

BOUNDED TOLERANCE AS MORAL FORMATION

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Abstract: In this paper I argue that tolerance as a democratic virtue is both somewhat incoherent and frequently undesirable. Part of moral formation is learning what one's morally normative community finds constitutively obligatory and what it finds constitutively prohibited, intolerable. Moral outrage at the intolerable is how members learn the norms (as opposed to the rules or laws) of their community. Democratic polities must have a broad range of norms, but at the same time there must be limits: not everyone is fit to play the game of democratic life, nor does everyone wish to do so.

Keywords: Tolerance, Moral Education.

I begin these reflections by pointing to two background factors that shape what follows. First, what I am doing here is philosophy of moral education, not moral philosophy itself. That is to say, my question here is not about the nature of good, or what it means to be good, but a consideration of, whatever it is that counts as goodness in any given moral community, what does it take to form children according to those norms.

The second observation is that I am talking about tolerance and toleration, but not in the sense that is often addressed when considering this phenomenon in the context of schooling. Mostly, this topic is explored in the context of belief, especially dealing with radically incommensurable belief systems, often fundamental religions, in school (Milligan, 2005; Chinnery, 2006; Langmann, 2011) Here the proper question may well be to extend some form of toleration for even the most odious of beliefs, or, at the very least, for the individual holding those beliefs. Beliefs and attitudes, however, have a way of eventually being expressed in actions. When those actions break a law or formal rule, there are procedural penalties imposed through pre-determined channels. But sometimes the actions, including speech, are more than mere violations of *rules*: instead they are transgressions of deeply held *norms* that both define and constitute the moral community. In these cases,

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imposition of penalty may be insufficient. The community must have a way to mark certain things as intolerable, morally intolerable – more than just violations of rules, but contradictions of the very ideas that make us who we are. In such cases, I will argue, intolerance is morally educative in that it points to the boundaries of the moral community.

Tolerance, much spoken about as a desideratum in educational and civic circles, is not a very important democratic virtue by itself. In fact, tolerance can, under some circumstances, undermine the very democratic life it is supposed to enhance.

Let me begin by make a few observations. First, democracy is a way of life that is inherently moral. Democratic life, like any communal life, requires a degree of virtue among its citizens that underlies and enables its practice. This is, however, more true of democracy than other political forms, precisely because democracy presumes to allow for *self*-government. Citizens incapable of acting responsibly individually are unlikely to be successful in collective self-government. It was the belief that the requisite virtue and restraint were widely enough distributed among the ordinary people that made the Aristotle and Plato skeptical about their own democracy.

The founding fathers in the United States shared the concern of these ancients, with whose thought they were familiar. They were aware that democracies and republics such as Athens and Rome were both rare and, where created, short-lived. They understood that the government they were creating would require citizens who were both well informed and well formed; knowledge and virtue would both be required. Thus the emphasis on schooling among so many of the founders and the creation of the common school system in the early nineteenth century. This creation was on one hand a response to the rising of a new generation that needed to remember the principles of the republic, but in an even more direct sense, it was a response to the fact that large numbers of immigrants were coming to the country and acquiring citizenship. In order to prepare the young, both native- and foreign-born, to participate productively and constructively in public life, the common school idea was invented and developed.

The common school has been called the “workshop of democracy,” in precisely the sense that it is the place where citizens are made². As Barber has pointed out, “We may be natural consumers and born narcissists, but citizens have to be made” (220) And, of course, this is the point of Dewey’s *magnus opus*, *Democracy and Education*. In all the talk about preparing children to step into their adult roles as democratic citizens, we need to remember

² The metaphor of manufacturing was seen as a positive thing in the era of the common school movement, but I will speak more of *formation* and *fostering* than *manufacture* or *making*.

that this is not merely citizenship formation – it is nothing other than a particular case of moral formation, understanding that all moral education is relative to some specific way of life. There being no moral “view from nowhere,” we are always anywhere being formed for our lives and role in some specific social life.

