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Tolerance: Between Forbearance And Acceptance

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Chapter 1

Tolerance: An Impossible Virtue?

When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union dissolved, many hoped for a “new world order,” an order distinguished by significant reduction in internecine bloodshed. It would be replaced by continued growth of democracy, mutual concern, and respect for differences. So far, it has not worked out that way. In the former Yugoslavia, neighbors who once lived in peace, even intermarried—Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovar Albanians, and Gypsies—are now at each other’s throats. Northern Ireland remains bitterly divided between Protestants and Catholics, internal strife or mutual enmity marks several former Soviet republics, and large-scale massacres have taken place not only in Rwanda but elsewhere around the world. There is nothing new in this, only additional instances of conflict, strife, and hatred. Long before the Berlin Wall went up or came down, people have found it difficult to live together peacefully, unless coerced into a false harmony to do so.

Many things create deep divisions. Material interests, such as water rights or market access, can set people against each other. Cultural animosities sometimes serve as proxies for these. Demanding protection of a group’s cultural heritage, for example, seems a less squalid reason for oppression than economic advantage. Behind high-minded and sentiment-filled demands, we often find selfish interests. Those grasping for power have their own self-interested reasons for turning small differences, disquieting suspicions, and minor irritations into major confrontations.

Still, although all animosities and strife have material consequences, not all have their roots in material concerns, greed, or narrow self-interest. Appeals to racial purity, linguistic superiority, cultural traditions, sacred places, and the sacred history of the nation continue to create deep divisions. Nor are hostilities limited to race or religion or to distinct linguistic, cultural, and geographical groups. *Any* difference, it seems, can produce hatred between and among peoples. Hatreds sometimes arise largely, though never simply, because one group cannot stand what another feels, thinks, or does. Such bitter animosities may so blind

parties to a dispute that they cannot see that they are jeopardizing both their own enlightened self-interest and what they hold most dear, as the terrible example of religious war proves. Opportunistic ideologues are skilled at cynically blowing on the coals of racial, ethnic, or cultural hatreds to further their own interests. Once ignited, publics often become so inflamed that they consume even themselves, often including those whose fanaticism or cynical grab for power initially lit the match.

Animosity, loathing, and abhorrence reveal themselves not only in atrocities, though that is common enough. They manifest themselves through sneers, petty humiliations, discrimination, persecution, and oppression. Each breeds anger and resentment and a powerful urge to retaliate. This, in turn, adds to greater suspicion, fear, distorted thinking, and twisted emotions on all sides. People may continue to *be* neighbors but not live *as* neighbors. Although they live next door, there is nothing neighborly about their relations, as the miles of shiny razor wire separating Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland attests.

Such hatred and bitterness corrosively eats away at what commonly cements communities together. Without the mortar of respect, trust, and tolerance, brick scrapes against brick. The result is familiar. Those locked in enmity yearn not only to be free from the hated other but to smash them to smithereens. Where those with power cannot keep the despised completely oppressed, they may yield to the temptation to rid themselves of the contemptible altogether, to make them “disappear.”

A curious feature of some deep-seated animosities is that, from the outside, they often look unfathomable, even faintly ridiculous. From the outside, individuals or groups locked in hatred may seem like two peas in a pod. From the inside, however, the similarities only highlight remaining differences, differences that come to assume monumental importance. Oddly enough, great differences do not always breed the same intense animosity as do small ones.

From our present perspective, for example, the antagonism among various Protestant denominations in seventeenth-century England seems incredible. Surely, we think, it was mad to let such seemingly minor doctrinal differences matter *so much*. Is it really worth fighting over whether one is baptized as an infant or an adult? Yet we also know that, at the time, differences such as this were regarded as supremely important. An entire theology was implicated and therefore God’s will on earth. To have allowed other persuasions to flourish without resistance would have been to abandon one’s own deepest convictions to do God’s work. It would also have seriously endangered one’s own soul. Martin Luther’s (perhaps apocryphal) reply to his inquisitors deserves quoting in full: “Here I stand, I can do no other. It is not safe for a man to violate his conscience. God help me.” Nor was it only theological doctrine that divided English Protestants. The ways in which they thought churches should be governed or precisely how one should worship also sometimes led to persecution and bloodshed.

