ANNALES SCIENTIA POLITICA

VOLUME 13, NUMBER 2, 2024

ANNALES SCIENTIA POLITICA

Vol. 13, No. 2, 2024

SŁOMSKI, W.: The difficult subject of tolerance. Annales Scientia Politica, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2024), pp. 43 – 47

WOJCIECH SŁOMSKI

University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw
Poland
E-mail: slomski@vizja.pl

Abstract:

Although the concept of tolerance is related to key philosophical issues (such as the nature and scope of human freedom), it is a relatively new concept in philosophy. Neither in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages was the concept used, but this does not mean that it is impossible to reconstruct views on the content we call tolerance today. The concept of tolerance belongs to the political discourse, where it functions in many different shades of meaning. It is often simply synonymous with the concept of democracy, and the adjective intolerant means as much as undemocratic. The term tolerance is also used to describe a certain way of responding to what is new and unfamiliar. In this sense, a tolerant person is someone who does not feel discomfort when encountering behaviour or views that he or she has never encountered before.

Keywords:

Philosophy, philosophy of politics, political science.

THE DIFFICULT SUBJECT OF TOLERANCE

WOJCIECH SŁOMSKI

University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw
Poland
E-mail: slomski@vizja.pl

Abstract:

Although the concept of tolerance is related to key philosophical issues (such as the nature and scope of human freedom), it is a relatively new concept in philosophy. Neither in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages was the concept used, but this does not mean that it is impossible to reconstruct views on the content we call tolerance today. The concept of tolerance belongs to the political discourse, where it functions in many different shades of meaning. It is often simply synonymous with the concept of democracy, and the adjective intolerant means as much as undemocratic. The term tolerance is also used to describe a certain way of responding to what is new and unfamiliar. In this sense, a tolerant person is someone who does not feel discomfort when encountering behaviour or views that he or she has never encountered before.

Keywords:

Philosophy, philosophy of politics, political science.

While the concept of tolerance is related to key philosophical questions (such as the nature and scope of human freedom), it is a relatively new concept in philosophy. Neither in antiquity nor in the Middle Ages was the concept used, which does not mean, however, that it is impossible to reconstruct views on the content that we now call tolerance. For example, Plato was undoubtedly less *tolerant* than Aristotle, although, on the other hand, Aristotle's views on slavery also do not entitle him to be called *tolerant* in today's sense of the word. Medieval philosophy also did without the concept of tolerance. Thomas Aquinas compared the relationship between the individual and society to the relationship between a part of an organism and the whole organism. This meant that while worship is subordinate to the goals of the organism, the goals of the organism are also directed toward the welfare of each of its parts.[1]

The first philosophical treatises on tolerance dealt with religious tolerance and began to be written during the Reformation. The inability to resolve religious conflicts through coercion was the reason why they began to look for principles that would allow different Christian denominations to coexist side by side. This principle became precisely the norm that proclaims *the non-coercion* of adherents of other denominations to give up their own beliefs. As a theoretical basis for this principle was adopted the right of every person to freedom of conscience.

This dual utilitarian-axiological justification of the principle of tolerance has persisted to the present day. The utilitarian dimension of tolerance was emphasized, for example, by J. Locke and J. S. Mill. Locke demanded, for example, the independence of the state from religious faith and institutions, from which total freedom of choice of religion was to result (*tolerance should also be shown to opponents with different views on matters of faith*.[2] The right to free-

[1] Thomas Aquinas, *Theological Summa*, I-II, q. 96, ad. 4c.

[2] J. Locke, *Letter on Tolerance*, Warsaw 1963, p. 56.

dom of religion was explained by this philosopher by the relativity of the truths of faith and the impossibility of proving their absolute truthfulness, from which, however, it can be concluded that if it were possible to prove the truthfulness of religious dogmas, then freedom of religion would cease. This would mean, in other words, the abolition of the right to error. Also J. S. Mill pointed out that tolerance contributes more to universal prosperity than its absence. *Humanity*, Mill believed, "*gains more by allowing everyone to live according to his preferences than by forcing everyone to live according to the preferences of the others.*"[3]

Clearly defining the concept of tolerance is difficult, since it now belongs as much to media and political discourse as to the language of philosophy. This discussion points out that the ideal of tolerance (however defined) can be realized in practice to varying degrees (in other words, tolerance is *gradable*). It is also pointed out that the opposite of tolerance, i.e. intolerance, is not abstaining from a certain behaviour, but acting against another's freedom.

