

## Reflections on the Value of Tolerance

Anna Maria Passaseo\*

University of Messina Department of Modern and Ancient Civilizations Polo Didattico dell'Annunziata Viale Annunziata 98168 Messina Italy

DOI: [10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.011](https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2019.v07i08.011)

| Received: 05.08.2019 | Accepted: 24.08.2019 | Published: 30.08.2019

\*Corresponding author: Anna Maria Passaseo

### Abstract

### Review Article

The concept of tolerance, widely used today, contains many controversial aspects that question its use, although tolerance is a “good” required in the pluralistic and multicultural democratic societies. Through a brief survey on the authors who first introduced the concept in western culture, the main reasons that justify the opportunity to educate to tolerance today are explored.

**Keywords:** Tolerance, value, prudence, rationality, moral rights.

**Copyright © 2019:** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

## INTRODUCTION

Talking about tolerance is not easy, although in today's pluralist and multicultural societies its intervention is increasingly requested and education is required to cultivate it as a quality that should characterize the profile of the contemporary citizen.

The difficulty in talking about it depends on the fact that the problem of tolerance arises only when things are at stake which we somehow find unpleasant or disapproving, such as heresy, subversion, prostitution, drugs, pornography, abortion and etc.

In other less controversial cases, we have recourse to the idea of freedom: when we say that someone enjoys some freedom, we exclude any criticism of the use he makes of it. In short: only those things that are connoted in a negative sense are candidates for tolerance. Just enough to make the concept of tolerance intrinsically problematic and to open up a whole series of questions: about its nature, its foundations, its limits and the conditions necessary for its realization.

### Tolerance: a good in itself?

We can start the discussion by giving a first definition of the term tolerance, a definition on which we can all agree.

Tolerance can be defined as that attitude for which one abstains from exercising one's power towards the opinions or actions of others, even if they are different from one's own in relevant aspects and therefore are disapproved of. In short, I am tolerant

when I stand, I do not forbid things that I can forbid, although I hate them, deem them undesirable or contemptible, or even disapprove of them morally.

Certainly, it can be noted that it is one thing to tolerate behaviors that are considered simply despicable and quite another to tolerate behaviors that are even considered immoral and this makes it possible to distinguish between a weak, soft meaning of the idea of tolerance and a strong or hard meaning. But the fact remains that it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between personal preference questions and ethical questions when discussing tolerance. What is intolerable coincides with what is unbearable: with what, in short, arouses strong feelings of rejection.

On the other hand, there seems to be something paradoxical in the claim that tolerance is a virtue or a good in itself, since it is a fact that it is exercised only against what is negatively judged. So we can ask ourselves what good can come from allowing things that are judged to be bad. In the case of pornography, for example, it can be assumed that pornographic material is bad and that our society would be better without it; and yet it can be said at the same time that pornography is something that the law must tolerate. The question that arises, in short, is: on what basis can one believe both that certain practices are immoral and that it is right, nevertheless, to allow them?

The answer to questions of this kind seems to be only one: and it is that tolerance is a second-class

good, a sort of necessary evil in a world that we recognize as largely imperfect.

### Justify the tolerance: the prudential argument

In this way, a prudential justification is given of tolerance. In other words, tolerance is a requirement of prudence: in the sense that it is believed that the absence of tolerance can cause serious consequences for the very survival of our society. In short: tolerance is justified and invoked by referring to considerations of public order and social peace: to considerations dictated by prudence, in fact. It is therefore prudent to tolerate what we do not like to avoid disorder and social conflict.

This kind of argument in favor of tolerance actually has a long history and often does not limit itself to affirming the simple rule of living and letting live.

In this order of ideas, in fact, it can be argued that within the society, precise limits must be imposed on the will and interests of the majority to provide for the alleviation of poverty, social disadvantages and despair that characterize the existence of minorities. That is to say, the opportunity not only to tolerate the presence of those we do not like in some way, but also to take care of them in some way.

Thus John Locke, in the Seventeenth century, advocated tolerance against Huguenot refugees fleeing French persecution, stating that the Huguenots had to be welcomed as bearers of economic benefits to England, given their skill in the field of commerce and industry [1]. In other words, Locke used economic arguments against the xenophobia of the English, against emotional and instinctive reluctance to allow the naturalization of foreigners in their own country.

In conclusion, sometimes it is prudent to tolerate what we do not like or because intolerance will favor disorder and social conflict or because tolerance will bring economic benefits.