Many who hate and despise each other strike even outsiders as pervasively different: different in race, ethnicity, language, religion, metaphysical commitments,

kinship systems, aesthetic sensibilities, sexual practices, and customs. Christian Serbs and Muslim Kosovar Albanians, for example, differ in religion, ethnicity, and language, as do Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Class and caste distinctions also lead to bitter antagonisms. These kinds of deep and often divisive differences are neither new nor rare. Modern weaponry coupled with ancient savagery, however, can make them especially brutal when they erupt in violence, though machetes remain brutally effective.

Why difference, whether trivial or substantial, should make *such* a difference in how we see and act is deeply puzzling. Many answers suggest themselves, but none is fully convincing. Further, there is no reason to expect that there will be a single answer or even one set of interrelated answers, however intellectually satisfying that might be. One explanation is the apparent need of many in-groups to define themselves against an out-group: "We are 'we' because we differ from 'you'." The more we resemble you, the greater the need to find *some* differences, however seemingly trivial, to distinguish ourselves and justify ourselves as distinctive—and superior. But why the need to feel superior?

"The nonidentity of discernibles" entails that, given any two things, there must be *some* discernible difference between them, or there would not be two things, only one. It trivially follows that if we speak of Serbs and Croats, Baptists and Methodists, Tutsis and Hutus, straight and gay, and so on, there will be discernible differences. These can be, again, especially from the outside, exceedingly small: Tutsi and Hutu, for instance. Yet, whether great or small, discerned differences can drive deep wedges between communities. Each looks across the gap separating them with suspicion, fear, and anger that can explode in violence.

Yet we also know that widely divergent groups have lived in peace and harmony for generations, even in places now torn apart by mutual enmity. If anything, living in peace is the norm. Otherwise, the world would have been consumed by hatred long ago. Just as we oil squeaky wheels, so distinctions that grow into tension and conflict catch our attention.

Deep and pervasive differences alone are, however, not enough to explain the harm groups inflict on each other. Nor can it explain why, after generations of peaceful coexistence, neighbors turn on each other with such viciousness. We know, historically, which differences seem to have led to the greatest hostility, namely, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and customs. We do not, however, have anything like an adequate sociological explanation of why *these* engender such animosities. An "other," as noted previously, helps define who we are in terms of whom we are not: We are Scots, not English; Christians, not Jews; straight, not gay. The Inuit, who were isolated from other human beings for centuries, have the same name for themselves as for humans generally, namely, "Inuit." There was no human "other" to stand in contrast. The mechanism of defining oneself in terms of others, however, is not well understood. Although speculative explanatory theories abound, none has garnered widespread support. Fortunately, finding answers to what causes perceived differences to become transformed into sources

of hatred belongs more to the social sciences than to philosophy, though philosophers have speculated endlessly about it.

Whether the differences among warring groups are slight or great, the degree of animosity in the world remains high. Whether it is higher or lower than before the end of the Cold War is difficult to say. Some suggest that the two superpowers kept ethnic, cultural, and racial hatreds in check, preventing them from spilling over into violence. This might explain peace in Yugoslavia under Tito. Elsewhere, however, the superpowers were only too happy to stir up trouble, as in Africa and Southeast Asia. Undeniably, however, bigotry, narrow-mindedness, fanaticism, and prejudice pervade today's world. A catalog of differences festering into malice in the United States alone could itself fill a book. Even when the enmity has not turned violent—and it has done that often enough—it has crippled the targets of hatred and society as a whole. One could compile lists for nation after nation, community after community. Everywhere there are pleas for reconciliation and—where that fails—*toleration* and *tolerance*.

