On Tolerance in a Globalized World

"In a technological age public professional interaction requires neutrality of thought for effective collaboration and political coexistence. As an administrative attitude neutrality differs from tolerance which is an ethical virtue; but neutrality in the professional sphere is implied and included within the ethical virtue of tolerance. Note that this objective modification of the virtue of tolerance, from patience in regard to other persons' defective acts to permission of different types of activity, is an objective modification of virtue in our technological society." Tomonobu Imamichi

It is a belief commonly held that we live in a globalized world. Today, people log into their email account and send a text, which another person receives almost immediately, whereas before it would take weeks and even months for people in different regions to communicate. Students can research dozens of sources on the same topic by "googling" something, while years ago they would have had to go to the library and read dozens of books. Because of the exponential rate at which our world is changing, we must examine our past beliefs and modify them accordingly to the world that surrounds us. One of such modifications is proposed by Tomonobu Imamichi in the aforementioned quote. Imamichi proposes that we need to change our motion of tolerance –and its importance- into a concept of "neutrality of thought". This modification has been triggered by the resurgence of a globalized world. Neutrality of thought differs from tolerance in many ways, which I shall briefly mention in the following essay. As always, regardless of the kind of world we live in, we need to examine our beliefs before we modify or strengthen them, and thus I shall examine whether it is really necessary to change our motion of tolerance. In the following essay I will first define tolerance and neutrality of thought, highlighting the differences and similarities between both concepts. I will examine the concept of neutrality of thought and the consequences it brings, using a method proposed by Immanuel Kant and a consequentialist view in order to determine whether neutrality of thought can be universally applicable. I shall then examine whether this change is really necessary.

Let us, then, first examine what tolerance has meant for the past hundred years. Tolerance has been greatly promoted as a virtue necessary in any civilized nation. Every civilization who wishes to thrive and prosper, we have determined, must promote tolerance. Tolerance, then, is the virtue of patience in regard to other persons' defective acts. Tolerance is found only in those people who are willing to endure another persons' flaws. This value has been a celebrated virtue ever since the ancient Greeks, and we have always taught our children to be tolerant to each other at the very least. Take, for example, two children who disagree about what class they should take first. In a society that promotes tolerance, we advise the children to discuss the issue and be willing to endure the other's opinion. By promoting tolerance, we would treat both children as individuals and prepare them to take a different class even if that meant they would be separated. Therefore, we can conclude that tolerance is the virtue of enduring the flaws of those around us.

Now, let us define what neutrality of thought, as proposed by Imamichi, is. Neutrality of thought is a modification of tolerance, a different concept that, Imamichi proposes, is implied within the ethical virtue of tolerance. Thus, neutrality of thought is merely a modification made upon our past concept of tolerance in the face of a technological world. Neutrality of thought is the allowance of different perspectives or opinions. At first it may seem to be close to what tolerance is, but neutrality of thought differs from this ethical value in numerous ways. Firstly, neutrality of thought is merely an attitude, whereas tolerance is an ethical virtue. Secondly, neutrality of thought implies that, instead of enduring our differences, we need to eliminate them in order to become neutral.

Let us apply neutrality of thought to the previously mentioned example of the two children and their classes. In a globalized world that requires neutrality of thought, we would tell the children to discuss their options and come up with one that would be applied for both of them. If the children were debating between Math and English, for example, we would advise both of them to take the same class, both of them attending either Math or English. We would, in conclusion, try to lead the children into neutrality. Thus, it seems like, whereas tolerance celebrates our differences and treats us as individuals, neutrality of thought attempts to eliminate those differences and treat us as a group or a community, disregarding individualism.

