

What is tolerance?

This introductory handout aims to provide a working understanding of the concept of tolerance with which we can then tackle the issues raised in the syllabus.

WEAK AND STRONG SENSES OF ‘TOLERANCE’

Let us start with an obvious point – that tolerance requires difference. We can only tolerate practices, or values, or beliefs of other people when these differ from our own. (Throughout this handout, I shall talk of tolerating ‘views’. By this, I will mean beliefs, values, and practices.) It doesn’t make sense to talk of ‘tolerating’ what we agree with. In everyday language, we say someone is tolerant if they are happy to let other people live as they choose – ‘live and let live’. But we can respond to what is different in a variety of ways.

Someone can not care how other people live – this doesn’t sound like tolerance; or they can not object to how other people live – this is a weak sense of ‘tolerance’; it is weak because if they don’t mind, how are they ‘being tolerant’?; or in a stronger sense of ‘tolerance’, the fact that the other person’s view is different matters to them – because their own views, e.g. in religion or morality, matter to them.

In the strong sense of tolerant, we only tolerate what is different and important to us. Take the example of vegetarians who think it is wrong to eat meat disapprove of eating meat. They oppose meat-eating. Vegetarians who don’t try to rid the world of meat-eaters tolerate the practice of eating meat. But meat-eaters for whom eating meat is not a moral issue, who aren’t opposed to vegetarianism (though they don’t want it imposed on them), don’t tolerate vegetarians. They simply don’t mind them.

To tolerate is not, for instance, to welcome or embrace; it suggests that what is tolerated is problematic somehow. If the difference of view does matter, a person stands in opposition to the different practice or value. This opposition may mean we want to suppress it, but toleration means that we do not try to do so. From now on, we shall talk of tolerance meaning ‘in the strong sense’.

OPPOSITION

If tolerance involves opposition, what kind of opposition? Is mere dislike enough? Suppose I dislike instant coffee, and would like it to be banned to stop people offering it to me; am I being tolerant by not lobbying for it to be banned? This seems to trivialise the idea of tolerance. But on the other hand, suppose how your friend dresses annoys or embarrasses you, but you remain good friends and don’t try to change them – is this tolerance?

If tolerance is just about dislike, then a racist who simply doesn’t like people of other colours, but who doesn’t act on his racism, is tolerant. This doesn’t sound right; isn’t a

tolerant person not a racist in the first place? The racist sounds more self-controlled than tolerant. Is this true of the embarrassed friend as well?

Perhaps tolerance depends not on mere dislike, but disapproval. What we merely like and dislike we take to be a question of taste, something which can quite legitimately differ from one person to another, and which we can't support by giving objective reasons and arguments. If I like turnips and you don't, neither of us is wrong about whether turnips taste nice. But disapproval is, or should be, based on reasons. Disapproval is based on thinking that one's one view is justified, while the different view is not; it is not simply a question of taste. This explains the way differences of view matter to us.

Restraint and power

We should make explicit two further conditions that have been implicit in the discussion. Because tolerance involves restraint, the person must take themselves to be able to do something about the practices or values they oppose. In other words, they must have some power; we cannot tolerate that which we cannot influence – we can only resign ourselves to it. Second, and obviously, in tolerance, the person refrains from exercising this power.

DEVELOPING THE ANALYSIS

Tolerance (in the strong sense) involves not acting on one's disapproval of a practice or value that one opposes. This definition still 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 racism can disapprove of racial equality. There are three ways in which we could develop our definition 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.

This helps to explain the link between the weak and strong senses of tolerance. A tolerant person does not mind or oppose different views that they have no good reason to oppose. When they do oppose other views, their opposition is not unreasonable.

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 think it is morally or politically right to refrain.