

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TOLERANT IN MORAL ISSUES?

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The problem of tolerance in the moral domain appears to be especially intricate and perplexing. On the face of it, there is no place for tolerance whenever moral matters are concerned. The current conceptions of tolerance and of morality seem to exclude such possibility. An argument to that effect may be briefly rendered as follows. Tolerance is usually defined as willingness to allow freedom of thought and action to others even when their opinions and conduct seem wrong. Tolerating thus means not interfering with behaviour which we disapprove. But the postulate of tolerance so conceived is normally put forward with an essential qualification: it is to pertain to such behaviour only which is not harmful to others. We ought to grant a person freedom of action only so far as it does not interfere with the welfare of other persons. And this is just what cannot be said of action disapproved for moral reasons. An act is claimed to be morally wrong if and only if it is harmful to others. As such, it cannot be tolerated, in the sense of not being interfered with. Anyway, the postulate of tolerance does not impose on us such requirement.

Now, is the above argument convincing? And, if it is, what might be meant by tolerance with respect to moral matters? Let us, first of all, consider the concept of morality referred to in the argument. Its adequacy has been questioned by some philosophers, who criticise the concept as being too narrow; they claim that there are morally wrong acts which are not necessarily related to the welfare of other persons. Now, it can hardly be denied that the concept of morality is being understood in different, more or less comprehensive, ways. I would contend, however, that its meaning involved in the above argument is its basic meaning. It corresponds to what may be called the core of morality – to its most

fundamental feature. In support of this view, let me adduce a quotation from Richard Brandt's *Ethical Theory*: "it is doubtful whether we think any action is wrong if nobody's welfare is in any way adversely affected by it". Whether this turns out to be generally true, or not, it is the concept of morality so understood that I will refer to in discussing the problem of moral tolerance. It is just on that conception that the problem becomes especially acute. If an act is, in this sense, morally disapproved, it is, ipso facto, believed to be harmful to others. And so, we are not obliged to tolerate it and to refrain from any kind of interference.

It appears then that evil deeds are acts which in principle do not deserve toleration. They differ in this respect from actions disapproved for other, nonmoral, reasons. An opinion or conduct which is disapproved for religious or metaphysical reasons may well be quite harmless to others. And so, according to the postulate of tolerance, we should refrain from interfering with it. The case of moral disapproval appears to be exceptional. By its very nature, the postulate of tolerance can hardly apply to it. Being harmful to others, a morally wrong act seems to call for some kind of interference. The question arises whether this fact excludes tolerance however understood. Must any act of interference be reckoned as an act of intolerance? Or is there a sense of tolerance that applies to such a case as well?

Anticipating further conclusions, I shall propound a positive answer to this question. There is a sense of tolerance which seems compatible with some kinds of interference with a person's behaviour. There are tolerant and intolerant acts of interference and the postulate of tolerance requires us to interfere in a tolerant way only. To say what this tolerant way consists of, we have to consider the reasons which are being adduced for the postulate. The reasons turn out to lie in a definite system of values – a system which may be described as a liberal one. It is characterised by the fact that one of its basic values is a value referred to as „autonomy" of human being. This autonomy is said to entail "the freedom of pursuing our own good in our own way" (to use Mill's wording). A man is claimed to be a being with a life of his own to live. As Kant insisted, "nobody may compel me to be happy in his own way". A way of life may be said to be good only in so far as it is freely chosen and pursued. And having the right to a free choice, man has the right to err.

Being undoubtedly an intrinsic value, personal autonomy so understood is neither the unique value nor the dominant one. It may thus

come into conflict with other values and, in certain cases, give way to them. The postulate of tolerance referred to above tries to do justice to this fact. It postulates freedom of thought and action on condition that it is not harmful to others. When this condition is not satisfied, the postulate does not require us to refrain from interference with the behaviour of others. And if this behaviour means a serious infringement of the right of others, we may feel obliged to interfere with it. This interference may take different forms. My contention is that some of them are compatible with the postulate of tolerance suitably understood. We may try to prevent or remove some evil doings in a way that may rightly be called tolerant. This tolerant attitude manifests itself in various aspects and on different levels of our interfering behaviour.