One can, for example, propose a historical definition, which, however, is not very useful in contemporary discourse, since it refers to religion, which is not, due to the religious indifferentism of modern societies, a cause of discrimination.

The definition referring to the object of tolerance seems more interesting. One can first speak of tolerance in relation to people. We then tolerate another person not because of the views he professes, but despite the fact that he is not one of us. The object of tolerance understood in this way is a *stranger*, that is, some minority within one's own society or a newcomer from outside. The division between one's own community and its external environment is preserved, but *the stranger* has the right to become (to some extent, depending on the degree of tolerance) a member of that community. The outward expression of tolerance towards *the stranger* is by granting certain rights, showing hospitality, interest in difference, etc.

This ideal of tolerance towards minorities of various kinds could only apply in a *pure* form in a society in which the rights of minorities are not restricted for any reason, and the only problem is securing these rights for the future. However, in realistically existing societies, numerous minorities are at a disadvantage in terms of opportunities for personal development and social advancement than the social majority. This raises the question of whether, in order to equalize these opportunities, we should create certain privileges for these disadvantaged groups, through which the effects of past intolerance could be offset. While such privileges can be read as discrimination against the once privileged majority (e.g., white middle-class males in the US), on the other hand, looking at society from a historical perspective, these privileges can be seen as a kind of reparation for the damage previously suffered (just as the deterioration of the situation of the once privileged majority can be seen as *reparation* for the damage done). Such conduct would therefore be consistent with the principle of justice.[4]

Attention is often drawn to the connection between tolerance and freedom, but it should be noted that not all situations in which we now demand tolerance can be traced to the realization of the right to freedom. Freedom is associated with the ability to choose, and it is difficult to speak of free choice with regard to outward appearance, native language, sexual orientation, personal abilities, and often the degree of education and wealth.

The subject of tolerance can also be views, goals, values, norms and behaviour contrary to what is considered acceptable in a given society, i.e. the commonly held worldview. We deal with tolerance relating to differences in worldview, for example, in the case of religious conflicts. The grounds on which such tolerance is based may also be different. It can grow, firstly, from ethical motivations, so, for example, from the conviction that every person has the right to free expression of his or her opinions and expression of his or her own behaviour. Ethical motivation plays a decisive role when the adherents of a certain worldview have the ability to suppress any *iniquitous* views, but because of the principle of tolerance, they do not use this opportunity. If, on the other hand, the adherents of conflicting worldviews have more or less equal power and neither side is able to gain a physical advantage over the other, then the motive for ad-

[3] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Warsaw 1959, p. 132

[4] Cf. R. K. Fullinwider, *The Reverse Discrimination Controversy*, New York 1980.

hering to the principle of tolerance seems to be rather pragmatic considerations. The idea then, in other words, is to assume that seeking to make one's professed doctrine universally valid does more harm than good. The parties to such a conflict may also tolerate each other, and at the same time exclude from the scope of the principle of tolerance adherents of some other doctrine (for example, members of Christian churches may not tolerate Jews).

In twentieth-century philosophy, the attitude of the individual to the prevailing views and rules of the community was defined in various ways, with a striving for extreme and one-sided solutions being characteristic: starting from extreme collectivism, valid mainly in totalitarian systems, to extreme individualism and liberalism, treating community goals and norms as completely subservient to the individual. There is also no shortage of attempts to arrange the relationship between the individual and society in such a way that the individual would gain maximum freedom, and the social structure would gain permanence.[5] It seems that the discussion of tolerance towards different worldviews is part of the search for solutions befitting today's globalizing world.

The most controversial issue is tolerance towards principles and actions that one considers morally wrong oneself. Here it is necessary, first of all, to define precisely the limits of tolerance and to formulate the principles by which one intends to take actions contrary to the principle of tolerance. After all, such action is both physical coercion, the introduction of specific laws, and purely verbal condemnation and stigmatization.

