

often been discussions of what laws should exist—in particular, laws permitting or forbidding various kinds of religious practice—and the laws have been determined by the attitudes of the more powerful group. But more basically, toleration is a matter of the attitudes of any group to another and does not concern only the relations of the more powerful to the less powerful. It is certainly not just a question of what laws there should be. A group or a creed can rightly be said to be “intolerant” if it would like to suppress or drive out others even if, as a matter of fact, it has no power to do so. The problems of toleration are to be found first at the level of human relations and of the attitude of one way of life toward another. It is not only a question of how the power of the state is to be used, though of course it supports and feeds a problem about that, a problem of political philosophy. However, we should be careful about making the assumption that what underlies a practice or an attitude of toleration must be a personal virtue of toleration. All toleration involves difficulties, but it is the virtue that especially threatens to involve conceptual impossibility.

A practice of toleration means only that one group as a matter of fact puts up with the existence of the other, differing, group. A tolerant attitude (toward this group) is any disposition or outlook that encourages them to do so: it is more likely to be identified as an attitude of toleration if it applies more generally, in their relations to other groups, and in their views of other groups' relations to each other. One possible basis of such an attitude—but only one—is a virtue of toleration, which emphasises the moral good involved in putting up with beliefs one finds offensive. I am going to suggest that this virtue, while it is not (as it may seem) impossible, does have to take a very specific form, which limits the range of people who can possess it. Because of this, it is a serious mistake to think that this virtue is the only, or perhaps the most important, attitude on which to ground practices of toleration.

If there is to be a question of toleration, it is necessary that there should be something to be tolerated; there has to be some belief or practice or way of life that one group thinks (however fanatically or unreasonably) wrong, mistaken, or undesirable. If one group simply hates another, as with a clan vendetta or cases of sheer racism, it is not really toleration that is needed: the people involved need rather to lose their hatred, their prejudice, or their implacable memories. If we are asking people to be tolerant, we are asking for something more complicated than this. They will indeed have to lose something, their desire to suppress or drive out the rival belief; but they will also keep something, their commitment to their own beliefs, which is what gave them that desire in the first place. There is a tension here between one's own commitments, and the acceptance that other people may have other, perhaps quite distasteful commit-

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Toleration: An Impossible Virtue?

BERNARD WILLIAMS

THE DIFFICULTY with toleration is that it seems to be at once necessary and impossible. It is necessary where different groups have conflicting beliefs—moral, political, or religious—and realize that there is no alternative to their living together, that is to say, no alternative except armed conflict, which will not resolve their disagreements and will impose continuous suffering. These are the circumstances in which toleration is necessary. Yet in those same circumstances it may well seem impossible.

If violence and the breakdown of social cooperation are threatened in these circumstances, it is because people find others' beliefs or ways of life deeply unacceptable. In matters of religion, for instance (which, historically, was the first area in which the idea of toleration was used), the need for toleration arises because one of the groups, at least, thinks that the other is blasphemously, disastrously, obscenely wrong. The members of one group may think that the members of the other group need to be helped toward the truth, or that third parties need to be protected against the bad opinions. Most important—and most relevant for the dilemmas of liberal societies—they may think that the leaders or elders of the other group are keeping the young and perhaps the women from enlightenment and liberation. They see it as not merely in the general interest but in the interest of some in the other group that the true religion (as they believe it to be) should prevail. It is because the disagreement goes this deep that the parties to it think that they cannot accept the existence of each other. We need to tolerate other people and their ways of life only in situations that make it very difficult to do so. Toleration, we may say, is required only for the intolerable. That is its basic problem.

We may think of toleration as an attitude that a more powerful group, or a majority, has (or fails to have) toward a less powerful group or a minority. In a country where there are many Christians and few Muslims, there may be a question whether the Christians tolerate the Muslims; the Muslims do not get the choice, so to speak, whether to tolerate the Christians or not. If the proportions of Christians and Muslims are reversed, so will be the direction of toleration. This is how we usually think of toleration, and it is natural to do so, because discussions of toleration have

ments: the tension that is typical of toleration, and which makes it so difficult. (In practice, of course, there is often a very thin or vague boundary between mere tribalism or clan loyalty and differences in outlook or conviction.)

Just because it involves some tension between commitment to one's own outlook and putting up with the other's, the attitude of toleration is supposed to be more than mere weariness or indifference. After the European Wars of Religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had raged for years, people began to think that it must be better for the different Christian churches to coexist. Various attitudes went with this development. Some people became skeptical about the distinctive claims of any church and began to think that there was no truth, or at least no truth discoverable by human beings, about the validity of one church's creed as opposed to another's. Other people began to think that the struggles had helped them to understand God's purposes better: He did not mind how people worshiped, so long as they did so in good faith within certain broad Christian limits. (In more recent times, a similar ecumenical spirit has extended beyond the boundaries of Christianity.)