### Rational justification

The argument based on prudence, however, was often judged to be unsatisfactory and incomplete. And this for two reasons.

The first reason is that it does not clarify if there is something wrong with intolerance and, possibly, in what this evil consists. It then happens that, where it is believed that intolerance - or even brutal repression - promotes social peace or brings some advantage, the prudential argument can be used to support intolerance and repression.

The second reason is that the prudential argument does not establish limits to tolerance, but implies that anything should be tolerated if it is useful to do so.

Already Locke integrates the prudential argument in favor of tolerance with another topic, which we can define as rational. In the *Epistola de tolerantia* Locke deals with tolerance in matters of religion and argues that religious intolerance is substantially irrational, given that individuals cannot be forced to accept religious beliefs other than those they actually have. Religious belief is in fact a matter of individual conscience and therefore cannot be subjected to the will. For this reason attempts to impose religious beliefs on someone are doomed to failure and are therefore to be considered irrational. So reason imposes tolerance [2].

Another way in which rationality can serve to establish tolerance goes back to Voltaire. "What is tolerance?" asks Voltaire in the *Philosophical Dictionary*; and replies: "It is the prerogative of humanity: we are all mixed with weaknesses and errors: let us mutually forgive each other's foolishness, it is the first law of nature [3]."

Voltaire's argument is taken up by Karl Popper, who links tolerance to the search for truth that unites all men. The recognition of our fallibility, of our fragility and of our inclination to error – Popper argues – leads us to prefer tolerance and therefore invites us to rational discussion with others: a rational discussion that can help us correct our mistakes and then approach us to the truth [4]. In other words, intolerance is a form of intellectual arrogance, a denial of the fallible principle, according to which it is possible that I am wrong and you are right. Tolerance, on the other hand, argues Popper, is the first condition to expand our universe of knowledge and, therefore, to get closer to the truth. Tolerance, according to this view, in short, becomes an instrument of *progress*.

This link between tolerance and truth is worth dwelling on. Indeed, it often happens that the idea of tolerance is associated with positions of relativism or even skepticism. If I believe that truth does not exist and that therefore every opinion is as valid as any other, I should accept the principle of tolerance. In reality, history, especially that of the 16th and 17th centuries, teaches that adherence to skepticism has often been associated with greater intolerance. In fact, the conviction that the truth does not exist can enforce the prudential principle whereby reasons of prudence with regard to peace and public order can advise intolerance and the suppression of heterodox beliefs.

On the contrary, if skepticism is rejected, the need to discover the truth and the recognition of one's own fallibility can, at the same time, induce one to prefer tolerance.

But, I repeat, to accept the rational argument in favor of tolerance, it is necessary to believe that there is

an objective truth somewhere and that we have a duty to seek it. Moreover – and this must be emphasized – the principle of reason requires that limits be given to what can be legitimately tolerated. In the sense that tolerance must be mutual, so that together we can seek the truth. In short: tolerance cannot be extended to those who would deny it to others. In fact, those who are intolerant presume to be infallible, to already possess the truth and therefore contradict the rational argument.

Finally the rational argument also tells us what is wrong with intolerance: intolerance harms it because it is a form of intellectual arrogance that prevents progress and hinders the search for truth.

### Justification based on the moral right

In addition to the prudential and rational arguments there is a third argument that leads to supporting tolerance: it is the argument based on the notion of moral right.

Let us return to Voltaire who writes: “when we preached tolerance, we followed nature and restored humanity in its rights [5]”. Now, it is clear that the fact that our societies today host individuals of many ethnicities, cultures and religions makes tolerance a particularly pressing problem. And this because different religious groups can have different and incompatible practices and, when we find ourselves in the presence of incompatible lifestyles, we will need a lot of tolerance, which can be justified by appealing not so much to considerations of public order, nor to which whether objectively the best model of life or the right religious faith, but rather the right of all human beings to live their lives in the way they think best.

On the other hand, apart from the differences in culture or religion, individuals are substantially different from one another and therefore there may not be a model of life that suits everyone, but there may be different lifestyles suitable for people of different temperaments or with different aspirations and ideals. And everyone must be recognized, as an adult member of society, the right to live whatever kind of life he prefers. This justification therefore refers to the requirement of respect for any person as autonomous agent who has the right to has life plans and projects that may be different from ours.

But in affirming all this, are we not committing ourselves to tolerating unconditionally anything, however unpleasant or burdensome?

