

WHAT IS “TOLERANCE” AND “TOLERANCE EDUCATION”? PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Research background. The notion of tolerance is used in various contexts, but nevertheless it remains ambiguous. The very fact that educators, politicians, and philosophers again and again face questions about the meaning of value term “tolerance”, stresses the vivid necessity of continuous attempts to elucidate the notion of tolerance at the theoretical level.

Research aim was to provide relevant arguments for the thesis that tolerance is a context dependent notion and therefore the claims about tolerance “in general” are ambiguous, uninformative, and non-instructive.

Research method. Our research methodology was philosophical reflection involving conceptual analysis and the application of the outcomes to education sciences.

Research results. If we are to understand and define the concept of tolerance, we need a broader understanding of what is good and what is bad, understanding of what behaviour is expected from us under certain cultural circumstances.

Discussion and conclusions. 1. In religious context, tolerance is a respectful attitude towards beliefs and practices of others – attitude which, in fact, can be grounded either by dogmatism or by scepticism. 2. In political context, emphasis is laid not on what others believe or think, but on what people do. 3. There is one common feature of tolerance conceptions which take shape in inter-religious discourse and in politics: it is believed that it is quite easy to understand the motives of actions performed by “others”; such understanding (“empathy”) is the main condition for tolerance. 4. In ethics and education, tolerance is the measurement (or objective assessment) of our beliefs keeping in mind possibilities of their alternatives. In this respect, tolerance is the realization of human rational nature.

Keywords: tolerance, tolerance education, autonomy, ethics, rationality.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of tolerance is used in various contexts; nevertheless, its meaning is short of clearance and distinctness. Can we be sure that in different contexts this concept does not differ in its meaning? How does tolerance as a *political value* relate to the notion of tolerance in the discourse of education sciences? Contemporary discourses on tolerance disclose an amazing paradox: tolerance is one of the most important democratic values, and, as far as we can see, the future and the very existence of Western civilizations depends on our being tolerant or intolerant with others, those who are different from us (in respect to nationality,

religion, political ideology, etc.); this is true, but it is very difficult to state or understand what toleration *really* is (cf. King, 1997). What should be tolerated, and why? What does educator really need to do if his/her purpose is tolerance education? Obviously, tolerance is not a skill or competence completely alike those students usually gain through effective education (i.e. skills of writing, reading, debating, or painting, singing, etc.). Of course, tolerance is related to the system of values and ethical education, but, on the other hand, having firm values is not identical with being tolerant; in other words, firm belief in truth of certain religious or moral claims

often leads to religious or moral fundamentalism. If tolerance is a kind of moral decision (letting others be), then another issue is relevant: is it acceptable to tolerate immoral actions? And what about so-called “Zero tolerance policies” which are accepted in some U.S. schools? Does Zero tolerance, to immoral actions contribute positively to the moral development of students? (This issue is thoroughly discussed by P. Daniels, 2008.) The very fact that educators, politicians, and philosophers again and again face such questions stresses a vivid necessity of continuous attempts to elucidate the notion of tolerance at the theoretical level.

So, the main question is: how are we to understand the word “tolerance”? Our answer is: it depends on the context. The thesis statement of our paper is: tolerance is a context dependent notion, and therefore claims about tolerance “in general” are ambiguous, uninformative, and *non-instructive* (especially in the case of educational discourse). To put it otherwise, the notion of tolerance itself does not ensure any clear criterion for assessing our actions (and the ones of others). The aim of the paper was to provide relevant arguments for this thesis. The first implication of this thesis significant for educational sciences is the claim that in the area of practical affairs (i. e. educational *praxis*) “absolute tolerance” or “unconditional tolerance” reveals itself as a defective idea – defective in the sense that scepticism and indifference (or other extremities – dogmatism and fundamentalism) emerge as a socially desirable stance.

Theoretical discussions on tolerance usually centre on some classical texts: for instance, John Locke’s “Letter Concerning Toleration” (2010); J. S. Mill’s treatise “On Liberty” (2002). In Lithuania R. Plečkaitis’ monograph *Tolerance* (1998) remains the fundamental philosophical work on the topic. Among philosophical works in English, we should mention B. Williams’s article “Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?” (1996), P. King’s comprehensive study “Toleration” (1997), P. Zagorin’s “How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West” (2003), F. Rainer’s informative paper “Toleration” (2012).

