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# Tolerance: A Virtue? Towards a Broad and Descriptive Definition of Tolerance

Bart Engelen and Thomas Nys

Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and Universiteit van Amsterdam  
bart.engelen@econ.kuleuven.be  
T.R.V.Nys@uva.nl

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on the difficult issue of what exactly goes on when an individual tolerates something. It focuses on the problem of why an individual would ever choose to allow for some practice that he deems unacceptable while having the power to do something about it. After distinguishing between different attitudes (tolerant as well as intolerant), this article argues that individuals can have various reasons for deciding to tolerate what they deem wrong. As such, we defend a broad conception of tolerance, which goes against the grain of recent literature in which tolerance is generally understood as a virtue.

**I**N THE LITERATURE ON TOLERANCE there is a divide between those who conceive of it as a virtue, and those who do not. Although most of the contemporary authors on the topic are situated within the first camp,<sup>1</sup> we would like to team up with the second.

We deliberately aim to stay clear from the normative issues surrounding tolerance. Consequently, we have nothing to say about what should be tolerated and what not. Instead, we focus on the purely conceptual and explanatory issue of what exactly goes on when an individual tolerates something. Our aim is to reformulate the concept of tolerance by shifting the discussion from the normative level

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: “the concept of toleration I discuss is the strict or narrow one, namely, that which is distinguished from other types of restraint, like indifference or pragmatic compromise. (...). It focuses primarily on the ethical, rather than the political context, that is, on toleration as a virtue of individuals relating to other individuals” (Heyd 1996: 10).

(“should we tolerate?”) to the descriptive one (“can we tolerate?”). In this respect, we take the following definition of tolerance as a starting point: “the paradigm example of toleration is the deliberate decision to refrain from prohibiting, hindering or otherwise coercively interfering with conduct of which one disapproves, although one has the power to do so” (Horton 1998, 429-430).<sup>2</sup> This definition allows us to distinguish between three necessary requirements to speak of tolerance: the individual (1) finds a particular practice or action objectionable or even unacceptable (disapproval), (2) has the means to stop this practice (power) but (3) decides not to do anything about it (self-restraint).

Take the example of homosexuality. Our aim is to investigate what goes on when an individual decides to tolerate homosexuality. Applying the abovementioned definition, we tentatively claim that such an individual (1) disapproves of homosexuality but (3) decides not to interfere with the conduct of gays (2) even in cases where he has the means to do so.

Immediately, the question arises why an individual (3) would ever choose to allow for some practice if he (1) deems it unacceptable and (2) has the power to do something about it. The problem we want to address here lies in explaining how one is *able* to tolerate what one deems wrong.<sup>3</sup> Tolerating seems to be a remarkable attitude, since it is difficult to understand how one can allow for such practices if one genuinely objects to them. In search for a solution to this problem we will try to reframe the concept of tolerance by distinguishing various categories of behaviour. This classification is the result of a closer inspection of the abovementioned requirements for tolerance.

## I. Those who agree and those who don't care

If we concentrate on the first requirement then it is clear that people who experience no initial sense of objection cannot be labelled ‘tolerant’, even though they have the power to intervene and refrain from doing so. For those who wholeheartedly agree with a certain practice, there is no question of tolerating it. The idea that homosexuals are tolerant with regard to homosexuality is simply absurd. To tolerate originally means ‘to bear something unpleasant’ and if there is no resistance whatsoever—if there is no burden to bear—then ‘tolerance’ is nothing short of a misnomer.

Another possibility is that one is completely indifferent about a certain practice: one simply does not care whether it is performed or not. One neither disapproves of it, nor does one feel committed to defend it. To take our example, it is possible that

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<sup>2</sup> See also: “the core of the concept of toleration is the refusal, where one has the power to do so, to prohibit or seriously interfere with conduct that one finds objectionable” (Horton 1996, 28; see also Horton 1987, 521). Nevertheless, we defend a different view than Horton himself, who goes on to understand tolerance as a virtue. In contrast with this broad definition (which leaves open which reasons one might have for not interfering), he favours a narrower one: “of course, people’s reasons for showing restraint are crucial to identifying their conduct as being tolerant. (It is partly for this reason that I have serious doubts about a purely descriptive concept of toleration)” (Horton 1996, 39).

