
ETHICAL ASPECTS OF TOLERATION FROM LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

Jarmila Jurová*

*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Faculty of Arts,
Department of General and Applied Ethics, Hodžova 1, 949 74 Nitra, Slovak Republic*

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Abstract

The paper primarily deals with the definition of the concept of liberal toleration in a pluralistic society, and consequently, it identifies and analyzes different categories of acting and the conditions that determine the space of toleration. We then define motives and ethical aspects of toleration in the context of liberalism. Discussion of various aspects of toleration results in the need of toleration understood as a moral ideal in present societies.

Keywords: liberalism, liberal toleration, conditions of toleration, moral ideal, ethics

1. Introduction

Liberalism is a complex philosophical, social and political doctrine. One of the fundamental bases of liberalism is the refusal of restrictions which restrict man in his free development. The highest value is the freedom of an individual, based on Locke's premise that "where there is no law, there is no freedom". According to liberalism, individuals are able to develop their own identity freely, in a society that is united by the shared good of mutual legal recognition and respect for the individual autonomy of each individual. Society is understood as a sphere in which public opinion acts as a means of coercion, however, at the same time, there is a large space for volunteer organizations. Hence society is actually a "plurality of smaller societies" [1]. State, unlike society, is a sphere where coordination takes place through coercion and sanctions, and it must operate under the rule of law and also apply the least coercive measures and coercion against its citizens. One of the basic facts of contemporary life - faced by every social-philosophical theory - is the moral pluralism. Individuals have different views on the sense of life, the existence of God, and on the way how to achieve happiness. Liberals believe that the role of government is not to introduce morality, but to establish the rules ensuring individual freedom to seek the good in their own way provided that they do not destroy the freedom of others [2]. In this sense, we consider liberalism as a theory of the good life for individuals which does not pursue a single positive idea of the 'good life for

* E-mail: jjurova@ukf.sk

man', but it advocates pluralism and belief that autonomous individuals should be able to choose from a multitude of various, even very different, but equally good ways of life. In Rawls's *Theory of Justice* [3], we find some convincing arguments in favour of the opinion that we should develop a liberal theory for institutional form without advocating any particular view of the 'good life'. Rawls argues that the search for consensus inclining to liberal and political institutions is simpler and easier if we are looking for its neutral basics with the respect of the big mutually competing issues of religion and individual ethics.

2. Liberal basics for understanding toleration

Liberalism today works with a concept of toleration, which is essential for the functioning of a pluralistic society: "From the ideal of tolerance derives the conviction that a pluralistic which accommodates a multiplicity of beliefs is necessary to the search for human good" [4]. Although "toleration is not the exclusive preserve of liberals" [5] – arguments for toleration pre-date the rise of liberalism – in liberal tradition toleration has a special and privileged status. However, it is liberalism which advocates toleration as a good in itself, not only as a pragmatic and prudent tool.

The current understanding of liberal toleration has its roots in the thinking of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, who work with the fundamental assumption of autonomy of the individual (the importance of autonomy in defining toleration varies depending on the approach). Another basis of toleration in liberalism is the principle of ethical neutrality advocated, among others, by John Rawls. Any concept of toleration - not excluding liberal - can function only if it is able to define the criteria for what is acceptable, permissible, that is what should be tolerated. In general, we agree with the statement of Hampshire-Monk, that toleration is a voluntary acceptance of attitudes or acts that we condemn because we consider them wrong, and that could be avoided or prevented, if we choose so [6]. This definition reflects also in the definition of space, conditions and motives of toleration.

The concept of liberal toleration is usually seen in a political context, because liberalism promotes inquiry of ethical neutrality of the state. State should not consider or decide between conflicting ways of life, but is intended to provide "a framework within which they may be pursued freely" [5, p. 118]. The requirement of ethical neutrality of the state does not mean that it should be neutral within absolutely everything that people would want to in the sake of the achievement and promotion of their own conception of the good. It is therefore a requirement of neutrality within certain limits.

On that basis, we would like to express the conviction that even in the liberal perspective, toleration can be understood as certain virtue or moral ideal. The space for toleration in this sense (in the context of liberalism) is now established as the systematization of the values typical for Western liberal society. Thus, we start from the premise that toleration is applied within a limited range of activities, actions, that is what is outside the 'intolerable'.