RESEARCH METHODS

Our research methodology was philosophical reflection, involving conceptual analysis and the application of the outcomes to education sciences.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Tolerance and matters of religion. The idea of diversity or variety pervades the claims which are meant to convey the notion or concept of tolerance (Plečkaitis, 1998). People differ among themselves, but not all differences are easily acceptable – we know this from the lessons of the history and from our everyday experience. Differences of religion are something people usually find intolerable (Williams, 1996). We tend to treat our own religion (i. e. certain system of beliefs and specific practices) as *the best* way to realize internal starvation for the transcendence (which is natural for human being, *homo religiosus*). But there are, as we believe it, *bad* ways to actualize this specifically human feature. For instance, Muslims believe that Islam grants the best way to be religious and other alternatives are bad (or, at least, not as good as the way shown by Mahomet).

In the matters of religion we have clearly drawn distinction between orthodoxy and heresy and namely this distinction shows differences of religious beliefs and practices in dark colours. If some claim about transcendence is justified and true, then it must be justified and true in some *universal* way. If there is ultimate reality and truth which is named by “God” (in singular or plural), it is evident that there should be one objective representation of this reality and truth (i. e. orthodoxy, “true/right/straight belief” in ancient Greek), and, all specific and subjective interpretations of transcendence should be treated with caution. In this context, “heretical” or “heterodox” beliefs and practices are said to be tolerated in one specific sense: “heterodoxy” reveals itself as dangerous fault, but it is necessary to convert proponents of faulty beliefs and practices in some civilized, legal manner (although Augustine justifies the use of force in teaching “right doctrine” (King, 1997; Rainer, 2012).

Historically, the concept of tolerance emerges from the clash of religions (Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam) in post-medieval Europe. In his treatise *De Pace Fidei* Nicolas de Cusa (1401–1464 A. D.) proposes a powerful idea that only superficial look reveals stark contrasts of different religions and, of course, deeper intellectual inquiry is needed to notice conceptual elements common to all of them. There is one religion in various rites, one essentially *Christian* dogma in various appearances (Rainer, 2012). In this case, toleration

is concentration on affinities without due respect to differences. "Other" or "different" has no value of its own.

In Erasmus of Rotterdam's (1466–1536 A. D.) preaches religious tolerance on the grounds that forced conversion of infidels is totally ineffective. "That, which is forced, cannot be sincere, and that which is not voluntary cannot please Christ" (Olin, 1979, p. 90). Of course, it does not mean that differences should be treated positively. Erasmus finds specific strategy to finish continuous strife among major religions: first of all, it is recommended to put emphasis not on human belief (i. e. what is declared), but on human conscience. This strategy rests on silent assumption (taken from medieval theology) that human soul is Christian in nature. As conscience speaks in terms of Christian doctrine, according to Erasmus, there is no need to extend formal authority of the Church: "The sum and substance of our religion is peace and concord. This can hardly remain the case, unless we define as few matters as possible and leave each individual's judgment free in many questions" (Olin, 1979, p. 100).

Eventually Christian humanists have to acknowledge that it is impossible to blur dogmatic contrasts at the theoretical-theological level. It is clearly understood that Church has a political power and unquestioned right to use it (Plečkaitis, 1998; Zagorin, 2003; Kaplan, 2007), and at this point contexts of religious discourse, ethics and politics evidently overlap. In the case of Christian Church, "will to truth" is identical with "will to power" (using Nietzsche's terms), and it, of course, cannot be content with merely formal obligation.

J. Locke links up religious tolerance with autonomy of moral agent in his famous *Letter Concerning Tolerance*: the truth "is not taught by laws, nor has she any need of force to produce her entrance into the minds of men" (Locke, 2010, p. 31; cf. Spinoza, 2008). As J. Waldron (1991) rightly noticed, Locke's conception of tolerance rests on naïve and false epistemological assumption that religious beliefs cannot be imposed from outside, i. e. that religion is not a proper object for manipulations.