That being said, the moral formation for democratic life arguably is more demanding than for other forms of life, precisely because it relies on citizens acting in accord with the public good of their own accord, not through external coercion or compulsion. That is to say, democratic life requires citizens of specific virtue, not merely obedient individuals (though, of course, in many autocratic forms of social life, obedience is the governing virtue).

The challenge at the heart of education for democratic life is to form democratic citizens with a persistent disposition to act in accord with the public good while at the same time doing this through reason and without stifling the ability to dissent or resist mere conformity. In short, to form a democratic conscience without excessive or irresistible indoctrination.

I now turn to the question of the nature and limits of tolerance.

The democratic necessity of tolerance

Those of us interested in the nature of democratic life have long understood the threats of intolerance and, consequently, have rightly emphasized the importance of tolerance. In fact, the Southern Poverty Law Center has built a program for schools called, Teach Tolerance. And teaching tolerance is an important aspect of democratic education.

Every social grouping, especially the complex societies that form any modern democracy, requires its citizens to extend a certain degree of space to those who are viewed as the *other*, whether the other-ness is a matter of religion, culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, some combination of these, or something else. The tendency to demonize, marginalize, oppress, and/or persecute those who are different from the dominant norms of their particular society is well-documented. Compared to this tendency of society to identify out-groups as well as in-groups, tolerance is an important, if minimal, component of what we might call a decent society (Covaleskie, 1996). In the long term, we might hope that social changes will make tolerance superfluous, but in the meantime, this is obviously not the case.

And, in fact, it may well be that this sort of minimal decency, achieved at the level of society, may be the best we can do. That is, the standard of individual morality may be justifiably substantially higher and more rigorous than that expected of society as a whole; perhaps it is reasonable to expect individuals to be committed to the highest standards of

morality in their personal lives while merely calling societies to refuse to sink into savagery and the marginalization and brutalization that minorities often face.

It is in this sense, then, that tolerance becomes essential for a decent society, even if we admit that few of us seek to be tolerated. And this in itself is illuminating: for many among us, to be tolerated will be a step forward. This is certainly true still in many areas for LGBTQ people, especially those in the BTQ segments of the population, as well as Muslims and Mexican-Americans, to specify some of the most obvious examples of this phenomenon. When discrimination against a group or an individual based on membership in a group is legal within generally understood limitations of the law, the legal enforcement of toleration is a step in the right direction. It recognizes that there are vicious individuals in any culture, and it places the weight of state enforcement on the side of equality and acceptance. This is the sense in which toleration is necessary: the United States has too many prominent spokespeople fomenting anti-Muslim and anti-Arab activities and attitudes, too many people defending discrimination against gay couples in the name of religious freedom. It is up to the broad polity of a democratic state to declare that we cannot eliminate all individual bigotry, but we will not allow intolerant attitudes to be imbued with the dignity of law.

And this brings us to the paradox.

The paradox of tolerance

It is, I think, a mistake to conceptualize tolerance as a virtue, at least as a virtue in and of itself. Unless coupled with a great deal of discernment and wisdom, tolerance can actually be destructive of democratic life. If tolerance is understood to be a primary virtue, such that programs like Teach Tolerance are seen as logical and a solution to a problem, we create a paradox when confronted with behavior that is intolerable, and, however tentatively we want to brand some specific attitude or behavior with that label, we all know that the label sometimes must be applied as we condemn in no uncertain terms things that we are not able, for good reason, to tolerate within our community.

There are two problems with approaching toleration as a foundational democratic virtue (despite the fact that in a very real sense that is precisely what it is). The first problem is conceptual and the second one rhetorical and political. Conceptual first.