<sup>3</sup> This problem is situated at the conceptual level. In contrast, the bulk of the literature focuses on the normative paradox: why *should* one tolerate what one deems morally wrong? As will become clear, we aim to avoid this paradox by defining tolerance in morally neutral terms.

one does not care at all about the sexual preferences of gays (or heteros for that matter). Whether homosexuality is allowed or prohibited, a person who is indifferent will not intervene, since he simply does not feel involved. It has extensively been argued in the literature that such an attitude of indifference cannot be the basis of genuine tolerance (Mendus 1989, 8; Mendus 1992, 1251; Nicholson 1985, 162).<sup>4</sup> If tolerance is not to be sought with those who agree or those who couldn't care less (Forst 2001, 193; Horton 1998, 430), it should be sought elsewhere.

## II. Plain Intolerance

But first, let us exclude another possibility, namely the prototypical case of *intolerance*. Consider a person who objects to homosexuality and who tries his very best to purify the world from such 'repulsive' or 'unnatural' behaviour. He believes that homosexuals should be punished or that they should receive treatment for their 'illness'. When he sees homosexuals holding hands he will insult them or even use violence to put an end to such 'obscenities.' Let us call this *plain intolerance*.<sup>5</sup>

People who are plainly intolerant essentially put their foot down when they are faced with something they deem objectionable. If they believe something is wrong, they invariably react. They feel that they cannot let things pass. Consequently, they do something about it and use their power to prevent these things from happening. Although they clearly experience an initial sense of rejection, they obviously cannot be called tolerant since they do not fulfil Horton's third requirement (self-restraint).

However, it is clear that we all fit this description from time to time. Moreover, we often believe that we have good reasons for putting our foot down. Some practices are so abhorrent, harmful, insulting, annoying or wrong that we believe that we *should* interfere, or that it is even our *duty* to put an end to them.

Yet, leaving aside the issue when one should be intolerant and translate one's sense of rejection into action, we want to stress that, at a descriptive level, this type of behaviour is remarkably consistent. There are no mysteries here: these people just put their fists where their mouths are. Taking their values seriously, they consider deviant behaviour as an insult that should be properly avenged. While they might be criticized for their simple- and single-mindedness, they cannot be accused of inconsistency or hypocrisy.

Of course, the situation can occur that a person *wants* to put his foot down, but lacks the necessary means to do so (Horton 1998: 431; Meyer 2002: 550-551). His intolerance fails in that he is *unable* to do something about a certain practice he deems highly objectionable. Some people might be horrified by the very thought of

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<sup>4</sup> See also: "Normally, one cannot be tolerant of something if one is either indifferent to it or approves of it. Acting tolerantly characteristically implies some sort of negative attitude or judgment on the part of the tolerator—ranging from mere dislike to intense moral disapproval—towards that which is tolerated" (Horton 1998, 431).

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that someone who is plainly intolerant does not always perform physically harmful behavior. Someone who meticulously corrects every mistake in an informal letter is intolerant as well. What characterizes the plainly intolerant is that he translates his feelings of rejection into action. The distinguishing mark lies not in the way in which he reacts, but in the *fact* that he reacts. He takes his value system to be absolute and seeks to impose it on others.

homosexuality but might be unable to voice their disgust or contribute to the downfall of gays. Such people are condemned to allow what they deem wrong, simply because they do not have the power to intervene. Yet, since they do not fulfil Horton's second requirement (power), they cannot be labelled 'tolerant.'