This is not the case, because, in this case too, the justification offered for tolerance also sets its limits, since it is implicit in the principle of respect for people that one should not be tolerant of those who deny such respect to others. Thus, we must not extend the principle of tolerance to those who deny that it is not worth living other types of life than their own, nor must

we tolerate those who would suppress diversity. For example, racial hatred is something that cannot be tolerated, because it leads to denying that the members of certain racial groups are properly people, with their life plans, values and rights.

### Concluding remarks

So far, we have considered three kinds of justification for tolerance: the prudential argument, the rational argument and the argument based on moral rights. In fact, a clear distinction between the three genders is rather artificial: since they are not mutually exclusive. However, they do come into conflict in particular cases. Now, these particular cases are the most difficult ones, where it is not clear to what extent one should be tolerant and why. Thus, for example, in the case of tolerance in the 16th and 17th centuries, the rationalist Lockian argument would suggest tolerating heterodox opinions, while public order considerations might make intolerance and repression preferable. Similarly, in the case of the Muslim teacher who, in England, tried to be recognized as having the right to leave school on Friday mornings in order to go to the mosque (a right which the headmaster, and subsequently the magistrate, denied him, because this absence would have imposed a great sacrifice on the other teachers), the argument based on moral rights would lead to tolerance, while considerations of prudence would suggest the opposite.

But then the question that was posed before returns: is tolerance a value in itself and for itself or only a necessary evil in an imperfect world?

This question can be answered by giving at least some cases in which tolerance can be considered a value in itself; just as it happens when certain virtues necessarily carry certain defects with them, so that without the defects there would not even be virtues. In short, tolerance would be a requirement of a good society, since even in a good society virtues can only flourish together with concomitant defects. In another perspective: we cannot have a diversified and pluralistic society if we do not accept that certain lifestyles, recognized by different people as important and valuable, may be incompatible with each other: something that makes tolerance indispensable, if we want to prevent diversity and variety from being replaced by radical flattening, by absolute conformism.

But then: what obligations does tolerance impose on us? What – little or so – do we have to do to be able to say consistently that we are truly tolerant?

We know that, historically, tolerance has been conceived as not interfering in the lives of others, or refraining from harming or persecuting them. Now this is, of course, a *negative* reading of the idea of tolerance, in the sense that it tells us *what we should not do*.

However, if tolerance is justified on the basis of respect for people as independent agents, the question arises as to whether such respect does not require anything more than simply looking after one's own affairs. For example, the Muslim teacher might think that English law, while not directly persecuting or oppressing him, is lacking and does not treat him with due respect if the religious beliefs of Muslims are considered, in a sense, of lesser value than those of Christians. But then, on closer inspection, the principle of tolerance, understood as something that requires and implies respect for people, requires a broader interpretation of tolerance itself. It involves not only letting others live, but helping them concretely and thus encouraging them to lead the kind of life they feel is worth living; it involves creating opportunities for others and doing everything possible to help them. Showing respect for those who are different from us requires, in short, that minority groups and therefore the weakest members of society be favoured.

It is a consequence of this vision of tolerance that diversity is conceived, at least in principle, as a positive value. In short, it is not a question of integrating minorities into the dominant culture, but of allowing them to flourish as minorities, each bearer of its own separate and distinct identity.

Certainly such an attitude requires great optimism about the possibility of the coexistence of

divergent moral beliefs. Indeed, the measures imposed by this coexistence must in any case be considerable and will not only concern the legal dimension of the law, where it will be necessary to increase the freedom of minorities by reducing the freedom of majorities; they will also concern the individual dimension, since everyone will be required to welcome and encourage models of life that are alien to us and even unpleasant for us.

If then the exercise of tolerance appeals not so much to our rational capacity – according to the line of reflection developed so far – but rather to the sphere more properly affective, emotional, and 'sentimental' of our being – the sphere to which both prejudice and religious charity belong – remains an open question.

## REFERENCES

1. Locke J. Lettera sulla tolleranza. It. transl. In Battaglia, F. ed. Antologia degli scritti politici di John Locke. Il Mulino, Bologna, 182-183.
2. Ivi, 180.
3. Voltaire. Dizionario filosofico. It. trans. Universale Economica, Milano, 1950; 112 (*for all the quotations the translation is mine*).
4. Popper K. La società aperta e i suoi nemici. It. trans. Armando, Roma. 2003; 523.
5. Voltaire. Dizionario filosofico. It. trans. Universale Economica, Milano, 1950; 113.