While we need research to find out what causes contempt and hatred between various groups and what allows them to reconcile and live together harmoniously, the need for toleration (the act of tolerating) and for tolerance (the attitude or virtue)¹ will not thereby disappear. Simply knowing what causes what does not mean that we can control the causes. Bare toleration will sometimes be all we can expect—or should want. No one wishes to live in a homogeneous or lobotomized world, a world without difference, passion, and commitment. Yet we think it is reasonable to expect, even demand, that individuals and diverse groups² *at least* tolerate each other.

But, we quickly add, not tolerate *all* differences. It would be unreasonable—worse, utterly wrong—to demand that we should tolerate *every* divergent attitude, belief, or practice. No one, we think, should tolerate cruelty or slavery just because it happens at a comfortable remove. Can we not say the same about racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes? We should not aspire to exchange unthinking bigotry for mindless toleration of everything.

We therefore need to sort out what tolerance implies, the circumstances in which it arises as a live option, and when it is (and is not) defensible, for understanding the *limits* of tolerance is part of understanding the scope of its justification. So far, tolerance has resisted any consistent or agreed-on analysis and defense. It has proven to be—as the subtitle of an excellent anthology on it implies—“an elusive virtue.”³ One contributor calls it highly “paradoxical.”⁴ Another goes so far as to say that it is “an impossible virtue.”⁵

Tolerance and toleration appear elusive not only because of their apparent impossibility but also because of their apparently inherent *instability*. Tolerance seems to occupy a no-man's-land between intolerance on the one hand and complete acceptance on the other. That is, it seems to exist in an unstable moment like that between the point at which, when looking at the familiar duck/rabbit drawing, we can *only* see the duck and then, in the blink of an eye, can *only* see the

rabbit. Tolerance seems equally unstable, equally fleeting. It either collapses back into intolerance or swiftly moves to acceptance or at least indifference. In the *Republic*, Socrates says of opinion that it rolls around between ignorance and knowledge, being neither one nor the other and impossible to pin down. Tolerance seems like that. We simply cannot seem to make it stand still long enough to pin it down.

Nor does everyone accept that tolerance is a good thing, and certainly not that it should be elevated to the status of a virtue, that is, as a morally desirable character trait. Some think that tolerance either requires or leads us to become skeptics, doubters, or indifferent spectators to our own lives. Someone who did not suffer from doubt was the French priest, then bishop, Jacques Bossuet (1627–1704). In 1598, the Edict of Nantes granted Protestants in France the right to worship openly. When it was revoked in 1685, Protestant pastors were forced to renounce their calling or face severe punishment, including death. Bossuet gave a classic defense of intolerance in threatening the Protestant clergy: “I have the right to persecute you,” he said, “because I am right and you are wrong.”⁶ There is no lack of certainty or indifference here, and that, some critics say, is a good thing, for tolerance, they argue eats away at the very things that give our lives meaning and substance. If tolerance is a good at all, it pertains only to the small, insignificant things in life. It will otherwise sap the strength of our deepest convictions.

Others reject tolerance because it does not go far enough. It is a half measure for the powerful and arrogant, who preach tolerance provided that they—and they alone—decide who and what to tolerate. What we need to do, these critics say, is move beyond tolerance and toleration to respect and positive appreciation of deep differences, to recognize and celebrate difference. For this to happen, however, we will have to move beyond the pretensions of contemporary liberal thought with its emphasis on individualism, rights, means–end rationality, and selves emptied of all meaning but that which they can provide on their own. We must move to a new, perhaps postmodern, sensibility.

If tolerance is not universally celebrated as a virtue or attitude, neither is toleration universally recommended as an act or practice. If we truly believe that our own way of life is best, why should we tolerate—that is, put up with—inferior, maybe corrupt, ways? Champions of toleration themselves do not show forbearance to absolutely everything. They, too, draw lines. They just draw them at different places. The language of tolerance and toleration, critics conclude, simply masks different judgments about where those lines should be drawn.