Now that I have examined both concepts and their differences, I shall look another necessary concept that Imamichi relies upon: the technological age. With the rise of the internet, among many other technological inventions, our world has changed drastically. This change has not been brought to us gradually but rapidly, throughout the course of merely a few years. Take, for example, a man, Todd, who was born in 1970 and his son, Josh, born in 2000. Imagine, now, that we were to give both of them the same assignment within the limitations of their times. Todd heads to the library, where he spends around three hours flipping through books and writing down his notes. Then he heads to a typewriter, which he uses for two hours while he types his essay and revises it. Altogether, Todd spent approximately five hours working on his assignment. Josh, on the other hand, spends around one hour skimming through the results on google and one hour typing his essay on his computer. Whereas Todd spent five hours on the assignment, Josh spent merely two, regardless of the fact that they lived merely thirty years apart. This is how rapidly and drastically our world has changed. In the face of such changes, Imamichi states that we need to modify your past beliefs. It seems that there is no logical way to refute the fact that our world has changed.

The idea that we need to change our past ideals does not seem revolutionary. After all, we have done it countless times before. An example of such a change is when we ceased to believe Earth was the center of the solar system and started to believe that the planets revolved around the Sun. Every time our world has undergone great changes we have undergone great changes ourselves. However, we must examine whether these changes or modifications we promote are really necessary or, if anything, beneficial to us all.

Let us examine neutrality of thought from an ethical point of view. Emmanuel Kant proposed that, when faced with an ethical dilemma, we must examine whether our proposal or our course of action could be universally applicable. I shall do exactly that, examining neutrality of thought by imagining its consequences. By doing this I will implement a consequentialist approach, deciding whether a plan is good based on its consequences. We must remember that Kant proposed that the course of action we are considering can only be implemented if it would be desirable for all of us and if it did not cancel the need for which we are proposing the option.

Suppose that we live in a technological society that, instead of promoting tolerance, promotes neutrality of thought. Neutrality of thought, like Imamichi proposed, seems to lead into an era of effective collaboration and political coexistence. But, as we have concluded before, neutrality of thought has also eliminated, in a way, our differences. Instead of discussing the different perspectives we are exposed to, we try to remain neutral, choosing one perspective for all of us. In this society, which celebrates neutrality of thought, two political parties are discussing the national budget available. One promotes the humanities, while the other promotes the sciences. The people who will vote for one of the parties need to decide which party they support, examining their own personal ideals and values. However, since this society does not promote tolerance but instead promotes

neutrality of thought, the voters are neutral. They can't decide which party they will support with their vote. Thus, we've encountered yet another consequence this concept: the inability to take a certain side. If we look at it by using Kant's method, we've found a key problem: neutrality of thought seems to be contradictory. Imamichi proposed neutrality of thought in an effort to give us a tool at our disposal in order to achieve effective collaboration towards a certain goal. Yet, when we implement neutrality of thought it seems to leave us indecisive, and it renders us useless in the search of the goal we desire. Because we cannot make a concrete decision, we cannot work towards the goal we had previously wanted. Thus, applying neutrality of thought seems to be contradictory to what we initially desired.

Democracy, the political system most countries rely upon, requires us to take action and to decide what we want for our future. So far, democracy has proven to be the most effective political system because, if it's implemented correctly, it distributes power equally. It is possible that in a technological age another political system could develop, but it seems far more likely that democracy will remain, based on the amount of countries relying and promoting it. In a democracy, the people vote for those they consider will do the most good with the power they're provided, but this requires the people to decide. A society that promotes neutrality of thought could, in a way, put us all in a daze in which, by wanting to remain as neutral as possible, we would not be able to decide upon a concrete opinion. And this consequence would not be visible only in politics. Even the slightest dilemmas, like choosing what shirt to wear, would dazzle us, and we would be unable to form a concrete opinion. Thus, we would be more easily manipulated.

Neutrality of thought seems to eliminate individualism. In a society that promotes neutrality of thought, we would all be forced to eliminate ourselves as individuals and seek to agree with those around us. Imamichi promotes neutrality of thought by pointing to the fact that it leads to political coexistence and effective collaboration, but he seems to completely disregard the fact that it also leads to manipulation. By wanting to appear neutral, a person changes his or her individual ideas and opinions, disregarding them in exchange for the communal opinions. This creates a rather fragile community in which people can be easily manipulated. For example, a power-hungry politician would need to only manipulate a certain group into submission, as the rest would follow in the search for neutrality. Let us, once more, use Kant's principle. Now, we must remember that Kant stated that in order for us to be able to implement a proposal, it needs to be desirable to all of us in the case that it is applied universally. Neutrality of thought, as we have previously proven, leads to manipulation. As humans, most of us desire to be independent individuals who can rely upon themselves. Thus, should neutrality of thought be applied universally, it would not be desirable for all of us, since it would violate our basic need for independence.

