What characteristics do tolerant individuals possess?

Tolerance involves not acting on one’s disapproval of a practice or value that one opposes. This definition allows that racists can be tolerant. Racists have offered arguments for racism, e.g. it is wrong to treat different races equally, because some races are inferior to others (and this claim is then backed up by some theory or other). So racists can disapprove of racial equality. But we don’t think of racists as tolerant people. There are three ways in which we could develop our understanding of tolerance so that racists are not tolerant, even if they don’t act on their racism.

RESPONSIBLE JUDGMENT

We make many value judgments without really thinking about them, without trying to justify them or understand other views. However, when we are reflective and still maintain our commitment to our own position, then our opposition to others is ‘responsible’. To be tolerant, we can say, our opposition must be responsible in this sense. Because a lot of prejudice is uninformed and irresponsible, most prejudiced people will not count as tolerant.

However, this allows that a thoughtful racist, or to change the example, someone who has thought carefully about homosexuality, but remains opposed to it on religious grounds, can count as tolerant.

This sounds right in a way. We may still want to claim that the person is prejudiced, but they are clearly not ‘merely’ prejudiced. Yet we may still want to say that their view is itself intolerant.

REASONABLENESS

So perhaps, to be tolerant, a person’s opposition must be ‘reasonable’ in the sense that it does not rest on irrational prejudice and hatred. Of course, responsible judgment will often uncover these irrational sources. But we need to add this condition, because even when people think about their beliefs and values, they are sometimes unable to see their irrational basis. What is needed is not that the person refrains from acting on their opposition to views, but that their beliefs and values themselves change.

One obvious difficulty with this suggestion is finding an account of what is ‘reasonable’, and being able to discover when disapproval rests on irrational prejudice. People are very good at ‘rationalizing’, giving reasons for their beliefs or values that do not depend on those reasons at all.
TOLERANCE AS A VIRTUE

In not trying to suppress those of whom they disapprove, racists are acting in a tolerant way. But this is not enough to say that they are genuinely tolerant. We can distinguish between tolerant behaviour and tolerance as a virtue.

With any virtue, we can act in accordance with the virtue but without being virtuous. For example, you can make a ‘generous’ donation to charity but without being a generous person – if the reason you made the donation was to impress someone. So someone can act in a ‘tolerant’ way without being what we would want to call a tolerant person.

We need to look at the kinds of reason a tolerant person gives for being tolerant. The racist who simply doesn’t want to get into trouble with the law, or thinks that the time is not yet right to expel all other races from the country, is not tolerant. The truly tolerant person thinks it is right – for moral or political reasons – not to act on their opposition to the views of others; and this is why they restrain themselves. Why it is right to be tolerant, people may disagree about. As examples of the relevant types of reason we may think of respect for others (moral) or a commitment to live peacefully with others (political).

COMPARING ACCOUNTS

If someone is genuinely tolerant, do we also need to say that their opposition must be responsible? Perhaps not. We needed to appeal to that condition to characterise ‘tolerant’ behaviour when the person wasn’t tolerant. But if the person is motivated by moral or political reasons to restrain themselves, then perhaps that is enough to say that they are tolerant even if their opposition is not ‘responsible’. There are, after all, many positions that we oppose but have not had the time to investigate and understand (very few people understand all the world’s major religions) but we are disposed not to try to suppress them.

If this is right, then what is wrong with prejudice is not so much that it is irresponsible – though this is not a good thing! – but that the prejudiced person rarely accepts moral or political reasons for not acting on their prejudice. Prejudice usually undermines the ability to recognise reasons for tolerance, at least in this case. For example, suppose respect for others is a reason for tolerance. Prejudice involves a lack of respect for others; so the prejudiced person will not restrain their actions on the basis of respect.

So the tolerant individual refrains from acting on their opposition to other people’s views on the grounds that they thinks it is morally or politically right to refrain.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TOLERANCE

We have argued that tolerance is not restraint for any reason, but involves thinking it is right to restrain oneself in this way. This leads to a puzzle: If someone believes it is right to restrain themselves, do they remain motivated to suppress others’ views? Does a really tolerant person accept, rather than oppose, different views? On the one hand, to be tolerant a person must oppose the other view; on the other, a tolerant person accepts other views.

We can resolve this tension by getting clearer on what we mean by ‘accept’. A person’s commitment to their own view involves the thought that they are not mistaken. A
commitment involves the rejection of alternatives; to this extent, there is opposition. And of course, they will argue for and defend their position. But if the reasons for tolerance are strong in their minds, their opposition may motivate them to do no more than this. Some tension between the reasons for toleration and the reasons that support their views may remain; and this is why they require tolerance. But in a very tolerant person, the level of mental conflict may not be great.

This explains why we sometimes think that a tolerant person ‘does not mind’ different practices, even though we also think that they must oppose them in some way. Tolerance, when it is most developed, does not just restrain one from acting on motivations stemming from opposition; as a commitment itself, it supplies motivations of its own which can, to an extent, undermine the original motivations that need restraining.

**WHO IS TOLERANT?**

The rest of this handout follows the handout on ‘Arguments for tolerance’. You should read that handout first.