Moral formation is partly about teaching children the bounds of what some specific moral community deems decent and acceptable behavior. This part of moral education is not about developing moral heroism or exemplars: rather it is about avoiding moral catastrophe. And here is where there is a moral danger in thinking that tolerance is the foundational: it

makes it very difficult to mark off those areas where precisely what we want to say is: “That is intolerable!” At the very least, an approach to moral formation that prioritizes tolerance is one that puts its moral agents in a bind: They are at certain points made to feel that they should not be intolerant *and* that they need to not tolerate certain acts or attitudes.

Another conceptual difficulty is in some sense trivial, but no less real, and begins to suggest one dimension of the incoherence: Tolerance as a moral stance is, like relativism, self-refuting. Even if intolerance is the only thing that is intolerable, tolerance is still inevitably bounded in fact and practice. So, while it may well be the case that tolerance is an important virtue in the life of a democratic polity, it must always be mediated. To be morally formative means among other things that a community finds some things intolerable. Another way to think of this is to point out that where nothing is intolerable, there are, by definition, no moral norms. To have moral norms is precisely to declare that, in this community, X will not be tolerated, and marking that boundary is an important part of moral education.

Normation

Moral communities are at least partly built on notions of what is and is not tolerable: in a very real sense intolerance is as important to a moral community as is tolerance. The former defines the moral norms of the community; the latter can, exercised with wisdom and discernment, make the community decent. Tom Green (1985) does a very nice job differentiating between *rules* and *norms* in his discussion of the formation of conscience. He imagines two boys, whom he names Mr. Punctual and Mr. Nonchalant. “Punctual always arrives at school on time. In fact, he does to extremes to do so, hurrying whenever the prospect of being late presents itself. He shows evident relief at making it on time, embarrassment on those extremely rare occasions when he misses, and anxiety at the prospect” (10).

He goes on to point out that it is not behavior *per se* that indicates norm acquisition:

Rather the existence or failure of norm acquisition is displayed in the presence or absence of certain feelings associated with departure from what the norm requires. These feelings are typically the feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, embarrassment, and sometimes fear, sorrow, and even pain. These are *moral* emotions... We know that norm acquisition has occurred in its fullest sense when departures from the rule have the capacity to evoke these kinds of feelings in the actor and feelings of outrage, indignation, pain, and offense on the part of others. (10-11)

The point is that we can govern a community by rules, which requires constant efforts to enforce compliance, which is likely to fail except under conditions of observation and/or

supervision. This is possible, but it would be difficult to call such a situation democratic. *Democracy requires normation, not mere obedience.* That is, we must be emotionally committed to the rightness of that set of norms that defines and constitutes a particular moral community.

And note that the emotions Green references are both strong and negative: *guilt, shame, pain* for violations of the norms that we ourselves commit; and *outrage, indignation, pain, and offense* at the violations perpetrated by others. We find intolerable, in short, violations of important norms. The trick is to both identify the proper norms to draw this kind of line around, and to respond properly to those violations deemed intolerable.

To respond to such violation without these emotions is to fail to engage in serious moral formation of the young. To respond dispassionately and procedurally is to tell the young that a rule has been broken, not that a norm has been violated.

Practicing the virtue of intolerance

The proper response to intolerable violations of norms includes a reaction that both expresses one's own (and one's community's) judgment and does so in a way that is educational and restores communal order. An example might help here.

Recently at the University of Oklahoma (OU) some members of a fraternity were videotaped leading a racist chant asserting that the fraternity would remain forever all white. When the video tape surfaced, OU President David Boren responded with public outrage and summarily expelled the two students who were identifiable on the video. What is noteworthy is that there was no attempt to specify a particular section of the student handbook or university policy manual that the chant had violated. President Boren was, quite literally, acting injudiciously, out of righteous anger – pain, offense, and outrage. Saying that “We have no room for racists and bigots,” Boren’s response was outside of the legalistic responses liberal democracies are generally assumed to require (Chilton, 2015, March 9). Instead of acting within the constraints of a thin consensus defining procedures for rule violations, Boren reacted with the emotional resonance indicative of a much thicker consensus.