It seems that most ethicists would only be willing to consider the latter type of restriction on the principle of tolerance as legitimate, and with numerous reservations as to form. A case in point, for example, is the Catholic Church's treatment of homosexuality. The Church does not condemn homosexuals as human beings but condemns homosexual acts. By homosexuals themselves, however, this condemnation is often interpreted as an expression of intolerance, all the more so because it follows from it certain demands for legislation.

Such distinctions are not always sufficient, however, because tolerated evil sometimes entails real victims. This brings us to the boundary between tolerating views, attitudes, behaviours and actions that we consider morally evil, and indifference to the suffering caused by such evil. It goes without saying that indifference to another's suffering is no longer a value, but *an anti-value*, which in effect also places ourselves on the side of evil.[6] Therefore, wishing to act ethically, i.e. in accordance with the system of values and norms we have adopted, which includes the principle of tolerance, we should define criteria to distinguish tolerance from indifference (i.e. value from anti-value).

As mentioned, this criterion can be human suffering resulting from someone's actions. Examples include the punishments customarily imposed on women for certain behaviours, as well as the custom of female circumcision practiced in many African countries. The existence of a link between suffering and someone's intentional action is relevant in this context, as some ethicists (mainly Christian) take the position that also suffering as part of a person's life[7] should be subject to tolerance. According to the teachings of Pope John Paul II, tolerating suffering (in the sense of coming to terms with it and accepting it) as an integral part of human existence is a condition for *a civilization of love*, while tolerating euthanasia (including fully conscious and voluntary euthanasia) testifies *to a civilization of death*.

The above three types of tolerance do not always occur in isolation. In practice, especially in developed countries, we generally encounter the need for tolerance both towards *the stranger*, but also towards views that this outsider also treats as universal and universally valid. This raises the question of to what extent we should tolerate this otherness, considering any form of interference to be unauthorized, and to what extent we have the right to expect the *stranger* to join our own community, relinquishing some part of his own otherness and identity by becoming one of us.

[5] Cf. S. Kowalczyk, *Man and community. Outline of social philosophy*, Lublin 1994.

[6] This is, of course, exclusively about moral evil.

[7] "*Suffering*", writes John Paul II, "*which in so many different forms is present in our human world, is also present in it in order to release love in man, that very selfless gift from his own self to other people, people who are suffering*." John Paul II, *Salvifici doloris* (29).

The answer to this question is not easy because of its possible practical consequences. Some authors fear that the complete abandonment of attempts to integrate national minorities into the culture will lead to the balkanization of Western societies, which will in fact turn into a series of unrelated communities coexisting in the same space. Although the condition for such balkanization seems to be mutual tolerance, in practice such tolerance would probably be nothing more than simple indifference. In turn, an attitude of indifference in the long term would not be able to prevent the awakening of antagonisms and conflicts between the various communities, which in turn would put an end to any tolerance, which is, after all, the reason why measures were not taken to prevent the balkanization of society.

Finally, one can treat tolerance as an ethical value that imposes a certain amount of obligations on us. This is how it is understood, among others, by Tadeusz Pilch, who demands that the humanities shape and spread an attitude of tolerance for *the inevitable and irremovable dissimilarity of people, cultures of behaviour, values*.[8] This view is certainly not an isolated one, however - in connection with the remarks made above - it is worth noting that the assumption that we know how the postulate of tolerance should be realized in practice may turn out to be erroneous and lead to consequences contrary to what we expect to achieve by realizing the ideal of tolerance. These doubts are at the root of most of today's disputes over the concept of tolerance, both philosophical and political. In addition to the necessity of defining the limits of tolerance, as discussed above, the issue of the degree of acceptance of dissent is central here. Some authors believe that tolerance cannot mean mere *toleration*, which basically boils down to the ability to remain indifferent *to the tolerated* object. This kind of indifference arises easily in relation to objects that are of little interest for other reasons. An example of this is the attitude of developed societies toward religion, which bears all the outward signs of religious tolerance, although its real cause is simply the disappearance of religious feelings.