### III. Tolerance?

Now let us move to those cases in which all three conditions are fulfilled. Consider a person who (1) experiences an initial sense of rejection when faced with homosexuality but (3) refrains from putting his foot down (2) even though he has the power to do so. Somehow he is able to overcome his sense of rejection and allow for a practice that he continues to regard as objectionable. Such a person is not persuaded that the practice at hand is alright. Instead, he constrains himself *despite* the fact that he has serious objections against it. While this distinguishes such a tolerant person from those who agree and those who don't care, it also gives rise to the problem we mentioned above. How is one able to refrain from interfering if one nevertheless believes that there are good reasons for doing so? Is tolerance not the pinnacle of hypocrisy?

In order to understand this we should accept that the tolerant person has reasons for allowing the practice that *override* his initial sense of rejection. What is tolerated is unmistakably rejected, but to interfere with that practice would be even worse. Hence we take Horton's definition to imply that a tolerant person withholds his true beliefs from being translated into action on grounds of overriding reasons. Such a person does not stand up for his beliefs and allows his objects of care to be trampled on.<sup>6</sup>

An example of someone who fits this definition of tolerance is a person who 'lets things pass' because he is too afraid to do what he believes he has good reasons for doing. Because he is afraid of the consequences of taking a stand, he decides not to be plainly intolerant. We would like to dub this case *pragmatic tolerance*. Although such a person cares about his values and commitments, he acts upon them only when the cost of adherence is low. In other cases, he simply chickens out and decides to keep his mouth shut.<sup>7</sup> For example, he does not rally against homosexuals because he is aware of the fact that such criticism is regarded inappropriate within the social environment in which he finds himself. Not willing to risk his reputation and jeopardize his social position, he decides that it is not worth the pain. The difference with the person who lacks the means to intervene is that the pragmatically tolerant does not *want* to be intolerant (although he could be)

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<sup>6</sup> Although the objectionable practice at hand often involves a violation of one's moral values, this is not necessarily so. The offence can also be directed at what Frankfurt calls "the things we care about" (Frankfurt 1988, 80-94). For example, a person might be offended by the fact that the National Anthem is used in a commercial for tampons, although it is difficult to discern which of his moral values is violated. For another example of a non-moral offence and its relation to tolerance, see the example of Pascal and Wittgenstein in Van Damme (2004).

<sup>7</sup> We use the term 'pragmatic' here in order to refer to prudential considerations, which can be distinguished from more principled, moral reasons (Horton & Nicholson 1992, 4). This distinction will become clearer in what follows.

while the person who lacks the power simply *cannot* be intolerant (although he wants to be).

However, this is not the typical case of tolerance. Usually, when we think of a tolerant person we do not believe that he is simply too afraid to translate his beliefs into actions (Heyd 1996, 4). Instead, we typically think of a tolerant person as having *moral* rather than *pragmatic* reasons for refraining from intervention. The archetype of such *moral tolerance* is expressed in the famous quote: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it”.<sup>8</sup> For example, a tolerant person might be convinced that, contrary to his initial sense of rejection, homosexuals should be allowed to engage in same-sex relationships because all humans have an equal right to express their sexuality. Since sex is essential for human beings, homosexuals deserve to be respected in their differences. Or else, one might regard autonomy as a central value in liberal societies, which means that homosexuals should be allowed to live their lives according to their own conception of the good, especially since there is no clear and discernable harm in case of same-sex relationships between consenting adults. Or still, one might be convinced that an uproar against homosexuality would seriously disturb the project of peaceful coexistence within society; something which one deems far more important—on a moral level—than one’s own sense of repulsion against homosexuals.

Both types of tolerance involve people who ultimately refrain from interference because they have reasons that outweigh their initial sense of rejection. The first category refrains on the basis of pragmatic or prudential reasons. Note that, on this account, the reasons for tolerance might be selfish but need not be. A person might tolerate homosexuality because he believes that his children will suffer from the fact that their father will acquire the reputation of a staunch homophobe. Although he himself is willing to take the punches, he wants to protect those he cares about from collateral damage.

