at the conference *Intolerance and Toleration*, held at Mary Washington College in November 1994.

The first section presents three contrasting perspectives on the conceptual roots of intolerance. In "Bayle, Locke, and the Concept of Toleration," J. B. Schneewind gives a historical account of the period of Locke's *A Letter concerning Moral Toleration*, the document to which we usually date the entry of the term *toleration* into the vocabulary of philosophical ethics. Schneewind makes the case for paying greater attention to Locke's contem-

porary Bayle, and he concludes with an argument defending a Rawlsian model of toleration.

In "Aristotle and the Metaphysics of Intolerance" John McCumber spans thinkers from Aristotle to the present to advance the claim it is not metaphysics that encourages or precludes intolerance, but the kind of metaphysics. In McCumber's account, Aristotelian substance metaphysics as defined by a dominant and dominating form determines a structure within which intolerance becomes inevitable.

Finally, Robert Cummings Neville argues in "Political Tolerance in an Age of Renewed Religious Warfare" that this "transcendent orientation" of religions can contribute to the passion that leads to religious warfare. To acknowledge that religious passion can lead to violence is not to say that religion is inevitably intolerant. On the contrary, Neville claims that the transcendent orientation, as a ground of obligation, is essential to tolerance, and he calls for development of a public theology, for which he draws upon elements of Buddhism and Confucianism.

The second section further examines the confrontation of religion and intolerance. It opens with Seyyed Hossein Nasr's "Metaphysical Roots of Tolerance and Intolerance: An Islamic Interpretation." Nasr argues that intolerance is a manifestation of human imperfection and is therefore an undesirable element of human existence that can be overcome only by the spiritually accomplished. Although among us at all times, intolerance may be more severe or less severe, and Nasr goes on to argue from an Eastern perspective that a secular and individualized society like that of the West exacerbates intolerance. Far from a cause of, religion is a limitation of, intolerance, and without a traditional metaphysics that is the underpinning of religion, excessive intolerance is unavoidable.

David Cain, Edwin C. George, John Donovan, and William O'Meara express four views on how religious faith can be tolerant in light of the diversity of religious commitment. In "An Elephant, an Ocean, and the Freedom of Faith," Cain, drawing upon Kierkegaard, presents "faithful appreciation" as a challenge of the freedom of faith. George, also drawing on Kierkegaard, claims that Christianity as conceived by Kierkegaard, far from being a source of intolerance, provides a foundational principle for toleration. Donovan's "Faith and Intellectual Fairness" comments on Aristotle and Charles Taylor in developing a conception of toleration as a virtue particular to religion, one that might be called a "self-regarding" virtue of religion. O'Meara's "Beyond Toleration" focuses in particular on the relation of Christianity to other religions.

The third section turns to politics and intolerance. In "Disagreement: Appreciating the Dark Side of Tolerance," Edward Langerak focuses on the fact that toleration involves enduring what is distasteful. He makes a case for

toleration as a kind of respect or open-mindedness that does not extend to the elimination of this negative aspect and does not "delight in diversity."

Gordon Graham, in "Toleration and the Idea of Progress," confronts the apparent paradox between the emergence of a value of toleration in an age that embraced the idea of moral progress and the ensuing connection of toleration with moral relativism, which, by denying objectivity in morals, denies the possibility of moral progress as well. Graham argues that the connection is a misplaced one, that toleration need not lead to relativism.

"The Justification of Toleration," by Richard Dees, turns to the long association of a principle of toleration with political liberalism. Arguing that the traditional positions from Locke to the present do not furnish adequate justification for the adopted principle, Dees attempts to revise their interpretation to solidify the justification without having to reject liberalism.

The final two articles of the section, Gertrude D. Conway's "Differences: Indifference or Dialogue" and Henry Ruf's "Radicalizing Liberalism and Modernity," deal with contemporary philosophers. In developing her ideas, Conway directs some attention to Gadamer and Rorty, while Ruf turns to Habermas and Foucault. Both Conway and Ruf focus on the issue of toleration in the light of postmodern philosophical thought and its criticisms of the conception of toleration as developed from the ideals of political liberalism, which were defended in a number of chapters of this volume.

The final section is devoted to ethical theory. Robert Paul Churchill gives a masterful analysis of the concept of 'toleration' in his article "On the Difference between Nonmoral and Moral Conceptions of Toleration." In doing so, he argues that much recent debate has been fundamentally confused, and he concludes by offering a new defense of toleration as a moral virtue.

Jeff Jordan's chapter, "Concerning Moral Toleration," raises a conceptual paradox. If toleration is a positive moral virtue, it might follow that one is morally correct to tolerate a moral wrong. Addressing this "conceptual puzzle," Jordan examines the limits of moral toleration.

In "Toleration as a Form of Bias," Andrew Altman looks at one "pervasive feature of human life," which is group bias. He proceeds to analyze possible strategies for making toleration work, short of unrealistically utopian appeals.

Evelyn M. Barker, in "Socratic Intolerance and Aristotelian Toleration," provides an analysis of ethical attitudes relevant to toleration found in Plato's *Republic*, while taking a critical look at the *Republic*'s detractors from Aristotle to I. F. Stone.

Stephen F. Barker, in "Carnap's Principle of Tolerance," addresses the moral claims of a philosopher who denies the meaningfulness of all philosophy beyond logical analysis. Carnap develops a principle of tolerance that issues from his understanding of logical and linguistic rules.

As it should be, the argument and analysis that follow neither resolve the questions raised, nor present one unified view on intolerance. However, the chapters do present the coherence of penetrating debate. The attentive reader will find debate, balance, and complement not only within each section but also across the sections. Brief introductory remarks cannot disclose the richness of the selections. May they serve instead as a quick guide to the reader and the incentive to read on.

NOTE

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.IV.1.