

WHY MERELY TOLERANCE?

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ABSTRACT. *Why Merely Tolerance?* The present paper discusses two possible responses to ethical pluralism. Starting from the premise that there exists a multitude of irreducible moral values, the paper analyzes two of the possible responses to this fact, namely ethical promiscuity and tolerance. The first one, as defined by Ivanhoe, promises to outdo tolerance and to solve the insufficiencies of the latter. However, the paper analyzes the main claims and arguments in favor of ethical promiscuity, putting in light the fact that this view does not actually manage to deal with the problem of clashing and mutually excluding moral values.

Keywords: *ethical pluralism, ethical promiscuity, tolerance*

In a world aiming for multiculturalism, pluralism and equality, tolerance does not seem the right ideal when conflicts arise. On the contrary, tolerance has been “unmasked” by different thinkers as a solution that supports power relations. Among those, Derrida¹ claims that tolerance is a mask of violence for some relations based on power which legitimates the superiority of one side. Hence, there is a multitude of voices that propose solutions meant to outdo the insufficiencies of tolerance. One of those is the ideal of ethical promiscuity, brought about by Ivanhoe. This paper comes as an answer to Ivanhoe’s arguments supporting the ideal of surpassing toleration by ethical promiscuity. The aim of this paper is to show that tolerance, understood as the decision to respect someone whose way of life and principles one disapproves of, based on the capacity of seeing the human value of the other,² is a more viable response to ethical pluralism than ethical promiscuity, even though the latter seems to solve some of the insufficiencies of tolerance.

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¹ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstrucția politicii*, Idea Design and Print, 2005, Cluj, p. 134.

² Yirmiyahu Yovel, “Tolerance as Grace and Rightful Recognition” in *Social Research*, Winter 1998, 65. 4, p. 909.

Hence, the first part of this article makes a short summary of Ivanhoe's main arguments, while the second part analyzes two of them and points to their weaknesses. The paper ends by putting in light some of the reasons why I believe tolerance is a better and more realistic response to ethical pluralism than the proposed ethical promiscuity.

Ivanhoe's Ethical Promiscuity

In an article entitled "Pluralism, Toleration and ethical Promiscuity", Ivanhoe argues in favor of the idea that we "should embrace ethical promiscuity – a view that not only acknowledges ethical pluralism but also offers good reasons to celebrate this state of affairs".³ He starts from the premise that there is an irreducible variety of ethical values, and wants to draw attention that this fact alone is not sufficient. But there needs to be a discussion about the significance of this ethical pluralism and the response to it. Faced with the reality of ethical pluralism, he notes that people have three possible response: to bemoan it, to be indifferent or to celebrate this diversity, by which he means "to see and welcome it as a good thing".⁴

He also claims, that while tolerance is one of the most commonly recommended responses to moral pluralism, just the simple avoiding of an unjustified war is not the best option to hope for or defend. It must be mentioned that tolerance, in this respect, is defined as an "uncritical acceptance of a range of competing and mutually irreconcilable values or forms of life". In change, he argues for ethical promiscuity, claiming that this warrantees for a "morally better life". Before forging ahead in his arguments, I will bring into attention the definition he gives to ethical promiscuity. As compared to tolerance, which carries a sense of "bearing opposing points of view", the new concept "argues for a more demanding response, one that celebrates ethical diversity as an important feature of good human lives".⁵

The author continues by explaining that this ideal of ethical promiscuity relies upon two supporting claims. The first one is simply the acknowledgement of ethical pluralism as a fact. The second is the "recognition that no single human life or culture can realize all of the values that are possible for creatures like us". And this includes "attitudes, actions and states of affaires that play a central role in the well-being of human beings", which includes issues relevant to personal welfare as well as interpersonal relationships.⁶

³ Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Pluralism, Toleration and Ethical Promiscuity" in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 37, No. 2, January 2009, pp. 311–319.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 312.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 314.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 314.

There is no need to dwell upon the first of the claims as this is widely accepted. Nevertheless, the second claim is the one that raises problems and questions.