Ideals of the political power limitations and individual autonomy (in the matters of religion) paradoxically lead to opposite and quite uncomfortable conclusions. The first is that the vast diversity of heterodox beliefs only strengthens orthodox dogma (dogmatic conclusion, as in the

case of Nicolas de Cusa). For instance, J. J. Russo (1997) claims the authority of one "civic religion" which should be professed by all citizens. The second is that there cannot be objective truth in matters of religion, that "God" is an empty concept (sceptical conclusion).

Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992) states: "Freedom of a human being to profess and spread his/her religion or belief may not be limited otherwise than by law and only when this is necessary to guarantee the security of society, the public order, the health and morals of the people as well as other basic rights and freedoms of the person" (Article 26). It is the declaration of tolerance in political terms (in this case, authority of the state surpasses authority of the Church). In postmodern era to say that there are many ways to transcendence and we should not single out one and the only way as privileged, first of all, means that religious beliefs and practices do not play the same role as in the former societies. What we have here is not a triumph of religious tolerance, but the triumph of "common sense" and materialistic-pragmatic world-view.

Tolerance in the sphere of politics. In politics differences often lead to social conflicts. We believe that democratic organization and government of the society is the best way for us to be "social animals" (remember the sentence of Aristotle that a human being is *zoon politikon*). However, some ways of social life are inappropriate (e. g. North Korea of today or Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia). So, what does it mean to tolerate different views or positions in political discourse?

First of all, in politics the concept of tolerance is a device of "impersonal rhetoric" (rhetoric in which "We", not "I", is subject of announced decisions and declared beliefs). It is the means to impose authority to social groups which are labelled as "minorities" (Žižek, 2009). So-called "minority" gain toleration in exchange of due respect to so-called "majority", in exchange of their passiveness. In such contexts "toleration" is a spurious coin. "Majority" demonstrates good will and absolute power, "minority", in turn, remains loyal and accepts "inferior position"; in fact, it is a process of polarization, not social consolidation. In this light we can better understand Goethe's known dictum: "Tolerance should be a temporary attitude only: it must lead to recognition. To tolerate means to insult" (the quote is taken from F. Rainer, 2012).

On the other hand, when “minorities” call for “toleration”, it can be understood as a claim for privileges. H. Marcuse labels it as “partisan tolerance” and claims: “The tolerance which enlarged the range and content of freedom was always partisan – intolerant toward the protagonists of the repressive status quo. The issue was only the degree and extent of intolerance” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 85). According to H. Marcuse, if the ideal of political tolerance (maximal freedom for minorities) is fully realized, then we will face social catastrophe – “intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 81). In democratic state “majorities” exercise incontestable political power in different levels and to different extent, but it is unthinkable to give equal power to “minorities” – it would pervert the very idea of democracy.

S. Žižek (2009) stresses another important aspect: anyway, tolerance is a product of the Western political thought, and as such it tends to advocate and export the Western standards of thinking and living. For instance, in the international conference J. Fernandez-Lasquetty, member of Hispania Parliament, states that such decisions as prohibition of death penalty are “universal and omnipresent values”, and “if we do not believe that such values should be esteemed by all people, then in approximate future they will be torn out from ourselves” (Fernandez-Lasquetty, 2008, p. 78–79). Of course, there is no reference to the codex of Sharia (adopted in Muslim countries) where death penalty is completely justified. In political and geopolitical contexts, *idealization of the West* pervades claims about tolerance.

As we have seen, notion of tolerance is primarily interweaved into the system of other more or less abstract concepts – “state”, “justice”, “autonomy” or “freedom”, etc. Declarations of political tolerance presuppose specific conception of the state which can be traced back to Thomas Hobbes. According to him, emergence of the state is a matter of consensus or “social contract”; the *bellum omnium contra omnes* or pre-civilized existence of human beings is totally inconvenient state even for satisfying primitive and egoistic demands, therefore in the dawn of history people decided to restrict their power to do what they pleased on behalf of one sovereign authority (Hobbes, 2003). So, political tolerance is understood as the only

alternative of the open social conflict. John Rawls seemingly treats toleration as a pattern (described as “overlapping consensus” and “reasonable pluralism”) in which individuals and groups should interact; supposedly this pattern works in different social contexts (Rawls, 1995).