These two lines of thought, in a certain sense, went in opposite directions. One of them, the skeptical, claimed that there was less to be known about God's designs than the warring parties, each with its particular fanaticism, had supposed. The other line of thought, the broad church view, claimed to have a better insight into God's designs than the warring parties had. But in their relation to the battles of faith, the two lines of thought did nevertheless end up in the same position, with the idea that precise questions of Christian belief did not matter as much as people had supposed, that less was at stake. This leads to toleration as a matter of political *practice*, and that is an extremely important result; but as an attitude, it is less than toleration. If you do not care all that much what anyone believes, you do not need the attitude of toleration, any more than you do with regard to other people's tastes in food.

In many matters, attitudes that are more tolerant in practice do arise for this reason, that people cease to think that a certain kind of behavior is a matter for disapproval or negative judgment at all. This is what is happening, in many parts of the world, with regard to kinds of sexual behavior that were previously discouraged and, in some cases, legally punished. An extramarital relationship or a homosexual ménage may arouse no hostile comment or reaction, as such things did in the past. But once again, though this is toleration as a matter of practice, the attitude it relies on is indifference rather than, strictly speaking, toleration. Indeed, if I and others in the neighborhood said that we were *tolerating* the homosexual relations of the couple next door, our attitude would be thought to be less than liberal.

There are no doubt many conflicts and areas of intolerance for which the solution should indeed be found in this direction, in the increase of indifference. Matters of sexual and social behavior which in smaller and more traditional societies are of great public concern, will come to seem more a private matter, raising in themselves no question of right or wrong. The slide toward indifference may also provide, as it did in Europe, the only solution to some religious disputes. Not all religions, of course, have any desire to convert, let alone coerce, others. They no doubt have some opinion or other (perhaps of the "broad church" type) about the state of truth or error of those who do not share their faith, but at any rate they are content to leave those other people alone. Other creeds, however, are less willing to allow error, as they see it, to flourish, and it may be that with them there is no solution except that which Europe earlier discovered (in religion, at least, if not in politics), a decline in enthusiasm. It is important that a decline in enthusiasm need not take the form of a movement's merely running out of steam. As some Christian sects discovered, a religion can have its own resources for rethinking its relations to others. One relevant idea, which had considerable influence in Europe, is that an expansive religion really wants people to believe in it, but it must recognize that this is not a result that can be achieved by force. The most that force can achieve is acquiescence and outer conformity. As Hegel said of the slave's master, the fanatic is always disappointed: what he wanted was acknowledgment, but all he can get is conformity.

Skepticism, indifference, or broad church views are not the only source of what I am calling toleration as a practice. It can also be secured in a Hobbesian equilibrium, under which the acceptance of one group by the other is the best that either of them can get. This is not, of course, in itself a principled solution, as opposed to the skeptical outlook, which is, in its own way, principled. The Hobbesian solution is also notoriously unstable. A sect that could, just about, enforce conformity might be deterred by the thought of what things would be like if the other party took over. But for this to be a Hobbesian thought, as opposed to a role-reversal argument that, for instance, refers to rights, some instability must be in the offing. The parties who are conscious of such a situation are likely to go in for preemptive strikes, and this is all the more so if they reflect that even if they can hope only for acquiescence and outer conformity in one generation, they can conceivably hope for more in later generations. As a matter of fact, in the modern world, the imposition by force of political creeds and ideologies has not been very effective over time. One lesson that was already obvious in the year 1984 was the falsity in this respect of Orwell's 1984. However, the imposition of ideology over time has certainly worked in the past, and the qualification in the previous statement, "in

the modern world," is extremely important. (This is something I come back to at the end of this paper.)

So far, then, toleration as a *value* has barely emerged from the argument. We can have practices of toleration underlaid by skepticism or indifference or, again, by an understood balance of power. Toleration as a value seems to demand more than this. It has been thought by many that this can be expressed in a certain political philosophy, a certain conception of the state.

To some degree, it is possible for people to belong to communities bound together by shared convictions—religious convictions, for instance—and for toleration to be sustained by a distinction between those communities and the state. The state is not identified with any set of such beliefs and does not enforce any of them; equally, it does not allow any of the groups to impose its beliefs on the others, though each of them can of course advocate what it believes. In the United States, for instance, there is a wide consensus that supports the Constitution in allowing no law that enforces or even encourages any particular religion. There are many religious groups, and no doubt many of them have deep convictions, but most of them do not want the state to suppress others or to allow any of them to suppress others.

Many people have hoped that this can serve as a general model of the way in which a modern society can resolve the tensions of toleration. On the one hand, there are deeply held and differing convictions about moral or religious matters, held by various groups within the society. On the other hand, there is a supposedly impartial state, which affirms the rights of all citizens to equal consideration, including an equal right to form and express their convictions. This is the model of *liberal pluralism*. It can be seen as enacting toleration. It expresses toleration's peculiar combination of conviction and acceptance, by finding a home for people's various convictions in groups or communities less than the state, while the acceptance of diversity is located in the structure of the state itself.