3. Categories of acting relevant for the analysis of liberal toleration

Every activity, every action or conviction can be incorporated into one of the three categories according to which we judge them:

1. acting or conviction that we approve and agree with;
2. acting or conviction that we do not approve and disagree with, but we tolerate it.
3. acting or conviction that we do not approve and we consider it intolerable.

For category 1 we cannot talk about toleration, because if we approve and agree with something, it does not require a tolerance. We believe that the fundamental moral question here is where to draw a kind of imaginary line between these three categories, particularly between categories 2 and 3. It is difficult to answer this question satisfactorily, but in my next argument I will assume that category 3 includes such acting that is a gross violation of human rights, and therefore it is considered intolerable (murder, genocide, etc.). My point is not to deal with the relationship between the intolerable and human rights, I will just start from the assumption that in general, we know what human rights violation is. Such behaviour is unacceptable and belongs to the 'intolerable' because it negates the set of values of Western European civilization, which is regarded as a key framework for discussion about toleration by current liberal thinkers.

Tolerance therefore only applies to the acting which is not approved, but at the same time we do not consider it intolerable. It opens the space to a category between clear and unambiguous approval and rejection. Where there exist only two categories (1 and 3), we appear in the space of fanaticism or dogmatism. Fanaticism and dogmatism are flawed because they refuse category 2 under the famous 'either with us or against us'. Thus, toleration develops where we recognize that there exists acting falling within category 2. This creates a space for liberally understood toleration.

4. Conditions of tolerant behaviour and acting

When do we talk about toleration? What conditions must be met for claiming certain behaviour or acting to be truly tolerant? According to Newey [7] and Fiala [8], tolerant behaviour or acting incorporates three interlinked conditions. When I tolerate something, it means that I primarily have a negative attitude to certain issue, action, custom, value, etc.; and, furthermore, that I have the power to change this issue or acting; and, finally, that I knowingly retreat from doing so (I abandon the possibility to change it).

The first basic condition of liberal toleration on the conceptual level is thus the presence of disagreement or hostility. The problem of toleration appears mostly in the conditions of diversity and toleration is required where diversity is so strong that it causes disagreement, aversion or disgust. Negative attitude does not only mean clear rational rejection, but it can also be a kind of emotional resistance or indifference. Reasons for rejection of the tolerated practice may be

different. There arises a question whether the toleration applies and may be applied only to what we reject morally (which is against our moral convictions), or also on what we simply do not like. The first case is a narrow definition of toleration; in the latter case we are discussing toleration in a broader sense. Our conviction motivates us to certain acting. As already stated, if the act or thing is strongly endorsed, then there are no grounds for talking about toleration. Negative attitude motivates to negative acts, i.e. toleration occurs where we resist incentives to refuse negative result of a negative judgment and we recognize otherness.

The second condition refers to the ability, power to express negative attitude and to respond in accordance with it. There is a wide range of options - from avoiding violent confrontation to the violent destructive action. We voluntarily retreat from changing the acting we disagree with because we perceive it negative. It means that we refuse to agree with such acting, but we do not regard it as intolerable. The one who tolerates must be in a position likely to influence the behaviour of the tolerated – this means that despite the opportunity or power to change or eliminate the practice, the tolerating person gives up any chance to use this power. So, when we talk about toleration, it implies that what is tolerated can be changed and it depends only on the discretion of a tolerating person, whether this person changes it or not. This is only an issue of clear definition of the objects of tolerance.

The third condition requires conscious retreat from the possibility of exercising one's power to change something we disagree with. I am tolerant when I have the chance to change what I disagree with, but I will not do so, even though I could: instead, I withstand otherness, i.e. I tolerate it. Ultimately, it is my deliberate restraint: I retreated from denial, because I have the reason to do so.

5. The reasons and motives of toleration - ethical aspects

I understand the reasons or motives of toleration as its ethical aspects at the same time. Reasons for toleration are diverse and can include respect for individual autonomy (freedom) or a general commitment to pacifism. As Williams claims, the toleration can relate to other virtues, such as kindness, generosity, etc. or it could be justified by the desire for reciprocity or a sense of modesty [9]. Hampsher-Monk understands toleration as an act of moral will and also emphasizes the motive of the tolerant: “In the case of toleration, however, as we saw, the motive to tolerate seems to be crucial to the identity of the act as one of toleration” [6, p. 21]. In general, however, possible reasons or motives of toleration can be categorized according to whether they do or do not apply to what we consider to be moral.