Social contract theory supports the ideal of human autonomy – ideal vigorously defended by J. S. Mill, “prophet” of liberalism. He produces powerful arguments for autonomy and implicitly for tolerance. First of all, he stresses that each individual has a natural right to pursue what he thinks to be a good for him; in other words, the state cannot prohibit “experiments of living”. The state cannot know better than the individual what things are good or bad for him/her. We should demarcate a sphere of purely private matters, a sphere where results of actions concern only the agent himself. On the other hand, according to J. S. Mill, we should demarcate a sphere of public affairs in which actions directly concern not only the agent, but also his social environment (Mill, 2002; cf. Spinoza, 2008). These attempts to draw borders of individual autonomy “from outside” (“from impersonal perspective”) ignore an important point: our actions (alongside with our words) are open to interpretation, and certain actions can be treated by authorities as indirect danger for public interests. It is especially relevant if a state, as J. S. Mill believes, is a means to produce maximum happiness for its citizens.

In contrast to the conception of religious tolerance, the emphasis lays not on what others *believe* or *think*, but on what other people *do*. On the other hand, in this case “the relation of tolerance is no longer vertical but horizontal: the subjects are at the same time the objects of toleration” (Rainer, 2012). We can quite easily tolerate ideas, but it is difficult to tolerate actions (especially these which aim at us). For instance, it is easy to tolerate the basic ideas of communism, but most of us are reluctant to tolerate any active attempts to materialize them.

Tolerance in ethics and education. Ethics is, in the first place, a system of orienteers which enable to lift up human behaviour to the level of *cultural* life. In other words, ethics is a line of demarcation between natural and cultural existence. Bad deeds are unacceptable either for individual or society. But moral norms are relevant to our decisions and actions only in case they are being treated as objective and universal (Williams, 2004). The

ethical claims cannot be normative or regulative without being unconditionally true.

In various conceptions of tolerance, first of all, we need a broader understanding of what is good and what is bad, understanding of what behaviour is expected from us under certain cultural circumstances. The concept of tolerance is not vacuous, if and only if basic moral categories can be sufficiently defined, and, of course, such definition must be in accordance with our actions and motives. We cannot conceive the notion of tolerance in such seemingly primitive or "unreflective" manner in which we understand our evaluative terms (e. g. "fair", "honest", "virtuous", etc.) (cf. Spinoza, 2008). Consequentially, if there are no objective ethical truths, then there is no objective basis for tolerance.

Not only is the concept of tolerance founded on certain ethical commitments. Of course, such notions as "autonomy", "conscience", "justice", etc. are ethical categories in nature. J. S. Mill claims that the state is "the aggregate of individuals" and describes how such "aggregate" work, metaphorically speaking, which principles of "political mechanics" are relevant here (Mill, 2002). His claims about autonomy stresses quite a trivial fact: citizens are elements or "gearwheels" of political mechanism, and there is no need to change them if they work properly. In contrast to J. S. Mill, I. Kant more explicitly describes inner structure of such elements, principles of "moral mechanics". He defines enlightenment (certain cultural phenomena) as "the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority" and emphasizes objective value of moral decisions which were made "without direction from another" (Kant, 1996, p. 17). In social contract theory of the state, namely "external criteria" of human behaviour ("conditional imperatives", as I. Kant puts it) plays a central role; authorities should encourage (by means of education and moralization) to make or change individual decisions according to socially established standards of human behaviour (Mill, 2002). In fact, different versions of social contract theory are quite content with moral conformism. But, according I. Kant, adequate ethical theory cannot dispense with certain "internal criteria" ("unconditional imperative") of moral decisions (Kant, 1996). Decisions and actions have moral value not because of social context, but as expressions of free will. Of course, state and society can manipulate individual through his feelings,

emotions, inclinations etc., but I. Kant excludes these empirical aspects from his conception of autonomy in which true-self is not material substance subjected to causality and the laws of nature (Kant, 1996).

Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (1995) states: "Education is the most effective means of preventing intolerance. The first step in tolerance education is to teach people what their shared rights and freedoms are so that they may be respected and to promote the will to protect those of others" (Article 4.1). In the sphere of education, realization of tolerance needs a certain ethical background: first of all, students and teachers should recognize one another as moral equals; they should share understanding that human coexistence is interaction of absolutely free (in non-empirical sense) individuals (cf. Heyd, 2003).

Tolerance rests on the rational part of human nature. To be tolerant is to understand things in a certain way. Tolerance is the measurement of our beliefs keeping in mind possibilities of their alternatives. Is it so vital to me to defend such and such belief? What is so special about this particular belief? What about this "being mine" which we predicate to beliefs and opinions? Is it a relevant epistemological characteristic (especially in educational processes)? A tolerant person is the one who tends to test his/her opinions rationally in the encounter with opposite views. So "tolerance" is the word to mark individual's intellectual and moral maturity. Therefore, the question about the essence of tolerance (about tolerance "in general") should be abandoned in favour of the question about rational support (or basis) of our ideals, opinions and beliefs. According to K. R. Popper, the notion of tolerance implies that "faith in reason is not only a faith in our own reason, but also—and even more—in that of others"; tolerance presupposes ability to learn "from criticism as well as from own and other people's mistakes and that one can learn in this sense if one takes others and their arguments seriously. Rationalism is, therefore, bound up with the idea that the other fellow has a right to be heard and to defend his/her arguments" (Popper, 1971 b, p. 238). Tolerance relates not to our first-order (emotional, spontaneous) reactions towards behaviour and attitudes of others, but to reflective evaluation of such reactions – evaluation based on abstract principles.

There are significant changes in the meaning when we speak about tolerant society (in political

context) and tolerant individual (in ethical context). For example, society, which we call educated, encompasses the majority of educated people and the minority of the ones without education; predicate “tolerant” works analogously with the subject “society” or another group-term. But when we say that certain individual is honest or tolerant we do not treat him as a person who can ever demonstrate opposite characteristics (dishonesty or intolerance). That is how moral predicates function in our everyday language.

DISCUSSION

Even discerning contexts in which the concept of tolerance is used, we face serious problems with it. B. Williams even speaks about the impossibility of tolerance: “The difficulty with toleration is that it seems to be at once necessary and impossible. It is necessary where different groups have conflicting beliefs – moral, political, or religious – and realize that there is no alternative to their living together, that is to say, no alternative except armed conflict, which will not resolve their disagreements and will impose continuous suffering. These are the circumstances in which toleration is necessary. Yet in the same circumstances it may well seem impossible” (Williams, 1996, p. 18).

There is one common feature for the tolerance conceptions which take shape in inter-religious discourse, in politics, and ethics: it is believed that it is quite easy to understand the motives of actions performed by “others”, by “those who are different from us”; such understanding (“empathy”) is the main condition for tolerance. Can we tolerate what is totally unknowable, “irrational” from our point of view? Of course, a patient can tolerate the painful operations of a surgeon because he/she is sure that the surgeon’s motives are good (i. e. to heal the patient). But the same person can meet a stranger with a knife under completely different circumstances where it is difficult to understand the purposes and motives of the “other”; natural reaction in such situations is fear and active attempts to avoid or eliminate the danger. Therefore it looks so difficult to tolerate customs and behaviour of “uncivilized” or “primitive” communities and we tend to convert them to our system of beliefs.

So, tolerance appears to be justified only “within the boundaries of mere reason” (using I. Kant’s language). The very term “limits of

toleration” *prima facie* looks like contradiction, although K. Popper’s argumentation clearly shows that theoretical discourse cannot dispense with this notion: “Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them” (Popper, 1971 a, p. 265). What is intolerance? First of all, intolerance discloses itself when the citizen avoids discussion on motives and principles of their actions. But, on the other hand, some kinds of arguments and explanations are not allowed in a *rational* discussion: for instance, explanation of certain action by saying “Scripture compels me to do so” will be ridiculed, even if the agent itself sincerely believes it. By the rejection of opponent’s arguments as irrational or irrelevant we can easily accuse him/her of being intolerant in his/her words or actions.

