

Topic 2

Universal tolerance is considered one of the most important ethical virtues of the modern globalized world, and it is easy to see why: in an increasingly interconnected world, anything which discourages or outright prohibits the spread and flow of different and non-conventional ideas can only serve to harm our way of life, and instead of simplify make our lives even more complex. Taken into consideration alongside the crimes and horrors which have arisen due to intolerance in both the past and present, it becomes clear why exactly it is considered such an important and essential part of our world. But does it have any right to do so?

In this essay I will argue against the concept of universal tolerance, through thorough examination of its core and effects. I will do so in the following manner:

- 1) An examination of the basic principles on which tolerance is founded, and why they are not as ideal as we may think they are
- 2) A counterargument to the above regarding the continued existence of harmful ideas, a response to the counterargument in light of demagoguery with a practical example
- 3) The existence of the tolerance paradox, and what it means for tolerance itself, a counterargument to the former in the form of a possible solution, and a response to the counterargument itself
- 4) A summary of the issues which are present in the concept of tolerance and a solution to the same through a Hegelian dialectic
- 5) A summary of the essay itself

I

The basis on which tolerance is founded upon is that all ideas, no matter of what kind, have equal merit and right to exist; that there simply is no such as thing as objectively right or wrong ideas, and that it is ultimately up to the individual to determine what is what. This subjectivist inspired tenet is notable because it allows us to discuss ideas which we might not agree instead of immediately denying them, thereby allowing us to widen our perception. But if we are to examine the issue more closely, then we can see the truth for ourselves: not all ideas are inherently equal. While this thought is an antithesis to our modern principles, it is worth careful consideration. This is not to say that there is always such a thing as an objectively superior idea; issues of theological or moral significance are ultimately equal because there is no way of determining the proper way in issues which are innately subjective. But for ideas of the economic, medical and political spheres, which have provable consequences, whose effects can be determined to be objectively harmful or not, the thought that they are equal is not only ridiculous, but dangerous as well.

If two ideas are considered side by side, and if one of them can be objectively proved to be more practically beneficial than the other, shouldn't it be considered superior, at least from a pragmatic point of view? Shouldn't it be worth more consideration and thought when contrasted to an idea which has objectively worse consequences? To quote Aristotle, "To make unequal things equal is the greatest inequality of all". In an incredibly ironic gesture, an attempt to make ideas equal not only

makes them more unequal, but actively has a chance of endangering us as well, by fostering the acceptance of ideas which can have harmful effects on us.

II

Of course, one can argue that such a scenario would never occur, that through proper discourse and vigorous debate the superiority of one idea and the inferiority of the other will be proven, and as such there will be nobody who will support or believe in the inferior idea. This argument, while bearing good will, is still naïve, because it a priori takes for granted that this discourse will not be subverted, and that these debates will be fair and truthful. One of the primary means this could be achieved would be through sophistry, i.e. the use of good sounding but fallacious and deceptive arguments. Since the only thing an argument needs to do to be accepted is to convince the public, a talented enough demagogue could through empty and shallow but intelligent sounding arguments persuade the public in the strength of his idea, even if the opposing idea has verified proof against it; an occurrence which keeps on reappearing throughout both the past and the present.

A practical example of this is the anti-vaccination movement. While there have been hundreds of studies done on the effects of vaccines, and no harmful effects have ever been proven, the anti-vaccination movement still argues against it, through the use of misinterpreted data and illogical arguments, which can easily fool an uninformed person. While we may allow them to remain exposed to illness and death, since it is an individual's right and prerogative to risk his or her life if they wish to do so, what are we to do when their stubbornness puts at risk not only themselves, but others as well? Is society to suffer because of the ignorance of the few, because of an almost dogmatic belief in the total equality of ideas? Or will we accept the reality of the issue, that some ideas just aren't equal?

III

Another issue which can be brought up against the concept of tolerance is the so-called "tolerance paradox", which states that tolerance of all logically also includes tolerance of intolerance. This is not just a clever thought problem, but a practical issue as well – sometimes, tolerance of ideas which are not all that tolerant leads to them becoming powerful and waging war against tolerance itself. A practical example of this is the rise of Nazism in post-WWI Germany, where tolerance of the fascist right ultimately allowed them to become heads of state and put an end to the policy of tolerance. This is in my opinion the biggest problem which tolerance faces, since its non-discriminatory principle allows the existence and spread of elements which oppose it, and which may further on end not only tolerance itself, but other ideas and concepts it disagrees with. Thus, it seems we encounter a new paradox: if we want tolerance to exist, we must be intolerant to some degree. But the hypocrisy of this act renders the term universal tolerance meaningless; in what way is it universal if we pick and choose what we tolerate and what not?

A response can be made here that this could be solved by tolerating everything except intolerant ideas, which would limit their growth and allow other, tolerance compatible ideas to exist without the risk of being ended by more aggressive, intolerant ideas. But this solution reminds me of that famous quote by Juvenal; "Quid ipso custodiet?"- Who watches the watchmen? Who or what exactly determines what is intolerant and therefore a threat to tolerance? And how do we stop this solution from being abused in a manner in which ideas which someone does not like or agree with are dismissed on the grounds of "intolerance"? Yet again we run into the problem of the principles of tolerance being abused in a manner which promotes intolerance - there is nothing stopping

someone from using this to censor his political or ideological enemies, and justify the act as a defense of tolerance.

IV

What joins these two issues of universal tolerance together is the problem of tolerating ideas which are harmful either to society or to tolerance itself. This is an innate and unique problem, since any attempts to solve this problem render it useless or hypocritical. But if I have found a problem with an idea, I must at least propose a possible solution. While the tone of the text might imply that I am promoting a totalitarian society in which ideas which are “harmful” are censored and dismissed, the solution is anything but. While tolerance does have its issues, it is still a vital part of our lives and an important philosophical concept, allowing the exchange and synthesis of ideas of different cultures and lifestyles, and it is only by recognizing these issues can we protect it from harm. Of course, when proposing a solution to a practical philosophical problem, the solution is based on changing the concept or idea itself, instead of the way we perceive and treat it. I think the solution to this problem lies in the past instead of the future.

Hegel saw history as a series of conflicts between ideas, in which a thesis is proposed, is answered with an antithesis, then removes its more extreme elements, just as the antithesis does, and forms a compromise with it, termed the synthesis. In the same manner we can search for a possible solution: a thesis (universal tolerance), challenged by an antithesis (the rejection of universal tolerance), before forming a synthesis- instead of treating tolerance with an almost religious devotion, we should instead learn that while tolerance is a noble principle, there are some things which when tolerated might prove harmful to ourselves or others. This, coupled with an informed and curious mind, which is not a difficult task to accomplish in the modern, knowledge-filled world, should ensure that dangerous ideas are contained, while still facilitating the trade of ideas and other benefits of a tolerant society.

V

In this essay I have brought up two essential issues which I see tolerance struggling with; the acceptance of objectively false ideas which might prove harmful, and the acceptance of ideas which are intolerant themselves, and might prove harmful to both tolerance and other ideas. I have also answered possible counterarguments to these same issues. Furthermore, I have proposed a possible solution to these issues, which relies on finding a balancing point between tolerance and its rejection, as well as possessing an informed mind.

To answer the question which I proposed in the introduction, tolerance is indeed an important part of our life, but we must still recognize that it is certainly not a perfect solution, and that we must always be wary of idolizing philosophical concepts. It is only then, I think, that we can truly declare ourselves tolerant.