

## TEACHING TOLERANCE AMIDST DISAGREEMENT

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Whenever we get a group of parents, teachers, and administrators together, we are apt to hear concerns about how students treat each other and their teachers and about the type of treatment they receive in turn. The popular press and presidential candidates lament the apparent loss of common values and the heightened sense of dissension. Although we are quick to express our fears, we are often reluctant or unable to articulate a reasonable response to the resultant moral anxiety.

It is hard to know where to begin. Concerned educators and other citizens regularly find themselves asking how we can educate children to be knowledgeable, productive, and the kind of people with whom others would want to live. Teachers struggle with how to balance competing claims for their time and resources, and they wrestle with how to respond to the seemingly inevitable disagreement that accompanies those claims. What do we do with the disagreement? What should we teach our students about disagreement when many find it increasingly difficult to even discuss (let alone resolve) conflict?

It strikes me that part of our uncertainty lies in confusion about what it means to be tolerant. This is a critical issue for at least two reasons. First, tolerance plays a pivotal role in many of the contentious debates currently facing education (e.g., the nature and role of multiculturalism). And secondly, tolerance is a key component of any viable ethical theory. Without a defensible understanding of tolerance, an ethical theory cannot withstand philosophical scrutiny. Given these criteria, let me sketch one view of tolerance and its relationship with disagreement. In the process, I will suggest what this might mean for schools and those persons in them.

## On Difference and Tolerance

I view education as a vehicle for ensuring equality and eradicating discrimination on the basis of non-relevant criteria. Like many others, I regard education as social transformation, and I envision a time when certain debates that currently rack the body politic will be viewed solely from a historical perspective. Now I am aware of my optimism here; consequently, when I ponder the relationship between disagreement and tolerance I am compelled to consider the state of things now and not as I hope they might be. The driving question then is what tolerance must resemble today—just which interpretation of it works best—so that a more salutary future is possible. Consider the following characteristics of tolerance.

Tolerance is born of neither ignorance nor insecurity, nor is it the product of indifference. To tolerate a practice or belief we find innocuous or irrelevant cannot count as an act of toleration. To say that we tolerate broccoli or polyester is silly, just as it is foolish to say that we tolerate something we wholeheartedly endorse. For tolerance to operate, there must be disagreement and the issues under debate must matter to the quarreling parties. Tolerance contains as a constituent the presumption of error, and it is characterized not by one's sympathetic acceptance of seemingly indefensible or offensive ideas or practices but by one's willingness to temporarily endure them. If tolerance requires that the things about which we argue are important, then it cannot imply disinterest.

As importantly, it also cannot mean the desire to nonchalantly adopt another's ideas or practices. It is meaningless to say we tolerate something we might readily accept. Since tolerance contains an implicit presumption of error, I tolerate your beliefs or behaviors because I cannot now convince you of your error.

Now there is a tension here. Tolerance presumes error, but all ideas held strongly enough to warrant tolerance by another also contain the implicit desire to proselytize.<sup>1</sup> (Any ideal that I claim demands protection from your biases is one I would desire you also to

hold.) I desire this result because ideals are objects of rational assessment (even if the reasons are ultimately shown to be invalid). It is the aberrant person who replies, "Just because!" when asked why she favors reproductive choice or why he rejects affirmative action. Adults in possession of their faculties are more likely to give reasons for their respective positions, for by concurring with me you validate my position and extend my ideological community.

In this context, nonholders adopt a position because they become convinced of the apparent truth of another's ideas. This adoption transpires because the speaker has offered sound reasons why the nonholder should accede, and, though the reasons vary greatly, no serious holders willingly argue that their ideals are merely arbitrary or erratic constructions. Moreover, if the reasons offered were petty or capricious, then not only would they not warrant tolerance (since tolerance connotes things that matter), but a decision to adopt would be equally vacuous.

