

Toleration (Rainer Forst)

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The term “toleration” generally refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still “tolerable,” such that they should not be prohibited or constrained. There are many contexts in which we speak of a person or an institution as being tolerant: parents tolerate certain behavior of their children, a friend tolerates the weaknesses of another, a monarch tolerates dissent, a church tolerates homosexuality, a state tolerates a minority religion, a society tolerates deviant behavior. Thus for any analysis of the motives and reasons for toleration, the relevant contexts need to be taken into account.

The Concept of Toleration and its Paradoxes

The concept of toleration is marked by the following characteristics. First, it is essential for the concept of toleration that the tolerated beliefs or practices are considered to be objectionable and in an important sense wrong or bad. If this *objection component* is missing, we do not speak of “toleration” but of “indifference” or “affirmation.” Second, the objection component needs to be balanced by an *acceptance component*, which does not remove the negative judgment but gives certain positive reasons [...]. In light of these reasons, it would be wrong not to tolerate what is wrong, to mention a well-known paradox of toleration. The said practices or beliefs are wrong, but not intolerably wrong. Third, the limits of toleration need to be specified. They lie at the point where there are reasons for rejection that are stronger than the reasons for acceptance; call this the *rejection component*. All three of those reasons can be of one and the same kind—religious, for example—yet they can also be of diverse kinds (moral, religious, pragmatic).

Furthermore, it needs to be stressed that there are *two boundaries* involved in this interpretation of the concept of toleration: the first one lies between (1) the normative realm of those practices and beliefs one agrees with and (2) the realm of the practices and beliefs that one finds wrong but can still tolerate; the second boundary lies between this latter realm and (3) the realm of the intolerable that is strictly rejected. There are thus three, not just two normative realms in a context of toleration.

Finally, one can only speak of toleration where it is practiced *voluntarily* and is not compelled, for otherwise it would be a case of simply “suffering” or “enduring” certain things that one rejects but against which one is powerless. It is, however, wrong to conclude from this that the tolerant need to be in a position to effectively prohibit or interfere with the tolerated practices, for a minority that does not have this power may very well be tolerant in holding the view that if it had such power, it would not use it to suppress other parties.

Based on these characteristics, we can identify three paradoxes of toleration that are much discussed in philosophical analyses of the concept, and each one refers to one of the components mentioned above. First, there is the *paradox of the tolerant racist*, which concerns the objection component. Sometimes people argue that someone who believes that there are “inferior races” the members of which do not deserve equal respect should be “more tolerant.” Thus the racist would be called tolerant if he curbed his desire to discriminate against the members of such groups, say, for strategic reasons. Thus if (and only if) we considered tolerance to be a moral virtue, the paradox arises that an immoral attitude (to think

of other “races” in such way) would be turned into a virtue. What is more, the racist would be more “tolerant” the stronger his racist impulses are if only he did not act on them. [...] The racist, therefore, can neither exemplify the virtue of tolerance nor should he be asked to be tolerant; what is necessary is that he overcome his racist beliefs. This shows that there are cases in which tolerance is not the solution to intolerance.

Second, we encounter the *paradox of moral tolerance*, which arises in connection with the acceptance component. If both the reasons for objection and the reasons for acceptance are called “moral,” the paradox arises that it seems to be morally right or even morally required to tolerate what is morally wrong.

Third, there is the *paradox of drawing the limits*, which concerns the rejection component. This paradox is inherent in the idea that toleration is a matter of reciprocity and that therefore those who are intolerant need not and cannot be tolerated, an idea we find in most of the classical texts on toleration. But even a brief look at those texts, and even more so at historical practice, shows that the slogan “no toleration of the intolerant” is not just vacuous but potentially dangerous, for the characterization of certain groups as intolerant is all too often itself a result of one-sidedness and intolerance. In a deconstructivist reading, this leads to a fatal conclusion for the concept of toleration : If toleration always implies a drawing of the limits against the intolerant and intolerable, and if every such drawing of a limit is itself a (more or less) intolerant, arbitrary act, toleration ends as soon it begins—as soon as it is defined by an arbitrary boundary between “us” and the “intolerant” and “intolerable.”

The discussion so far implies that toleration is a *normatively dependent concept*. This means that by itself it cannot provide the substantive reasons for objection, acceptance, and rejection. It needs further, independent normative resources in order to have a certain substance, content, and limits—and in order to be regarded as something good at all. In itself, therefore, toleration is not a virtue or value; it can only be a value if backed by the right normative reasons.

Lexique :

behavior : attitude, comportement

dissent : contestation

weakness : faiblesse

relevant : adéquat.

the following characteristics : les caractéristiques suivantes

component : composant

furthermore : en outre

boundaries : limites

realm : domaine

to deserve : mériter

to curb : refréner

to be turn into : être transformé en

to draw: tracer

one-sidedness: partialité