Does a tolerant person have to be a liberal? Or is tolerance possible for people with strong moral or religious views, e.g. religious fundamentalists? If a fundamentalist can accept of the arguments for tolerance, then fundamentalists can be tolerant.

(We will focus just on whether illiberal religious fundamentalist could be tolerant. There can be liberal religious fundamentalists, viz. those that believe God endowed human beings with freedom, reason and autonomy, and gave everyone the duty respect these qualities. However, it is unusual for a fundamentalist to value autonomy higher than all other moral values.)

**Tolerant illiberals**

A fundamentalist is unlikely to accept the argument from fallibilism. Acknowledging doubt over whether what they believe is really the word of God is not a trait of fundamentalists. Nor is the argument from diversity likely to appeal – the best way to live is discovered through a sacred text or tradition, not through experiments of living. And fundamentalism understands morality to be objective, not subjective.

However, Locke’s argument that coercion is ineffective at changing people’s religious beliefs may well be a ground for tolerance. Fundamentalists usually aim at others coming to share their religious beliefs, but they may also believe that using social or legal sanctions will not achieve this. They may also believe, with Locke, that religious belief is only of value if it is arrived at freely. Finally, they may believe that there are moral restrictions on what one may do to bring others to believe – many religions show a respect for freedom of thought.

On the other hand, fundamentalists may be more concerned that people behave in accordance with God’s law. It is the practices, rather than the beliefs, of others they want to change. In this case, Locke’s argument is beside the point.

This leaves the arguments from reasonableness and from strife. These both present political reasons for tolerance. If we wish to live together peacefully, and we cannot
demonstrate, through reason and argument, that views different from ours are mistaken, then tolerance is necessary.

Many religions have traditions that support this line of thought – that spiritual knowledge is difficult, that individuals must find their own way to God through experience (while paying attention to tradition), and that a peaceful society is part of God’s plan for human beings. However, fundamentalists often think that what is morally required is clear; that individuals cannot be left to discover the truth for themselves, but need to be told; and (often) that human reason is both weak and sinful, which is why the truth lies in revelation.

If reasonableness is unpersuasive, the argument from strife still stands. Fundamentalists (and others with strong moral and religious views) can draw a distinction between an ideal society – in which the laws of God or morality are reflected in society’s laws – and the kind of society we can realistically expect. If an attempt to transform society as it is into an ideal society would lead to conflict and suffering, e.g. because of pluralism, they may advocate tolerance. This position remains distinct from liberalism, because it retains the view that an ideal society would be one in which a particular conception of the good is enshrined in law.

Cultural membership and intolerant liberals
In a liberal society, with its emphasis on autonomy, reasonableness, and tolerance, attempting to impose one conception of the good on others will not succeed. If this is the reason a fundamentalist is tolerant, must they be part of a liberal culture in order to be tolerant? Suppose they live in a society in which God’s law is, or can be made, the basis of law, e.g. if society adopts Islam’s sharia law. Can someone who is part of such a society be a tolerant individual?

Just because someone lives under sharia law does not mean that they approve of it. They may, on the grounds of tolerance, advocate that it is repealed precisely because it is one conception of the good. But what of someone who approves of the rule of sharia law, living in a culture that also approves?

Whether someone is tolerant depends on how they respond to those who disagree with them. If someone approves of a culture that imposes its conception of the good on its members by social and legal sanctions, whether or not they accept this conception, then that individual cannot be called tolerant.

For all of us, our identity is partly defined by the culture to which we belong. In a liberal society, united by a particular understanding of individual autonomy that contrasts it with tradition, liberals struggle with how to respond to practices that appear not to respect individual autonomy, and cannot understand how individuals who take part in such practices could do so autonomously. Three contemporary examples: arranged marriages; in Islam, women wearing clothing that signifies and protects modesty (whether it is the headscarf or the burka); and female circumcision. If a liberal argues that we should outlaw all such practices, this could be argued to be an intolerant response. Tolerance would recommend allowing such practices to exist where individuals choose to continue them.
TOLERANCE, LEAVING OTHERS ALONE, AND OFFENCE

Tolerance does not involve ‘leaving others alone to think and do as they please’, as the syllabus suggests. For example, Mill says that we can still argue, entreat, and remonstrate with people who seem to live in a way that we think is damaging them. We must, however, not attempt by any other means than persuasion to prevent them from lead their lives as they see fit.

Will a tolerant person try to avoid being offensive? Tolerance involves respect for the other. And giving offence is often considered a mark of lack of respect. Not all tolerance, of course, is motivated by respect (we have seen other arguments). However, if a tolerant person is tolerant because they believe it is right to respect other points of view, then they will be motivated to avoid offending others.

There will, however, be a limit to this. Suppose someone believes that homosexuality is an unnatural perversion. They may take offence at anyone simply declaring support for homosexuality. Does this mean a tolerant person shouldn’t declare such support? No, because it is intolerant to require people not to express their views. So while a tolerant person will avoid unnecessary offence, out of respect, they need not give up expressing views which may cause offence to others.