We can tolerate for the reason that is non-moral, motivated by self-interest and benefits that toleration would bring. In everyday life and also in the realm of politics, there are many examples of the ‘tolerated’ only because our inaction in light of something that is not approved, is beneficial.

Another reason for tolerating can be seen in consequential moral reasons, when we tolerate something that is not consistent with our conviction, in order to achieve some kind of higher, common good (e.g. scientific research of cloning organs, etc.).

Fundamentally moral conviction that toleration as a concept has a moral value and intolerance is actually a moral evil that results from the failure of access to persons other than those that deserve respect, is also understood as one of the reasons for toleration. It is this reasoning that plays important role in contemporary liberal thought about toleration.

Contemporary social, political and moral philosophers of the liberal spectrum (Rawls [10], Mendus [5], Forst [11], Dworkin [12] and others) derived the theory of toleration from the necessity of respecting the persons understood as free and equal individuals, and they base their theories on the fundamental values of liberalism - freedom and individual autonomy. Although Rawls and Dworkin remain the position of the political concept of toleration, according to Hampsher-Monk, the question of what and when should be tolerated the political liberalism cannot be satisfactorily answered without its philosophical reflection [6]. Mendus also emphasizes that toleration is indeed a moral value and she sees the argument precisely in the understanding of people as autonomous individuals who live in their own way, and who act morally only if they enable the others to lead their own lives as they wish [5]. According to Forst, people are tolerant when although they disagree with other ideas about good and true life; they tolerate all the other views within the limits of reciprocity and generality [11].

6. Toleration as a moral ideal

At this point, I would like to express the conviction that toleration is not only a political but also moral ideal that fits into a pluralistic form of society promoting the diversity of beliefs and values. Toleration as a virtue is not a form of passive indifference, but is seen as a positive value, which together with other values helps to develop human being. The idea of a tolerant ethical life underlines the value of the search for wisdom within diverse communities and societies. No matter what normative principles we use while taking the value of toleration, it should be realized that one of the results of toleration is a complex moral reasoning, which is based on rational thinking. A man tends to judge superficially, that is based on primary emotions (I like it/I do not like it) and then it comes to the intellectual contemplation towards universal principles. Often there is a conflict between emotional and intellectual, which brings us to the norm of human rationality, which may be difficult to establish - we are not always as rational as we would like to be. The challenge of toleration is that it requires limiting some of the first emotional reactions. In the context of toleration this conflict is very important, because if it did not exist, then we would not talk about toleration, but indifference.

Indifference is often incorrectly deemed toleration. Indifference denies the importance of initial responses and reasoning. Toleration does not require silencing of those responses; merely it requires limiting the negative effects of our negative reasoning that could hinder the application of general principles. The second difference between indifference and toleration is that indifference is very close to general scepticism in the sphere of moral reasoning. This position does not recognize any set of objective moral values and therefore cannot lead to the belief that toleration is good. The difference between tolerance and indifference is particularly important because indifference does not place any demands to us. Toleration requires a conscious approach of the search of the way between emotional assessment and rational reasoning. It requires self-confidence and self-criticism, which we have to learn in order to be able to think in more, not only in the two modes of moral reasoning.

7. Conclusions

Tolerant society is a society whose members are aware of the limits of knowledge and are willing to ask questions together, to interact and lead dialogue. As Palitefka writes, the contact with those who are somehow different from us increases in nowadays society, and it is necessary to find an appropriate approach to otherness [13]. Mutual recognition of dissent and diversity, difference of opinions is the evidence that toleration is extremely complicated virtue. Traditional way of dealing with differences in society is, unfortunately, their repression. However, democratic liberal societies accept the fact of pluralism and they also accept conflict as normal part of life in society. If we do not want to solve conflicts by force, then toleration is essential.

Ethical-liberal argument of toleration based on respect for autonomous beings able to decide and choose their own conception of the good, is one of the possible justifications for toleration today. The ability of individuals as those who are “genuinely irreducible to the political ... order” [14] to choose their own conception of the good should be respected and developed, because it is perceived as a necessary, though not sufficient condition for achieving the good life.

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