Yet these kinds of reasons, although they are not purely selfish, are still different from those employed by someone who is moved by a more impartial form of reasoning that transcends his personal point of view. Even if such a person does not in any way become worse off by being intolerant, he still puts his objections on hold. For example, he might refrain from interfering in light of the societal benefits of tolerance, out of a strong belief in value pluralism or out of respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons. Horton and Nicholson (1992, 3) strongly stress that tolerance is always based on such morally praiseworthy reasons:

Not just any choice to refrain from interference seems enough for toleration. There may be many reasons for noninterference such as indolence or cowardice which are quite distinct from, and sometimes antithetical to, toleration. In short we need to know the reasons for noninterference in order to identify something specifically as an instance of toleration.

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<sup>8</sup> This quote is often mistakenly attributed to Voltaire. Instead, it originally appeared in ‘The Friends of Voltaire’ (1906), written by Evelyn Beatrice Hall under the pseudonym Stephen G. Tallentyre.

In what follows, we want to argue against this view by stressing that purely pragmatic reasons can motivate tolerance as well.<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. Reframing Tolerance

The distinction between two types of tolerance implies that Horton's definition of tolerance can be interpreted in two ways. According to a first, narrow interpretation, a person is tolerant if he (1) disapproves of some practice, (2) has the power to interfere but (3) has overriding *moral reasons* for refraining from such interference. According to a second, broad interpretation, an individual is tolerant if he (1) disapproves of some practice, (2) has the power to interfere but (3) has overriding reasons for refraining from such interference (whatever these may be).

How does the conception of tolerance as a virtue fit into this scheme? Does it require moral reasons for tolerance? At first sight it does not, in the sense that a virtue is a disposition to act in certain appropriate ways (depending on the circumstances). It is a character trait in that it is firmly entrenched in the agent's character. The tolerant person would be somebody who acts appropriately without balancing costs and benefits, but from a moral habit. Nevertheless, the virtue of tolerance rests on some important assumptions (Van Tongeren 2003, 114-115). It requires that we put our values in perspective, i.e. that we do not hold them to be absolute. For that reason it is a *modern* virtue—entirely absent in Aristotle's writings. As such, the virtue of tolerance presupposes a belief in pluralism and human fallibility. In general, Aristotelian terms, one can say that the virtues of character presuppose *phronèsis*, an intellectual virtue (Van Tongeren 2003, 65). Only with these assumptions in place can tolerance ever be appropriate. Those who tolerate for different reasons are not properly thought of as virtuous or tolerant.

Now let us return to both definitions of tolerance. While both are valid ways of understanding tolerance, we want to argue in favour of the broad definition and reveal a number of problems with the narrow alternative. First, the broad definition reframes the concept of tolerance in descriptive, that is, morally neutral terms. This allows us to avoid the normative paradox mentioned at the outset that arises from systematically assuming that "toleration is right and the tolerator is good" (Nicholson 1985, 160). Forst (2001, 195) aptly summarizes the paradoxical implication of such a narrow definition of tolerance: "if both the reasons for objection and the reasons for acceptance are called 'moral,' the paradox arises that it seems to be morally right or even morally demanded to tolerate what is morally

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<sup>9</sup> In our view, Horton and Nicholson fail to separate two distinct issues. When identifying the abovementioned "types of moral argument for toleration" (Horton & Nicholson 1992, 4), they are focusing on the issue why tolerance in some cases is desirable or valuable. Here, they refer to ethical theories like utilitarianism and liberalism that try to argue why tolerance in these circumstances is a moral duty or ideal. However, they fallaciously apply these criteria to the level of the individual who has to make up his mind whether he will interfere or tolerate some practice. The fact that tolerance is indeed desirable or valuable from a societal point of view because of the abovementioned reasons does not imply that people should base their actions on these reasons in order to be tolerant. Even though scoring a goal in a soccer match is good for the team because it earns championship points, a player may have less noble reasons for doing so (like impressing the female spectators).

wrong". If one does not stipulate that the reasons for tolerance should necessarily be moral in nature, the paradox simply disappears.<sup>10</sup>

Second, the broad definition better fits the general meaning of tolerance as it is used in everyday language. Not a single dictionary entry for tolerance stipulates conditions with respect to possible reasons for doing so. The narrow definition and its implied exclusion of *pragmatic tolerance* thus cannot be sustained. Instead, we want to stress that both pragmatic and moral reasons can legitimately motivate tolerance. Consequently, we side with authors like Crick (1971) and King (1971) against the conception of toleration as a moral ideal.