To account for them, we have to distinguish two kinds of acts considered by us to be morally wrong. The distinction depends on how a given deed is judged by the doer himself. Does he believe it to be morally right or does he realise that it is morally wrong? Both situations are possible and our reaction to a given case should be determined by the kind of situation which it exemplifies. In a situation of the first kind a morally wrong deed may be said to be a consequence of morally wrong beliefs. In a case like that we are confronted with a conflict of moral opinion. No such conflict is necessarily present in a situation of the second kind, in which a morally wrong deed cannot be taken to be a result of morally wrong beliefs.

Now, what kind of attitude towards moral beliefs that we disagree with might deserve to be called "tolerant"? Respect for autonomy of human being seems to require that we grant any person full freedom of opinion. We have seen, however, that if the opinion leads to conduct which seriously harms others, we can hardly remain indifferent to it; we seem obliged to some kind of interference. In spite of it, we may not be considered guilty of intolerance. I would contend that we do not offend against the postulate of tolerance if our interference is restricted to persuasion; if we try to persuade, not to coerce, our opponent into what we think the right way of thinking and doing. By persuasion I mean, first of all, argumentation: a procedure providing reasons for or against the beliefs in question. As to tolerance, argumentation seems to be the least objectionable way of interfering with the thought and conduct of our opponent. We try to change his opinion - and, in consequence, his doings - by an appeal to his reason. He is asked to give up his position only if

he becomes convinced of its wrongness. His autonomy then can hardly be said to be infringed by our interference.

But is such procedure applicable to the situation mentioned? Can one speak of argumentation literally understood when moral matters are concerned? The problem is highly controversial, its solution being dependent on general metaethical assumptions about the status of moral values and value judgements. Roughly speaking, the answer is positive on the ground of cognitivist and absolutist standpoints, negative – in the case of emotivist and relativist ones. In a strict sense, one can adduce reasons for moral judgements if and only if these are genuine, true or false, statements. Only then is argumentation in moral matters possible. When this condition is not satisfied, our persuasion procedures must take some looser forms; they cannot amount to arguments strictly understood.

In view of this, it may seem rather strange that it is just absolutism of moral values that is often taken to be the main obstacle to tolerance in the moral domain. Ethical absolutist is said to believe that to every moral question there is one true answer; any deviation from it is error, which everyone should get rid of. Hence, tendency to argue for the true system of values and against all the false ones. In contrast to absolutist, ethical relativist does not assume that there exists such a thing as the true system of moral values. He who differs from me in his moral beliefs cannot be said to be in error and I need not feel obliged to free him from it. This is often taken to promote tolerance in the field of moral opinions.

But the relation between moral relativism and tolerance does not seem to be as straightforward as this. If what we aim at is genuine tolerance, and not sheer indifference, it is absolutism rather than relativism that provides a foundation for it. Relativism is, as a rule, based on emotivist conception of value judgements. On that conception, moral judgements are nothing but expressions of our emotions and volitions. Since they are not genuine, true or false, statements, one cannot justify them or falsify and in this way convince others of their rightness or wrongness. On emotivist interpretation, a conflict of moral beliefs reduces to a clash of opposite emotions and wishes. To remove it, one has to resort to procedures other than – strictly understood – argumentation. Whatever their nature might be, they seem to present ways of interference less tolerant than strict arguments. They attempt to change the opponent's emotions and wishes not by making him understand some moral truths, but by influencing his mind in a more

direct way, such as suggestion or impression. Some of those attempts may well bear the character of manipulation and, in effect, threaten the person's autonomy. Arguments seem free from such objection. But to apply them to moral issues, one has to accept cognitivist conception of moral judgements. To give reasons for a moral judgement, the judgement must be a true or false statement – a statement of a moral fact, not only an expression of emotion. And such conception of moral judgements is necessarily an absolutist one. If truth is to be literally understood, there cannot be different truths on the same matter. There exists, in principle, one true system of moral values and argumentation is the best way to convince others of its truth.