Although the possibility of adoption exists, the more likely response (at least initially) between disagreeing parties is one of reservation. Although both parties would like to believe that they could draw the other into line, each may have to be satisfied that his/her antagonist listen. If in this setting adoption is unlikely even though the freedom to argue one's position is explicit, then the most the speaker can hope for is that the other will come to see that portions of my argument are reasonable. While I might accept your mere acquiescence on this point, true vindication comes when you grant that something of what I say makes sense or warrants serious consideration. Tolerance operates when you take me seriously, and it can only happen if you are sincere in your attempt to understand what I am saying. The essence of tolerance, then, is not freedom but understanding.

If tolerance is simply conceived of as the right to think whatever one chooses, then it is insipid. I am not asserting that what one can and does believe is unimportant, or that one's thinking does not

color one's perception of the world. However, the protection of thought alone is inadequate, for as William James noted, belief is measured by action.<sup>2</sup> This action may be in the form of speech—but only speech of a certain type. The speech must be intelligible to listeners and must make certain claims on them. It must motivate to action or provoke a response from both the speaker and the listener. If it fails to do so, it lacks both the nonholder's implicit critique and the believer's impetus to proselytize; it is, therefore, ineligible for tolerance. Thought and speech incapable of evoking a reaction cannot be our focus.

It is unarguably true that tolerance should protect one from coercion and violence based solely on one's convictions, but there are certain things this proposition cannot mean. Few would even attempt to argue that tolerance connotes the abuse of liberty, and even the most permissive societies have not conflated tolerance with license. Although tolerance dictates a certain freedom of action, we know that every society constrains speech and deed—even those forms not deemed licentious or treasonous. Our courts have regularly ruled that certain statutory prerogatives supersede the rights of believers (religious and otherwise). One could safely argue that actions born of conscience must first meet the condition of no decisive harm to the state before they will receive lasting judicial or legislative assurances of tolerance. Tolerance is too circumscribed if restricted to the freedom to act.

So when we approach the issue of tolerance pragmatically and historically, it cannot mean the freedom to think, the freedom to speak, or the freedom to act. Although each of these liberties represents a fundamental societal good, once we acknowledge the marked limitations on their practice we see that they cannot denote tolerance's scope. To permit tolerance to be so narrowly defined would ultimately relegate it to protecting only irrelevant or nonthreatening differences. If tolerance is to hold our ethical and political attention, it must risk more.

A relevant tolerance that admits notable limitations on personal freedom is best confined to the dialogue of disagreement. Persons must be taken seriously and must view others in like fashion for such a conversation to proceed. They must speak of differing ideas in an environment colored by the presumption of error and the drive to proselytize. Their topics must be substantive and their ideas must make claims on the other, and always resident in this exchange is the possibility of adoption. However, these conditions—and hence tolerance—are not possible without a structural commitment to understanding.<sup>3</sup>

This commitment requires that we eschew practices that restrict understanding. This condition means that we must reject attempts to silence or isolate. The silence comes from avoiding (or confining) the discordant voices out of fear that their error may cause conflict, or (as threatening) that they may push us to reevaluate our own belief system. Isolation emerges from a social acquiescence that permits the proliferation of debatably distinct groups, each with vocal demands for recognition. Here, one may be told, “Since you are not one of us, we simply can’t understand each other.” From the standpoint of understanding, neither approach is viable.

Now what does all this mean when we think about students, educators, and the social climate in which they interact? If persons take the meaning of tolerance seriously, their behavior should differ from that expected by popular culture. Popular culture tells us that conflict is to be avoided at all costs. Tolerance tells us that some things are worth arguing about.<sup>4</sup> Popular culture tells us that we behave admirably when we simply do not care about difference. Tolerance says that although indifference about many things is desirable, true tolerance is concerned with matters that persons find vitally important. Popular culture asserts that tolerance is the equivalent of endorsement. Tolerance correctly notes that its intent is critique and understanding. Popular culture suggests that if we should disagree we must either remain silent or associate only with like-minded persons. Tolerance counters that the need for conversation is

greatest with those with whom we disagree. Tolerance ultimately tells us that our goal is not to escape confrontation but to engage the other.