Third, adherents of the narrow definition face a practical difficulty. How is one to decide whether a particular act of tolerance is based on moral rather than pragmatic reasons? After all, it is hard to distinguish between both sorts of reasons in concrete cases. Take the example of an individual who refrains from interfering with the conduct of homosexuals. Although his decision to refrain may well be inspired by a form of impartial moral reasoning in which values like autonomy and respect for others are deemed more important than his own sense of uneasiness with homosexuals, it may well turn out that, on a deeper level, he refrains from action simply because he is too afraid to take a stand. Another example is the person who lets things pass for the sake of peaceful coexistence: is this based on some noble form of impartial reasoning or on more mundane considerations like self-preservation?

The crucial point is that it is difficult to assess which reasons actually move a person to action. This problem is quite akin to the Kantian difference between actions from duty and actions that are merely in conformity with the moral law. Kant admits that an individual's true motives are not only obscure to those who observe his behaviour from the outside (third person perspective), but also to the person himself (first person perspective). Proponents of the narrow interpretation should be prepared to accept this obscurity. Of course, they could easily do so, but then tolerance, although it is conceptually clear, might become something that is very difficult to detect in reality. In the end, genuine cases of tolerance based exclusively on impartial considerations might actually be very sparse.

Fourth, the broad definition has the advantage of making it possible to induce people to be tolerant, even if they have not accepted overriding moral reasons themselves. Our penal system allows punishing people if they cross the line. Therefore, society sends a message that they will be punished if they would choose to do so. Increasing the costs of plain intolerance effectively provides citizens with pragmatic reasons for letting things pass even when there is something at stake for them, i.e. something they care about. This way of 'stimulating' tolerance does not render citizens completely unable to interfere but rather makes citizens take into

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<sup>10</sup> One can also ask whether the practice that is tolerated is morally justifiable or not. In short, we believe that it is intuitively clear that it is possible for an individual to tolerate things that are considered morally wrong by any standard. Blatant cases of pedophilia, for example, should never be tolerated. This provides an additional argument to conceive of tolerance in descriptive, morally neutral terms (Crick 1971; King 1971). However, since we want to avoid normative questions regarding the limits of tolerance (what should be tolerated and what not), we want to leave this issue aside.



account the potential costs of doing so. While gay-bashing is still an option, they are not free to do so without taking the blame.

It becomes clear, however, that tolerance is often a *second-best solution*. We believe that, in a number of circumstances, it would be better if there were no initial sense of rejection at all. Ideally, one should move beyond tolerance in that this feeling should not merely be overridden by other considerations but should be erased completely. The point here is that people sometimes disapprove of something that—according to widely acknowledged standards—is not to be disapproved at all. In such cases, we should not emphasize the value of tolerance—as theorists who conceive of tolerance as virtuous or good would do—but rather say that people should come to recognize each other’s values *as* valuable and not as things that they deem objectionable. Later on, we will return to this claim that people do not want to be tolerated for the sake of overriding reasons; they demand recognition and respect for their values and practices as such.