Indications of the thickness of the consensus include the claim that “we” have no room for racists and bigots (the existence of a moral *we* and reference to *our values* are in a very real way exactly what we mean when we talk of a *thick consensus*; it is an assumption of communal agreement on at least some things that matter deeply, and not just procedures for resolving differences of opinion) and the reference to “Real Sooners,” who do not act in this

way (Staff, 2015, March 10). Boren's immediate response was a tweet: "This behavior will not be tolerated and is contrary to all of our values" (Harkin, 2015, Mar 8).

Long ago, Emile Durkheim (1961) pointed out that the function of punishment had little if anything to do with modifying the behavior or attitude of the individual who was guilty of a violation of communal norms. Instead, he argued, there are two social purposes for punishing violators. In the first place, punishment is a way of restoring the power of the law that has been broken. A violation of the rule has the inevitable effect of weakening the force of the law. In *On Moral Education*, Durkheim suggests that as a society becomes secular and its laws lose the power of religious endorsement, the laws themselves, in order to have effect, must themselves be considered to be sacred³. When they are broken, and when others know they have been broken, the aura of the sacred and inevitable around the law is weakened. Punishment is, in effect, a ritual by which the laws are reconsecrated and rededicated.

In addition, the ritual of punishment is an act of education for those members of the community not involved in the violation. It is a reminder to all that the law still binds and will be enforced. The outrage and offense evidenced by President Boren in the incident described above is one of the ways that these twin purposes can be realized. As Green pointed out, *merely enforcing a law or rule does not make it a norm*. When we are offended by the actions of another, actions for which we would also condemn ourselves, this is the sign of the existence of norms. This is the point of Boren's *public* and *immediate* condemnation of the actions of the leaders of the chant.

It is well to note that both Boren and the newspaper articles reporting on the event made the point that the reason Boren acted as he did was that the acts he was condemning were intolerable, and therefore would not be tolerated. This is the heart of my point: a decent society (indeed *any* society), in order to preserve its way of life and maintain its moral architecture, must not only have the means to identify and indicate the bounds of tolerable behavior. It must actually do so when the need arises. This is the essence of education in the domain of the moral.

Responsible intolerance

What does it mean to declare that an individual has committed an intolerable act? Once an intolerable act has been committed and the perpetrator identified, what follows? One

³ What Durkheim is discussing in this regard is the education of citizens in a secular democratic state. Of course we become more reflective about our laws as we become mature citizens, but we begin with a sense that the laws are sacred and must be obeyed.

possible response is to exclude the offender from the community either by ostracizing, expelling into exile, or imprisonment. The other is some form of restoration or redemption. By expelling the leaders of the chant, President Boren took the former path, with a great impact on the community. Certainly this was an educational moment in the life of the university.

But there is a growing movement of what has been called *restorative justice*, in which individuals, even individuals who have done intolerable things, are restored to membership in their communities through a process of healing and reintegration (Van Ness, D.W. & Strong, K.H., 2014; Braithwaite, J., 1989/2007) This movement, adopted from ways traditional societies have of dealing with offenders in their midst, is still rare but is becoming more common in both the criminal justice system and in schools, where it is replacing more punitive (and less educational) approaches to “discipline”⁴.

My point in pointing out these alternative approaches to dealing with intolerable behavior is not to advocate one or the other, so much as to draw a brief example beyond the argument that intolerance can also be virtuous to point out what a response looks like. We all know, commitment to tolerance notwithstanding, that some things are intolerable. When something is truly intolerable, it cannot – must not – be tolerated; that is simply what intolerable means. There are a variety of responses that communicate that something is intolerable, but legalistic proceduralism is not one of them. The response is emotional, not dispassionate.

This in itself poses serious problems that need to be addressed, but that is a project for another paper.

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⁴ For a look at how restorative justice looks when used in a kindergarten setting, see Vivian Gussin Paley (1993). See also Deborah Meier (1995).

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