### Contending with Disagreement

Although the notion of tolerance as understanding may seem quite plausible, the thought that disagreement is an integral part of that tolerance may strike many as peculiar. Most of us find disagreement stressful, and schools devote considerable energy to holding this form of conflict in check. What, then, could possibly be gained from promoting it?

What is needed at this point is an example of tolerance at work along with parameters of its use. It is fitting that I select the hard case of the hypothetical dogmatist for exploring tolerance as understanding and for considering the obligations ideological rivals owe each other if tolerance really matters.<sup>5</sup>

The critic may ask why anyone should feel compelled to understand or respond to the dogmatist. From personal experience, many of us sense that serious undesirable consequences may accompany a substantive challenge of such a person's beliefs. The critic may even assert that in a society that extols freedom of conscience, we should, at most, note the dogmatist's position but refrain from any response that may be construed as a threat—a position that could be defended with certain popular conceptions of tolerance. I have argued that tolerance however, entails critique, judgment, and dialogue. How do we accomplish them without denigrating the dogmatist or succumbing to some form of violence? Why must we respond, and if we are to respond, what might we say?<sup>6</sup>

One justification for engaging the dogmatist comes from the activity of education itself. Although education is concerned with information transmission and with preserving society by replicating a certain sort of citizen, it obviously is not limited to these goals. A more adequate description of education would include its role of teach-

ing students to discriminate between the reasons for choosing one idea over another. Moreover, we realistically expect that the nature and complexity of these reasons and the instances of such reasoning will become more sophisticated as students progress through the educational process.

The ability to identify “good reasons” represents a cornerstone of our conception of education, but as a justification it still lacks an explanation for why we should voice our good reasons. Some may assert that it is enough that we have such reasons—reasons that ultimately permit us to choose our own conceptions of a good life. Why should anyone be required to expose her reasons to scrutiny in the classroom or in a civic forum?

One reasonable reply is suggested by the work of Hannah Arendt. According to Arendt, although freedom in a democracy condemns coercion of belief, it also demands that one provide within the public sphere (e.g., the classroom, the school board, or the city council meeting) defensible reasons for actions. Further, the freedom implicit in democracy necessitates a public space within which these reasons can be articulated. For Arendt, however, the ensuing exchange is not limited to mere discussion where the respective points of view are simply displayed and then returned to a mental cupboard for safe-keeping. Rather, it entails a conversation whereby every participant’s thought could conceivably be altered by the argument of another.<sup>7</sup>

For one’s thinking to actually be altered by a conversation presumes certain things about the exchange. The requisite truth-telling cannot be limited to merely stating what one believes, for to do only this much is to settle for egocentrism. Participation in the public sphere requires that truth-telling extend beyond “what I believe” or “what the preeminent literature suggests” to include “why I think position X mistaken.” Unless this implicit challenge is raised, each party is permitted an unjustified confidence that she is in possession of the truth. In taking this additional step, the participant risks offending the holders of X and subjects herself to possible ridicule and

rejection. However, refusal to take this step precludes legitimate involvement in democracy and permanently relegates the speaker to the status of safe but noncontributing observer.

If Arendt is correct, as I believe she is, then a democracy requires that the hard issues be discussed and that every participant's views be held to review. This proviso means that even those in positions of power who sense that they must remain neutral to display their tolerance are compelled to address the controversial and seemingly irresolvable issues and to risk confrontation. Following an Arendtian logic, cowardice rather than a commitment to tolerance may explain one's choice of reflective silence over the prospect of conflict.