“The richness of each human lifestyle” argument

In order to clarify what he meant by the statement that “no single human life (...) can realize all of the values that are possible (...)”, he goes on by explaining that a business woman will never understand the experience of a military, and vice-versa. Yet, they could come and appreciate what is valuable in the other. And this is the kind of “recognition and appraisal respect at the heart of ethical promiscuity”.⁷

The problem with these examples is that they do not involve a moral problem. They do not have an ethical dimension, but rather a cultural one that does not require any relevant moral judgment. What I mean by that is that the mere fact that the business woman has a completely different life experience than the military does not cause any of them to be inclined to judge the other as doing something wrong. There is no relevant moral judgment involved here or, in Habermas’ words, “the cognitive difference must be a meaningful response here. Tolerance can only come to bear if there are legitimate justifications for the rejection of competing validity claims”.⁸ That is to say, there is no right or wrong in having any of these lives. But what would remain of Ivanhoe’s argument if the different lifestyles in question are that of being a non-drinking father supporting the ideal of having a life-time partner and a family, on the one hand, and an alcoholic man having no regard to the value of a family or loyalty to his wife. Of course, none of these two men could possibly experience, at the same time, the richness of the experiences of the other lifestyle. But can there be a mutual respect here? Can the first man actually respect the other’s decision that more or less directly harms the wellbeing of some children? I believe the real problem about tolerance arises when it is about mutually exclusive ethical and life values. To give another example, though zoophilia is a legal practice in Canada,⁹ that does not mean that it can make a lifestyle that can gain the respect of the Christians who believe the Bible explicitly condemns it. These are issues larger than a mere different lifestyle. It is about clashing values. This is where the question of tolerance comes as the only possible solution.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 311

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights”, in *Philosophy*, Vol. 79, no. 307 (Jan. 2004), p. 10

⁹ A Canada Supreme Court ruled that the crime of bestiality only applies to sexual penetration, and not other sexual acts between people and animals, Read more at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/canadas-supreme-court-ruling-on-sex-acts-with-animals-exposes-weak-bestiality-law-165080/#GtI5vpIfqRKerCb.99>. (accessed on July 6, 2016).

Sam Harris rightly notes that to tell a devoted Christian or Muslim (and others too) that what he believes is merely a social or cultural construct or just one truth among others, it simply means to reduce the intensity and complexity of their beliefs to match some postmodern view of the world. But that will not change the exclusivism of their beliefs. In his own words, Harris notes that, “the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed”.¹⁰ He goes on by explaining that “many religious moderates have taken the apparent high road of pluralism, asserting the equal validity of all faiths, but in doing so they neglect to notice the irredeemably sectarian truth claims of each. As long as a Christian believes that only his baptized brethren will be saved on the Day of Judgment, he cannot possibly “respect” the beliefs of others, for he knows that the flames of hell have been stoked by these very ideas and await their adherents even now”.¹¹

Of course, one might find citing from Harris at odds with my intentions, as Harris argues against the possibility of tolerance itself. Nevertheless, I think this serves my purpose in that he makes a realistic remark about what believing means for different groups of people, putting in light the fact that not everyone in this world can suppress his beliefs to reduce them to a merely lifestyle void of any metaphysical truth. Hence, the “high road of pluralism, asserting the equal validity of all faiths” is not a realistic option for any of those that would fit to Harris’s category of those who “really believe”.

Regarding Harris’s claim that “intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed”¹², I need to depart my view from his. When he talks about tolerance, it comes clear that the definition of tolerance that he uses is similar to that of pluralism, namely an acceptance of all points of view as equally valid. Hence, a respect for all of them. D. A. Carson¹³ and Josh McDowell¹⁴ refer to this understanding of things as “the new tolerance”, compared to the old understanding of tolerance as the acceptance of the existence of different points of view. In the context of Ivanhoe’s article, that would be the acceptance of ethical pluralism as a fact. But before forging more into Ivanhoe’s apology, I must add one more argument in favor of the traditional understanding of tolerance. The new tolerance implies an equal respect for all points of view. The problem is the one’s personal identity is so strongly infused with what one believes

¹⁰ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, Norton & Company, NY, 2004, p. 13.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 2012, p. 3.

¹⁴ Josh McDowell, Bob Hochstetler, *Noua toleranță*, Editura Aquaforte, Cluj, 2006.

or does that it is almost impossible to where one is from what one does/believes. Therefore, somehow the accent on respect has moved from the person to the lifestyle. Yet, I want to draw the attention to the fact that the person longs for respect, not for the idea. Thinking of Taylor's explanation of the process and struggle for identity that each one goes through,¹⁵ one can easily see that the ideas and lifestyle one embraces is only a tool in this process of the "making of the self". Yet, even denying the moral validity of one's lifestyle is not a hinder in this process, but rather a natural step in this process.