These aspects are significant either discussing the thesis “no toleration of the intolerant” or dealing with so-called “paradox of the tolerant racist”. If an individual subsumes other people to “inferior races”, but refrains from brutal actions, there is a temptation to call him tolerant. In such cases, *prima facie* we have all essential elements of tolerance: the individual holds negative conviction towards the “other”; the individual has a power (physical or political) to oust the “other” from his/her neighbourhood; the individual consciously refrains from open discrimination (e. g. for financial reasons) (King, 1997; Plečkaitis, 1998). Can we claim, that in the case of “the tolerant racist” morally inadmissible attitude became moral virtue of tolerance? Racist holds certain prejudices which cannot be justified on *rational* grounds (Horton, 1996). But if standards of rationality are socially adjustable (as post-modern philosophers belief), then the question of *immoral tolerance* is open.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

1. In religious context, tolerance is a respectful attitude towards beliefs and practices of others – attitude which, in fact, can be grounded either in dogmatism (“one religion in various rites”) or in scepticism (“extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence”).

2. In political context, emphasis lays not on what others believe or think, but on what people do.

3. There is one common feature of tolerance conceptions which take shape in inter-religious discourse and in politics: it is believed that it is quite easy to understand motives of actions performed by "others", by "those who are different

from us"; such understanding ("empathy") is the main condition for tolerance.

4. In ethics and education, tolerance is the measurement (or objective assessment) of our beliefs keeping in mind possibilities of their alternatives. In this respect, tolerance is the realization of human rational nature.

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KAS YRA TOLERANCIJA IR TOLERANCIJOS UGDYMAS? FILOSOFINĖS PERSPEKTYVOS

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SANTRAUKA

Tyrimo pagrindimas ir hipotezė. Tolerancijos sąvoka vartojama įvairiuose kontekstuose, tačiau lieka neaiški. Pats faktas, kad pedagogai, politikai ir filosofai kaskart susiduria su klausimu apie vertybinio termino *tolerancija* reikšmę, pabrėžia tęstinių pastangų būtinybę nušviesti tolerancijos sąvoką teoriniu lygmeniu.

Tikslas – pateikti relevantiškus argumentus tezės, kad tolerancija yra priklausoma nuo konteksto. Todėl teiginiai apie toleranciją apskritai dviprasmiški ir neinformatyvūs.

Metodai. Tyrimo metodas yra filosofinė refleksija, apimanti sąvokų analizę ir gautų rezultatų taikymą edukologijos srityje.

Rezultatai. Jei norime suprasti ir apibrėžti tolerancijos sąvoką, reikalingas platesnis supratimas, kas yra gera ir kas bloga, kokio elgesio yra tikimasi iš mūsų tam tikroje kultūrinėje aplinkoje.

Aptarimas ir išvados. 1. Religijos srityje tolerancija suprantama kaip pagarbus požiūris į kitų įsitikinimus ir praktiškumas, kuris gali būti grindžiamas tiek dogmatizmu, tiek skepticizmu. 2. Politikos srityje tolerancijos sąvoka reiškia ne tai, ką kiti mano ar tiki, bet tai, ką jie daro (kaip elgiasi). 3. Tolerancijos sampratos, susiformavusios religinėje ir politinėje aplinkoje, turi vieną bendrą bruožą: manoma, kad galima gana lengvai suprasti kitų žmonių veiksmų motyvus. Toks supratimas yra pagrindinė tolerancijos sąlyga. 4. Etikos ir ugdymo srityje tolerancija yra savo pačių įsitikinimų objektyvus įvertinimas atsižvelgiant į alternatyvų galimybes. Šiuo požiūriu tolerancija yra žmogaus racionalios prigimties realizavimas.

Raktažodžiai: tolerancija, tolerancijos ugdymas, autonomija, etika, racionalumas.

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