Just as important, it also means that instead of being exempt from discourse, the dogmatist is obliged to confront those with differing views. As with every person who holds that her ideals warrant tolerance, she enters this exchange intending to persuade, but the very nature of the public sphere dictates that she realize her position may be changed or clarified by such an encounter. It is only by entering the debate that she can obtain what she desires: tolerance for her potentially contrary views and an audience from which converts might arise. Further, it is only in forming arguments capable of withstanding the barbs of those with whom we disagree that our own ideas become clear and begin to take a shape that permits others to "try them on." Prior to this, they remain securely one's own, but they contribute little to social evolution or moral progress.

So what does this suggest for the classroom? It means that disturbing debates will occur more frequently and at all grade levels. It may mean that students will engage the issues of race, gender, and class: an engagement laden with emotion and personal history. They may need to openly struggle with the appropriate role of religion in their school and with the appropriate role of the school in their personal lives. However, it also means that rather than attempting to placate students embroiled in a pithy dispute, the teacher will use

student indignation and frustration and fear to construct a crucible from which understanding might emerge.

Although this approach may represent a lofty goal, we correctly view it as potentially dangerous. Each of us has been “wounded” by a student or colleague during some heated exchange, and we are understandably reluctant to endorse a model in which such maltreatment could become commonplace. Fortunately, the social context of disagreement need not be virulent, and there are several things we can do to keep this environment from becoming malicious.

We can begin by reminding our students (and perhaps our colleagues) that the exploration of ethics is and should be troublesome. Moral considerations weave their way throughout our relations with the world, and the seriousness with which persons engage the moral debate speaks to the crucial role of ethics in human experience. Beyond establishing that the task is often not easy, certain qualifiers for ethical discussion must be placed—restraints that apply to all participants. Three are essential.

The first is that the conversation must be undominated and free of coercion. This observation requires that all be permitted access to the debate as equals. It does not mean, however, that all moral stances are comparable or that any are immune from criticism. Within the public sphere, the equals may argue and may eventually conclude that a particular position is simply wrong.<sup>8</sup>

This orientation will also mean that we must be open to nondominant sources of moral data. The notion that students’ moral growth is enhanced by dialogue may prompt educators to pursue greater familiarity with the foremost voices of their students’ moral traditions or those of now-extinct traditions. This attitude will require study of frequently ignored sources, such as, original ideas embedded in, say, religious thought, foreign and multicultural history, the writings of iconoclasts, or the literature on ethnic and gender bias.

The second qualifier is that participants need to rethink the re-

lationship between information and debate. Most typically assume that the former precedes the latter: one must “know” before entering a conversation. Although it is trivially true that a blank slate cannot enter into discourse and that conclusions should be drawn from evidence rather than from baseless opinion, we shortchange ourselves and our counterparts if we remain silent until we have “the answer” and only then are willing to enter the discussion. What often occurs is that the perceived need for sufficient data translates into the conviction that one never has enough information to make an informed decision, to resolve a moral dispute, or to undertake moral action.

Students and their teachers must often engage in discourse before they have what they consider to be sufficient information, for what counts as sound reasoning often emerges from the conversation between persons immersed in a single, difficult question. In a circuitous manner, much of the necessary data comes from the debate itself. The history of great ideas confirms that works of consummate importance are seldom the product of single thinkers working in seclusion. More frequently, they result from ongoing dialogues between persons operating with less than the critical mass of factual material. Debate contributes much of the information required for debate, while it simultaneously inhibits the potential for dominated discourse.

This orientation may appear to denigrate factual knowledge, but such an impression is misguided. Its purpose is to assuage lay fears about “experts.” It is understandable that persons would experience a certain anxiety if they thought they could not participate in the public sphere unless they possessed the training and idiom of the authority. These concerns are allayed, however, when we remind all parties that equals debate and that the most complex ideas in any field can be communicated in ordinary language. No one need ask permission to speak.

