

Lecture Notes 6 : Toleration and Pluralism

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If A tolerates B's conception of the good C then :

- (1) A thinks C is *pro tanto* morally objectionable
- (2) A thinks that, other things equal, B ought to be protected in his possession of C.
- (3) A advocates B's possession of C not in virtue of being coerced or forced to do so.

Tolerance as a political virtue

It is sometimes said that the virtue of pluralist democracy is tolerance. If it is to count as a virtue, then it must be reasonable. A tolerant racist is a contradiction in terms because toleration, as a virtue, presupposes that one's disapproval of C in (1) is reasonable.

If it did not presuppose this, then the most bigoted people in the world would be the most tolerant.

An apparent paradox of toleration

Consider the following claims:

- (4) Toleration is required by respect for persons.
- (5) To tolerate is, at least in some cases, to accept wrongdoing.
- (6) Wrongdoing is inconsistent with respect for persons.

Now this seems like an inconsistent triad. The only way out of it consists in pointing out an ambiguity in the term 'wrongdoing'.

The possibility of toleration

A widespread commitment to the value of autonomy. If you think that acting autonomously is valuable, or at least valuable within certain bounds (as when it's congenial to the good life, à la Raz), then you will tend to think that one's exercise of autonomy, even if wrongful, must be protected (within bounds).

The idea of repressive tolerance

Here's a Mill-like defence of tolerance:

- (7) The purpose of freedom is the achievement of truth, or of rationality in people.
- (8) Indiscriminate tolerance furthers this purpose.

∴ (9) Indiscriminate tolerance should be defended and encouraged.

In a famous 1965 essay, Herbert Marcuse disputed (8):

Even the all-inclusive character of liberalist tolerance was, at least in theory, based on the proposition that men were (potential) individuals, who could learn to hear and see and feel by themselves, to develop their own thoughts, to grasp their true interests and rights and capabilities, also against established authority and opinion. This was the rationale of free speech and assembly. Universal toleration becomes questionable when its rationale no longer prevails, when tolerance is administered to manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinions of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy. (Marcuse 1969, 90)

Should fascist speech be tolerated?

Fascists on the rise everywhere in Europe (UK: BNP has two MEPs, France: Front National got 17 percent in 2012 presidential elections, Greece: neonazis have 18 parliament seats, etc.).

No principled liberal grounds for allowing political or social movements that are explicitly and self-consciously opposed to equality between human beings, and can propagate and partially enforce such views.

Permissibility of ban on fascist speech seems to follow from Millian caveats about free speech:

An opinion that corn dealers are starvers of the poor... ought to be unmolested when simply circulated through the press, but may justly incur punishment when delivered orally to an excited mob assembled before the house of a corn dealer, or when handed about among the same mob in the form of a placard. (Mill 1947, 55)

It is a necessary part of fascist action and propaganda that, whatever they say and do in public, they say and do as 'excited' (i.e. violent) mobs. Violence and its propagation is a necessary part of what fascists stand for (the 'corn dealers' being immigrants, leftists, etc.).

What does the harm principle say?

NB. The question of *means* is paramount here.

Study questions

Is the idea of toleration incoherent? Is it impossible to realise?
'Racist speech should be tolerated.' Discuss.

Further Reading

Forst, R. (2012), 'Toleration', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Marcuse, H. (1969), 'Repressive Tolerance', in RP Wolff (ed) *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Beacon Press.

Raphael, D. (1988), 'The Intolerable', in S Mendus (ed) *Justifying Toleration*, CUP.