But, to be compatible with the postulate of tolerance, the argumentation in moral matters must fulfil some further conditions. Generally speaking, it must embody an epistemic attitude which may be called critical, in opposition to dogmatic one. That attitude is characterised, among others, by the degree of certainty with which the arguer accepts the premises and the conclusion of his arguments. In the case of moral beliefs, this certainty can never be absolute. This may be viewed as a consequence of such a conception of moral judgements which ascribes to them a status akin to empirical rather than a priori statements. According to that conception, elementary ethical statements are justifiable directly, by appeal to moral intuition, general ethical principles – indirectly, by appeal to their elementary consequences. Now, what is here taken to be moral intuition is not an infallible source of moral knowledge. Since inductive generalisation is not an infallible procedure either, all types of moral judgements are far from being certain. None of them can be said to be beyond doubt. No side then in a conflict of moral tenets is entitled to absolute certainty about the truth of its own standpoint or the falsity of that of the opposite side. Both opinions are essentially questionable. Nobody has "monopoly of truth" in moral matters. If we are aware of this fact, we are prone to regard a difference in moral opinions as a natural phenomenon, and not as a sign of mental or moral aberration. Moral argumentation may then be viewed upon not as a kind of fight or competition, but as a common search for moral truth. Interfering in such a way with moral beliefs of our opponents we do not seem to trespass against the postulate of tolerance properly understood.

Argumentation – or, more generally, persuasion – has been the only way of interference discussed thus far. However, ways of interfering that

may deserve the name "tolerant" are not restricted to arguments of whatever kind. There are situations in which we cannot confine ourselves to arguing with the evil-doer, but must counteract his doings in another, more direct way. To such situations belong, first of all, all those cases in which a morally wrong deed cannot be said to be a result of morally wrong beliefs. The evil-doer may even admit, when pressed, that what he is doing is morally wrong. In spite of that, he may persist in his doings, ignoring the moral disapproval. In a case like this there is no point in arguing with him on moral issues. And if his doings mean a serious harm to other people, we cannot remain indifferent; we may feel morally obliged to some kind of interference. Now, may such interference be compatible with the postulate of tolerance? What restrictions does the postulate impose on our ways of counteracting moral evil?

The typical answer is that the postulate calls for the renunciation of force and restricts methods of counteracting evil to "non-violent" ones. Though plausible, the answer cannot be accepted without qualification. The renunciation of force does not seem to be either necessary or sufficient condition of tolerant behaviour. There are situations in which a most tolerant person may feel justified in using force. Let us recall the well known Mill's statement: "I may forcibly prevent a man from crossing a bridge if there is no time to warn him that it is about to collapse". What is more important, we may feel justified in using force to prevent a harm being done to other people, not to the doer himself. This is just the kind of situation that presents the main problem concerning tolerance – problem widely discussed by moral and political philosophers. When are we allowed to resort to force in our attempts to prevent or remove evil doing? What means of coercion may we make us of? What is to be the role of state in providing such means? As well known, this highly controversial question has been answered differently by different political programmes, liberalism and totalitarianism being the two extremes. Not entering into this problem on the present occasion, I can say only that it is a problem which does not admit of any easy solution, any all or none answer. Let us adduce a typical formulation of liberal standpoint: "the liberal state must respect personal autonomy, but may restrict it in order to prevent serious other-regarding harms". The standpoint expressed by this statement seems to exclude a full legislation of morality, but not a partial one. Morality must not be replaced by law,

though some – most fundamental – moral principles ought to have legal sanction. It is usually maintained, e.g., that in contradistinction to, say, adultery, murder should be punished by law. Any acceptable interpretation of the postulate of tolerance must be compatible with that fact – must allow certain means of coercion.