As an extension of this point, the final qualifier is that language may not be used to preclude participation in debate. No participant

can make a case by relying upon arcane knowledge or a private language. Just as we would find it unacceptable if in the typical American classroom ethical discourse were undertaken only in Tagalog, so it is when use of a private language (an unfamiliar religious or political position or technical jargon) excludes equals from the conversation. If anyone dismisses a challenge by claiming that the critic lacks the insight or the information to which only the speaker is privy, then the speaker fails to make the case, and any argument won by sleight of hand (e.g., fallacious reasoning) or by mere acquiescence (“I’ll agree just so I don’t have to listen to you any longer.”) reflects coercion rather than persuasion.

Every party to the debate is required to give good reasons—reasons capable of persuading the critic. Although one could conceivably have the answer, it would be lost to one’s critics if one were unwilling to communicate in a language understood by all. The ability to persuade listeners that such reasons exist is dependent upon one’s willingness to enter into an honest, energetic, and undominated dialogue—simply asserting the truth is never enough.

Moral beliefs are objects of rational assessment, and persons generally insist that good reasons exist for them. If born of good reasons, these beliefs are subject to examination, and the holders are responsible for explicating to those with differing viewpoints why particular ideals are worth holding. This holding may require a certain “bilingualism” on the part of the speaker. If he is, say, a religious fundamentalist, he will need to “translate” his private reasons into a language that nonfundamentalists can understand. This move does not require him to disparage his religious language nor to disavow its content. It does, however, require that if he wants his moral reflections considered within the public sphere, he must make his reasons accessible.

Participation in a democracy requires finding a language whereby diverse parties can reach understanding. The nature of this language is not fixed and is, therefore, subject to evolution. This

public language could take the form of a shared moral pidgin (i.e., a narrow and rather superficial set of rules to guide public discussion). However, the results of social and linguistic intercourse over time and critical conversations among those who disagree may permit new levels of agreement, and this outcome reduces the need for the protection of purported diversity while it endorses a more complex set of common reasons.

Tolerance as understanding means that educators must welcome disagreement rather than search for ways to make contentious issues innocuous. Tolerance as understanding also means that we risk having our ideas altered by the thinking and experiences of others, and this qualification initially requires that all parties hold adamant views in suspense. Suspense does not require that we induce moral amnesia, however, for each agent's moral beliefs are subject to review. Given sufficient time and evidence, we likely will discover that some ideas are simply better than others.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion above is characterized by a certain confidence in human beings. I can imagine many readers responding that this account of tolerance "sounds good" but questioning its relevance for the schools. Others may note that certain questions remain unanswered: "How do we teach tolerance or the value of legitimate dialogue? "I see lots of talking; why do I see so little change?" "How do we ensure that the demand for honest disagreement isn't used to oppress minorities—"We the majority don't understand what you minorities are talking about, and until we do you'd best keep quiet!"

These are genuine concerns, and ones I have addressed in other contexts; however, they were not my focus here. Rather, my goals were to make the strong connection between disagreement and tolerance and to sever the popular association between avoidance of conflict and tolerance. To do so it was necessary to distinguish between mere talking and dialogue. Many mistakenly assume that the terms

are synonymous. When we make this mistake, we confuse talking at or talking past someone with actual dialogue, and consequently, we are continually disappointed when these forms of non-dialogue fail to make a difference. Finally, it is necessary to challenge the common belief that serious disagreement is permanent. Too many students and educators have resigned themselves to moral inaction because they have concluded that most problems are perennial and that no form of conversation can improve them. They argue that people today are just too different, and that their respective views of the moral world are simply incommensurable. From this position, a moral stance is either idiosyncratic or the product of one inconsequential community among many.

Now I am not so naive as to maintain that a properly conceived tolerance stands as a panacea for all the ills that society faces. However, by the same token, we must break free of the notion that Americans are special people dealing with altogether exceptional problems. Now although it is likely the case that particular peoples in particular eras have displayed distinctiveness, it is pathologically myopic to presume that we (in this time and place) are ethically and socially unique beings.