Using Kant's method, then, we have proven that neutrality of thought violates two basic requirements: it leads to indecisiveness and thus renders us incapable of achieving our goals, and it leads to manipulation, therefore creating a proposal that is not desirable for all of us. These two flaws seem to disaccredit the concept of neutrality of thought, but there are still more flaws in such concept. Neutrality of thought implies that, as people seek to be neutral, they lack the discussion that is otherwise put into important issues. People who yearn for neutrality of thought merely agree with those around them, without first examining what they're agreeing on. Discussion would be eliminated, along with the benefits from it. Constructive criticism seeks to identify key flaws in an argument or proposal, flaws that otherwise would not be identified. Without debate, proposals and arguments would be embraced without examination. This would have profound effects, like the assimilations of countless flawed concepts.

Now that we have considered whether neutrality of thought is viable with our society, let us examine whether it is necessary, like Imamichi proposes, in a technological age. Consider two of the many general guidelines most of us humans agree on: we must not murder each other and we must respect each other. These "laws" have been present within humanity for thousands of years and have served as the building blocks for numerous societies. Of course, not all humans follow these laws, but most of us agree they are necessary in order for us to thrive. Imamichi points to a "technological age" in which we must possess neutrality of thought in order for effective collaboration and political coexistence to exist. Looking at the technological world in which we live in and comparing it to the world that existed fifty years ago, we find that these fundamental laws remain. We still promote respect and the value of life. Thus, it can be concluded that while our world has changed, the ethical laws that we've used in order to determine what is right or wrong are still, at their very essence, the same. In the face of this conclusion, we must wonder: is it really necessary that we change one of the core virtues of our society?

A characteristic of the "technological age" that Imamichi points out is that information is accessible to us easily. A person in a country in South America, for example, can find out about an important event taking place in a country in Asia, all by merely looking something up in Google. As people who live in such an age, we are exposed to an exponentially greater amount of information than those before us, and Imamichi points to this wider exposure to make the claim that we need neutrality of thought in order to coexist. Yet we must consider what exactly has changed this past years. Besides some isolated acts or events, technology has not changed, at their very core, many of the events we are exposed to. We still find out about the election in a country, or a war in a certain region, but these events –among many others- existed before the rise of the technological world. What changed was that now we have a greater ability to be informed about these events. Thus, we can conclude that many of the virtues necessary before the rise of technology are necessary now. Tolerance seems to be as required –even more so- today as before because we are exposed to a greater amount of information. Neutrality of thought seems unnecessary, then. After all, what changed when we entered this "technological age" was our exposure to information, not its subject.

It is impossible to deny the fact that we live in a technological age. Over the past few years the amount of information to which we are exposed to has increased exponentially, changing the way we see our world and the way we examine, modify or strengthen our core beliefs. In the face of such technological age, Tomonobu Imamichi claims, we must modify our concept of tolerance, molding it into the concept of neutrality of thought. Tolerance has been a celebrated virtue for hundreds of years, promoting patience in regard of other people's flaws, while neutrality of thought, a fairly new concept, promotes the allowance of different perspectives. Neutrality of thought, however, seems to be a flawed concept, since its consequences include but are not limited to manipulation, indecisiveness and the lack of discussion about important subject matters. If we decide to use Kant's method and examine the effects of implementing neutrality of thought universally, we discover that this concept is flawed and could not be implemented universally for two reasons: it is contradictory and it is not desirable for all of us. It is also clear that neutrality of thought, regardless of the fact that a technological age cannot be refuted, is unnecessary, as the changes that our society has undergone in the process of becoming technological are not drastic enough to account for a change in one of our civilization's core principles. Thus, neutrality of thought, as Tomonobu Imamichi claims, is not necessary and is impractical.