J. Locke's argument outlined above, according to which we should tolerate different religious beliefs because there is no way to demonstrate their truthfulness, has important implications for modern culture as a whole. This reasoning allows us to assume that there may be a single true system of values (religious or ethical), but that people do not have access to it and will forever remain condemned to conjecture, which they must not treat as ultimate truths. This attitude seems to be characteristic of modern Western societies. It is not pure relativism, consisting of the conviction that all values and norms are equally worthy of choice, but the consequences of this attitude turn out to be the same as those of relativism. From this point of view, it is possible to formulate a thesis according to which the cause of the crisis of modern Western societies, consisting in the diminishing willingness to engage in action for the common good, is not, contrary to what A. MacIntyre believes,[9] the disappearance of faith in the universal validity of the foundations of morality, but the disappearance of faith in the possibility of achieving universal agreement on what values and principles these foundations should consist of.

The matter of the long-term social consequences of the widespread acceptance of tolerance as a moral principle therefore remains a matter of debate. Most authors (including Z. Bauman) take the position that the community of principles is *voluntary and casual* in the postmodern (read: modern) world.[10] These authors believe that a natural consequence of *a tolerant* society is the gradual disappearance of interpersonal ties, which begin to be treated not as a value in itself, but as a tool for individual development. The sense of responsibility for others disappears, and each individual begins to see himself as a self-contained entity, isolated and independent of others.[11]

For disputes related to the concept of tolerance, the distinction proposed by F. Töunies between a community (*Gemeinschaft*) and an association (*Gesellschaft*) may be relevant. In a

[8] T. Pilch, *On the need for dialogue between cultures and people*, ed. by J. Pilch, Warsaw 2000, p. 11

[9] Cf. A. MacIntyre, *Legacy of virtue: a study in moral theory*, Warsaw 1996.

[10] Cf. A. Borowiak, *Postmodern Worldview and the Postulate of Tolerance*, in *Tolerance and Multiculturalism. Challenges of the XXI century*, edited by A. Borowiak and P. Szarota, Warsaw 2004, p. 48.

[11] Cf. ibid, p. 43.

community (family, nation), an individual exists independently of his will, while in an association he can voluntarily join and leave it. From this point of view, the notion of tolerance binding within a community becomes problematic, since refusal to accept certain norms, behaviors, goals, etc. binding within an association simply means resignation from participation in it. In addition, the norms in force in the community may come into conflict with those of the association. The manner in which this conflict is overcome, i.e. the ability to function simultaneously within the community and individual associations, can be taken as a measure of the tolerance of a given society.

The concept of tolerance also belongs to political discourse, where it functions in many different shades of meaning. It is often simply synonymous with the concept of democracy, and the adjective *intolerant* means as much as *undemocratic*. The term tolerance is also used to describe a certain way of responding to what is new and unfamiliar. In this sense, a tolerant person is someone who does not feel discomfort when encountering behaviour or views that he has never encountered before. Tolerance in this sense can be learned and can be taught through education and psychological training. Psychotherapy can also be an effective means of nullifying the effects of discrimination, which include the internalization of a negative label attributed to minorities by an intolerant majority.[12] However, the massiveness of such and similar actions is only possible in a society that accepts tolerance as a moral principle.

References

Aquinas, T. (n.d.). *Theological Summa* (I-II, q. 96, ad. 4c).

Borowiak, A. (2004). Postmodernistický svetonázor a postulát tolerancie. In A. Borowiak & P. Szarota (Eds.), *Tolerancja i wielokulturowość. Wyzwania XXI wieku* (s. 45-60). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

Fullinwider, R. K. (1980). *The Reverse Discrimination Controversy*. Cornell University Press.

Grzymała-Moszczyńska, H. (2004). Ako sa učiť inú kultúru – akulturačný tréning pre študentov. In A. Borowiak & P. Szarota (Eds.), *Tolerancja i wielokulturowość. Wyzwania XXI wieku* (s. 177-190). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.

Ján Pavol II. (1984). *Salvifici doloris* (n. 29). Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

Kowalczyk, S. (1994). *Man and Community: Outline of Social Philosophy*. Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.

Locke, J. (1963). *Letter on Tolerance*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

MacIntyre, A. (1996). *Legacy of Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Mill, J. S. (1959). *On Liberty*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.

Pilch, T. (2000). O potrebe dialógu medzi kultúrami a ľuďmi. In J. Pilch (Ed.), *Dialog między kulturami* (s. 15-30). Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak.

[12] Cf. H. Grzymała-Moszczyńska, *How to learn another culture - acculturation training for students*, in *Tolerance and multiculturalism*..., op. cit. p. 177nn.