In this respect, we want to stress that tolerance is not always desirable or good, even when it is based on morally praiseworthy reasons. Once more, take the case of homosexuality. One should come to see that homosexual relationships are valuable as such, and not just by an appeal to abstract rights. The idea that homosexuality is okay only because it fits a person’s right to self-determination, is “one thought too many” (Williams 1981, 18). The initial sense of rejection should (eventually) make way for appreciation or acceptance. Moreover, even those who are indifferent towards the issue, i.e. who do not understand what all the fuss is about, are often deemed more praiseworthy than those who are able to restrain their unsympathetic feelings. All this makes clear that the ‘virtue of tolerance’ falls short as an ideal.<sup>11</sup>

It should by now be clear that theorists in the field face the dilemma of choosing between both definitions. If, on the one hand, they want to think of tolerance as virtuous or good, they should embrace the narrow definition, according to which tolerance is always based on morally praiseworthy reasons. If, on the other hand, they accept the broad interpretation and label the pragmatic person tolerant as well, they can no longer conceive of tolerance as virtuous, morally desirable or good. Bringing together the disadvantages of the former position and the advantages of the latter position, we believe that the burden of proof shifts to those who think of tolerance as an inherently normative concept. In their view, tolerance is a virtue and thus morally good, because it is defined as allowing for the right practices in the right circumstances and for the right reasons. Leaving aside the question whether this way of explaining the goodness of tolerance by referring to the goodness of the reasons for tolerating begs the question or not, we believe it faces a number of serious problems that have to be addressed explicitly by those who want to think of tolerance as a virtue.

## V. Conclusion

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<sup>11</sup> This might be compared to what Fletcher calls “the instability of tolerance” (Fletcher 1996, 171): an attitude of tolerance always tends to tilt to legitimate rejection (and hence plain intolerance), indifference, or acceptance.

We have argued that it does not matter which reasons lead an individual to refrain from acting upon his sense of rejection towards a certain practice. This holds not only from a conceptual point of view, but also from a societal point of view. In the end, what matters is that citizens conform to the norms and laws that prevail in the society they live in. Except for plain intolerance, the categories described above all have the same outcome of non-interference. A purely ‘behavioural’ definition of tolerance, which stresses a person’s hands-off attitude towards practices in which he does not engage himself, might be useful from a societal point of view. Still, we believe Horton’s broad definition of toleration, which includes the requirement of a sense of rejection, remains useful. After all, it avoids the counter-intuitive conclusion that even people who don’t care at all are tolerant.

Let us return to the initial problem of how a person could ever allow for that which he sincerely objects to. Here, one might suggest that his overriding reason for self-restraint is perhaps best understood as a desire to *honour* his values rather than *promote* them. Such an attitude of honouring means that he is personally committed to certain values and practices but that he does not necessarily want others to uphold them as well (Pettit 1991, 230-231). Instead of continuously proselytising, like the plainly intolerant person does, he lets his actions exemplify his personal values. Such a person is satisfied with living by his own standards and does not want to impose them on others. For example, he might go to church every Sunday without actively urging or persuading others to do so as well (and without taking action against those who fail to go to Sunday Mass). This would explain why a person who takes his values seriously nevertheless doesn’t react against practices that go against them.

However, as we have already suggested, one can legitimately ask whether such tolerance is able to pass normative scrutiny from the perspective of both the tolerator (“Should we merely honour our values or should we put our foot down?”) as well as the person who is tolerated (“Do we want to be tolerated merely because *their* values only need the respect of honouring?”). People do not want to be respected as mere placeholders of values. To be respected as a person is to be respected in one’s identity. And since this identity is constituted by the things one cares about (Shoemaker 2003, 112), people seek recognition for those things that are dear to them. Hence it is questionable whether a strategy of putting the differences ‘behind closed doors’ and making them the object of private interests is a morally praiseworthy strategy.<sup>12</sup>

While a narrow definition of tolerance as a virtuous attitude that is based exclusively on moral considerations overriding one’s initial sense of rejection is still possible, we favour a broader definition that no longer stipulates that such considerations should be moral. This way of reframing the concept of tolerance in descriptive terms goes against the grain of recent literature in which tolerance is generally understood as a virtue.

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<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, Scanlon (1996, 235): “if toleration is to make any sense (...) we must distinguish between one’s attitude towards what is advocated by one’s opponents and one’s attitude toward those opponents themselves: it is not that their *point of view* is entitled to be represented but that *they* (...) are entitled to be heard”. Our claim is that such a clear distinction is problematic.

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