I added these observations to show that there is a significant difference between what one is and what one does. There is a Christian saying that God hates sin while He loves the sinner. This line of folkloric wisdom draws to my point. Those who make no distinction between what one is and what one does will face a serious problem when faced with simple situations of life, such as a child lying. Supposing that the parent believes lying is an abominable attitude, will the parent hate his child because he lied, or can he hate the fact that he/she is lying while still loving the child? Or, regarding more mediatized stereotypes, like some anti-catholic phrases accusing the church of hating gays because it does not agree to the practice of homosexuality. To make this point, Jenkins cites Signorile, a leading figure in supporting gay ideology and rights, who has argued that the Pope's moral and intellectual position constitutes violence in its own right: the Vatican believes that "homosexuality is 'evil' and 'intrinsically disordered,' terminology that in my view amounts to gay-bashing".¹⁶ This is a relevant example to emphasize that the confusion between a lifestyle and a person leads to logically unacceptable conclusions. A discussion could develop from here, whether this new tolerance is actually leading to denying free speech, and even freedom of consciousness? Is this going to turn into another version of Orwell's memorable "all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others"?¹⁷ That is to say, everyone has the right to freedom of thought and of speech, unless they speak against some minority group lifestyle? In a well-documented work, Jenkins makes a convincing argument enumerating and analyzing numerous cases of how the American society is sensitive to all types of stereotypes except for those against the catholic church, rightfully calling it "the last acceptable prejudice".¹⁸

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 35.

¹⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The new anti-catholicism: the last acceptable prejudice*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 100.

¹⁷ George Orwell, *Animal Farm. A Fairy Story*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009, p. 192.

¹⁸ Philip Jenkins, this is the purpose of his book: the new anti-catholicism: the last acceptable prejudice.

There is a point for which Ian McEwan, in his discourse at Dickinson College,¹⁹ feels like encouraging graduating students to consider “the precious gift of being offended”.

The “good forms of life” argument

Going back to Ivanhoe’s development of the argument in favor of ethical promiscuity, after several pages, he subtly adds to his definition the notion of “good forms of life”. And this is where ethical promiscuity finds great value. However, there is no criteria given by which one can decide what is a “good form of life” and what is not. Adding to it, in the conclusions, he explains that ethical promiscuity (as different from relativism), “rejects some values and forms of life as repugnant and is just as capable as any other ethical stance of criticizing individual practices within a given form of life”.²⁰ Of course, the logical question is under what criteria? If each person continues to decide what they find good or bad in other life forms from their own perspective (be that a religious or a cultural biased perspective), the natural response would be that they will appreciate the different lifestyles that do not involve mutually exclusive moral values; but what would they do when something is found to be repugnant? Respect that per se? Respect the person despite that? Merely tolerate?

In favor of tolerance

It seems like a great deal of the critics of the concept of tolerance are eager to replace it with some better looking ideal. But what happens when that ideal finds its limits? Many of its critics simply mistake it for a generalized attitude towards everything and everyone translated into some sort of power relation. Yet, there is also a good deal of thinkers who argue it only makes sense to talk about tolerance when there is some sort of an irreducible conflict. For example, in “Justifying tolerance”, the two authors show that to talk about tolerance implies that there is an offense.

¹⁹ Ian McEwan, “Defend Free Speech”, discours ținut la Dickinson College, mai 2015.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/ian-mcewan-dickinson-college_n_7308314.html.

²⁰ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *op.cit.*, p. 325.

One has the power to respond to that, or to somehow suppress that but decides not to, by a matter of free choice.²¹ And there tolerance is the attitude that decides to value a person despite, or regardless of that conflict. Andrew Jason Cohen²² makes a relevant analysis of the concept of tolerance, showing what it is not. And he clearly separates tolerance from indifference, resignation or even a principle of noninterference that would hinder rational dialogue. Therefore, a life lived by the principle of tolerance rather than ethical promiscuity does not involve being indifferent to a great richness that cultural diversity can offer. Yet, it does leave one the possibility to stick to one's inherited or chosen values, not merely for the sake that they are just as good or valid as all the others, but rather, in the case of moral values, for the sake of the truth value that one might assign to their own worldview.

Conclusions

To conclude with, I will summarize the three reasons that show that tolerance is a more viable solution to conflicting world views than ethical promiscuity.

First of all, tolerance is a way of dealing with clashing moral values which allows one to respect a person for their human value, despite their moral values. And tolerance refers to situations of clashing moral values. To say that one is tolerant does not mean one is indifferent to the richness offered by the diversity of a multitude of lifestyles.

Secondly, tolerance does not depend on what the other believes, and does not bring into discussion any vague criteria of what one could celebrate or not, as it has to do with one's humanness – an intrinsic value to every person, not specific beliefs or lifestyles.

Finally, tolerance can cope with accepting the other while not requiring to bracket one's own worldview. That is to say, tolerance does not put impossible requirements for those who are devoted to an exclusivist worldview, which is not an insignificant part of the population of this Globe.

²¹ Vernon Richard, LaSelva Samuel V., "Justifying Tolerance" in *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 1984, pp. 3–23.

²² Andrew Jason Cohen, "What tolerance is" in *Ethics*, Vol. 115, No. 1 October 2004, pp. 68–95.

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