This is an essay in social and political philosophy. I will, therefore, largely ignore questions of tolerance arising in interpersonal relations. I will occasionally use examples drawn from this sphere because of their familiarity. Clearly, this is possible only if we deploy the notions of tolerance and intolerance in similar ways. I believe that we do. Nor is this surprising, for interpersonal moral reflection and social and political reflections are not radically discontinuous, though there are important differences of focus and emphasis. Justice and rights generally

figure less prominently in interpersonal affairs than in social and political ones, while boorish or insensitive behavior figure less importantly in social and political affairs than in interpersonal ones.

This is not to say that considerations in one sphere are absent from the other. In our personal relations, we are often as deeply concerned about the social and political attitudes of people we know well as we are of their actions. We may find it difficult, for instance, to sustain a friendship with someone whom we know harbors bigoted thoughts or expresses racial antipathy even if he never otherwise *acts* on his thoughts and antipathy. Politically speaking, this may be largely (though not completely) beneath notice; in our personal interactions, it looms large.

Philosophers only interpret the world, Marx famously says, adding that the point is to change it. That philosophers only interpret the world means no more than that they are doing their job. They are ill-equipped to do more and are likely to make a mess of things when they try. Gaining a better philosophical understanding of appeals to tolerance may help us understand both the possibilities and the limits of intelligent change.

Philosophers introduce novel terms or ideas into public discourse at their peril; usually, they work with words, phrases, and notions already in use. They shape and refine existing currency, both old and new, and return them brightly polished to contemporary service as if freshly minted. This does not mean that philosophers simply tidy up ordinary language. They also systematically explore not only the linguistic conditions for a term's application but also its connections with related concepts. The aim is not dictionary making but conceptual clarification and understanding. Sometimes a philosopher can transform our understanding of the meaning, implications, and justifications for ready-at-hand terms. This might mean taking a word or phrase already in use and giving it a more central place in our thinking. Or it might mean reshaping language and so what we think. Words then take on new meaning and importance.

Most words in ordinary language (or even learned discourse, such as medieval Latin) do not have a precise sense, unless someone deliberately assigns one. Many words, especially those that do not name common objects (and even here the exceptions abound), are marked by ambiguity and vagueness, at least until they are used in a specific context. This is both understandable and unproblematic. Words are tools. We do things with them. Provided that they get the job done, we are not always too fussy about giving them a precise sense. Just as we use screwdrivers as levers and as punches, so we use ordinary words in a variety of ways, usually connected but often straying from their original employment. If it matters, we can always assign a word or phrase an exact sense, as we do in science, mathematics, and certain phrases in legal contracts. Often, however, it does not matter, and we get on perfectly well without precise definitions.

Context often removes ambiguity and vagueness. When engineers discuss "tolerances" of a particular fitting, for instance, we are not thrown into hopeless confusion. This example illustrates an important point, for in a certain context, a

word that might be vague or generally ambiguous can have a precise meaning. The danger lies only in thinking that it always has the same precise sense in all contexts. We need to remind ourselves, moreover, that we simply do not always need precision. Everyone can distinguish day from night and dusk from both, but is there unanimity about when dusk begins and ends? And how, precisely, does dusk differ from twilight? Everything just said is true of the word "tolerance." As we will see in chapter 6, it has been around a long time.

NOTES

1. I will distinguish these terms more finely in chapter 3. Usually, however, they can be used interchangeably because the context makes clear which is meant.
2. "Groups" is not a happy word choice. I use it to refer to varied social groupings, such as families, communities, ethnic groups, castes, religions, political parties, pressure groups, unions, and the state. It would be tedious to provide this list, or portions of it, repeatedly. A group, incidentally, need not be institutionalized, as will be discussed later.
3. See the collection of essays in David Heyd, ed., *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
4. John Horton, "Toleration as a Virtue," in *Toleration*, ed. Heyd, 28–43.
5. Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?" in *Toleration*, ed. Heyd, 18–27.
6. Quoted in Susan Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1989), 7.