On the other hand, refraining from any acts of coercion does not seem to be a sufficient guarantee of tolerance. The essence of tolerance lies much deeper: in our internal attitude towards our opponent. The same external act of interference with his conduct may express different attitudes. What is then characteristic of a tolerant attitude? What is its essential feature? My contention is that the essence of tolerant behaviour lies in its motivation. This motivation may generally be described as “altruistic”. An act is called altruistic if it is motivated by a concern for the welfare of others. So interference with a person’s behaviour may be regarded as tolerant – in the sense mentioned – in so far as it springs from our concern for those affected by that behaviour.

This characteristic may somehow be restricted by referring to a particular kind of what we mean by the concern for others. Promoting the good of others means, first of all, protecting them from wrong, helping them in distress. For to alleviate suffering seems morally more important than to increase happiness (in accord with the tenets of the so-called “negative utilitarianism”). Since we are constantly surrounded by human suffering, our concern for others manifests itself mostly as compassion for our suffering fellow men. Compassion thus becomes the main element of our altruistic motivation. In view of this, compassion may be claimed to be a sufficient motive for counteracting moral evil. Since, on the conception of morality adopted in this discussion, any wrong deed reduces ultimately to someone’s suffering, our sensitiveness to the suffering of others provides sufficient motivation for our attempts at preventing or removing the given deed. There is, in particular, no need to resort in this motivation to a moral judgement – to appeal to a moral condemnation of the deed in question. We may simply appeal to compassion for the suffering which it brings about.

This fact has a direct bearing on the problem of tolerant behaviour. From tolerant point of view, any moral judgement appears to be somewhat objectionable. And it seems most objectionable when it refers to acts done by other people and brands them as morally wrong. Any act of morally judging other people – whether positively or negatively –

expresses an attitude of superiority; if I praise or blame a person, I behave as a superior to him. And acts of negative moral judgement, i.e. moral condemnation, appear to be especially controversial. The meaning of any moral judgement includes, besides cognitive, an emotional component. In the case of negative moral judgements, this emotional component consists of feelings of a strongly repulsive nature, such as dislike, contempt, indignation. It is often postulated by moralists that the negative feelings should concentrate on the wrong deed only, and not on the wrongdoer. But such a postulate is hardly realisable. It is an undeniable psychological fact that the repulsive feelings involved in moral condemnation invariably concentrate on the wrongdoer. There are moralists who in this fact do not see anything morally objectionable. The wrongdoer is said to deserve our blame and – connected with it – contempt and indignation. What is more, moral indignation is often looked upon as a measure of one's moral standard. The more indignant one grows, the more righteous one feels.

This attitude, however, is clearly incompatible with the postulate of tolerance. He who is to follow the postulate can hardly accept the feelings of moral condemnation, contempt or indignation as motives for his conduct. The only motive acceptable for him is his concern for the welfare of others – above all, the compassion for all who suffer and the desire to help them in their suffering. It is to be stressed that his compassion will include the wronged together with the wrongdoer, since moral degradation (as Socrates has already claimed) is a kind of misery and the wrongdoer is, in reality, a pitiable creature. Ideally, our attitude towards a wrongdoer ought to be such as it is in the case when the wrongdoer is our close friend; we deplore his wrongdoing and try to amend his ways, but we do not condemn him, do not despise. We may thus be said to counteract a moral evil in a tolerant way if what we aim at is not fighting the wrongdoer but helping the wronged (and, in a way, the wrongdoer as well). Tolerance so conceived may paradoxically be said to mean interference without disapproval rather than disapproval without interference. Such an attitude towards our opponents seems to embody what the Gospels call “the love of our enemies”. I find in it the deepest sense of tolerance in the moral domain.