A history of the species quickly reveals countless similarities across cultures and time. Although this history is punctuated by often unimaginable ruthlessness, it also tells the story of innumerable, nonviolent contacts between fundamentally diverse peoples—contacts that altered all parties. The histories of ideas, of languages, of religions disclose the truth that humanity has been “fed by many streams.” With great regularity human beings have incorporated new ideas and practices while discarding others that their predecessors considered sacrosanct. In fact, the only way to guarantee that a culture or a tradition within it will remain fixed and permanent is to fully isolate it from all outside influences—a highly unlikely possibility in the world in which we live.

Despite the difficulty of the task and the many instances of hu-

man cruelty, students need to be reminded that it is not wishful thinking to believe that true dialogue and the resolution of significant problems remain real possibilities. Although it is true that the attribution of error may be related to intolerance, I have argued that there is no inevitable correlation between the two. Severe disagreement need not prompt violence or coercion. Tolerance with both an embedded critique of the other and the desire to proselytize can promote a non-violent conflict where "the arbitration of mind" is substituted for escapism or brutality.<sup>9</sup> Tolerance as understanding is not a second-best strategy for problem-solving, but perhaps the most fitting way of securing a dynamic balance between zeal and civility.

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### ENDNOTES

1. Proselytism is a strong term, but it is appropriate here. Where tolerance is operating we are not dealing with mere sentiments, we are typically contending with deeply held convictions born of our multiple connections and commitments to family, religious systems, and the community at large.
2. See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.) My argument is not intended to disparage the importance of freedom of belief. I willingly grant that attempts to constrain belief likely constitute acts of coercion and violence. James goes further and convincingly argues that constraining belief may be more than unethical. If you force me to deny the existence of X when X actually exists, you force me to be irrational.
3. Although it is true that certain ideologues would welcome the arrangement whereby we were required to understand them without reciprocity, liberal theorists are correct that free parties would never willingly enter into such an agreement. Tolerance requires a show of good faith. In the vernacular this is the oft-cited demand that one be "heard."
4. Note that I am not espousing an argumentative attitude for its own sake. There are many situations (weddings and funerals, for example) in which respect for persons dictates a particular civility. I am concerned here, however, not with decorum but with ethical/political dis-

course.

5. I have used the term “dogmatism” to connote an extreme ethical stance. It is necessary to distinguish this term from “absolutism.” As with skepticism and relativism, the distinction between absolutism and dogmatism is often lost, and the two are mistakenly seen as synonymous. We must expect, however, great diversity among absolutists, and their ranks may well include conservative religious groups, objectivist philosophers, certain Marxists, and curiously even some relativists who view their precepts as indisputable principles. Although the absolutist is often perceived as arrogant, intolerant, and uninterested in the evidence, it is worth noting that belief in objective, universal moral principles does not require that one embody these characteristics. The absolutist may be quite tolerant, and given the difficulty of securing an objective moral point of view, it is possible the absolutist will display conspicuous humility in light of potential fallibility.
6. I use the terms “we” and “they” solely for the purpose of explication. These (and related) terms have no inherent meaning. The meaning attributed to them is always contextual. Consequently, such meaning is never fixed. A member of one group (e.g., ethnic minority) may discover that he or she has become one of “them” (e.g., diverse citizens concerned about the portrayal of women in music videos) when conditions or interests shift.
7. See Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future (New York: Viking, 1961) and On Revolution (New York: Viking, 1965).
8. Let’s say, for instance, that one were to assert that children simply could not mature into moral and contributing members of society unless they received corporal punishment. We would have an obligation to discover the reasons for this view and the evidence used to support it. But when a review of the evidence revealed that physical punishment clearly was not necessary for such development, we could justifiably conclude that the initial claim was inaccurate. Now the speaker could continue to espouse the same mistaken opinion, but the listeners’ obligation to understand would already have been met. The more likely outcome (unless the speaker suffers from certain pathologies) is that the speaker will adjust his or her views in light of the new evidence or perhaps abandon them.
9. John Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1922), 300-301.