This implies the presence of toleration as more than a mere practice. But how exactly does it identify toleration as a value? Does it identify toleration as a virtue? This turns on the question of the qualities that such a system demands of its citizens. The citizens must have at least a shared belief in the system itself. The model of a society that is held together by a framework of rights and an aspiration toward equal respect, rather than by a shared body of more specific substantive convictions, demands an ideal of citizenship that will be adequate to bear such a weight. The most impressive version of this ideal is perhaps that offered by the tradition of liberal philosophy flowing from Kant, which identifies the dignity of the human being with autonomy. Free persons are those who make

their own lives and determine their own convictions, and power must be used to make this possible, not to frustrate it by imposing a given set of convictions.

This is not a purely negative or skeptical ideal. If it were, it could not even hope to have the power to bind together into one society people with strongly differing convictions. Nor could it provide the motive power that all tolerant societies need in order to fight the intolerant when other means fail. This is an ideal associated with many contemporary liberal thinkers, such as Rawls, Nagel, and Dworkin.

Under the philosophy of liberal pluralism, toleration does emerge as a principled doctrine, and it does require of its citizens a belief in a value: perhaps not so much in the value of toleration itself as in a certain more fundamental value, that of autonomy. Because this value is taken to be understood and shared, this account of the role of toleration in liberal pluralism implies a picture of justification. It should provide an argument that could be accepted by those who do find *prima facie* intolerable certain outlooks that obtain in the society, and which liberalism refuses to deploy the power of the state to suppress. As Nagel has well put it, "Liberalism purports to be a view that justifies religious toleration not only to religious skeptics but to the devout, and sexual toleration not only to libertines but to those who believe extramarital sex is sinful. It distinguishes between the values a person can appeal to in conducting his own life and those he can appeal to in justifying the exercise of political power."¹ No one, including Nagel himself, believes that this will be possible in every case. There must be, on any showing, limits to the extent to which the liberal state can be disengaged on matters of ethical disagreement. There are some questions, such as that of abortion, on which the state will fail to be neutral whatever it does. Its laws may draw distinctions between different circumstances of abortion, but in the end it cannot escape the fact that some people will believe with the deepest conviction that a certain class of acts should be permitted, while other people will believe with equal conviction that those acts should be forbidden. Equally intractable questions will arise with regard to education, where the autonomy of some fundamentalist religious groups, for instance, to bring up their children in their own beliefs will be seen by liberals as standing in conflict with the autonomy of those children to choose what beliefs they will have. (Such problems may be expressed in terms of group rights.) No society can avoid collective and substantive choices on matters of this kind, and in that sense, on those issues, there are limits to toleration, even if people continue to respect one another's opinions.

The fact that there will be some cases that will be impossible in such a way does not necessarily wreck liberal toleration, unless there are too

to say that the substantive values of individual autonomy are misguided or baseless. The point is that these values, like others, may be rejected, and to the extent that toleration rests on those values, then toleration will also be rejected. The practice of toleration cannot be based on a value such as individual autonomy and also hope to escape from substantive disagreements about the good. This really is a contradiction, because it is only a substantive view of goods such as autonomy that could yield the value that is expressed by the practices of toleration.)

In the light of this, we can now better understand the impossibility or extreme difficulty that was seemingly presented by the personal virtue or attitude of toleration. It appeared impossible because it seemingly required someone to think that a certain belief or practice was thoroughly wrong or bad, and at the same time that there was some intrinsic good to be found in its being allowed to flourish. This does not involve a contradiction if the other good is found not in that belief's continuing but in the other believer's autonomy. People can coherently think that a certain outlook or attitude is deeply wrong and that the flourishing of such an attitude should be tolerated if they also hold another substantive value in favor of the autonomy or independence of other believers. The exercise of toleration as a virtue, then, and in that sense the belief in it as itself a value, does not necessarily involve a contradiction, though in a given situation it may involve that familiar thing, a conflict of goods. However, we cannot combine this account of liberal toleration with the idea that it rises above the battle of values. The account gives rise to the familiar problem that others may not share the liberal view of these various goods; in particular, the people whom the liberal is particularly required to tolerate are precisely those who are unlikely to share the liberal's view of the good of autonomy, which is the basis of the toleration, to the extent that this expresses a value. The liberal has not, in this representation of toleration, given them a reason to value toleration if they do not share his or her other values.

Granted this, it is as well that, as we saw earlier, the practice of toleration does not necessarily rest on any such value at all. It may be supported by Hobbesian considerations about what is possible or desirable in the matter of enforcement, or again by indifference based on skepticism about the issues involved in the disagreement; though with indifference and skepticism, of course, the point will be reached at which nobody is interested enough in the disagreements for there to be anything to put up with, and toleration will not be necessary.

It is important, too, that the demands on toleration do not arise in contexts in which there are no other values or virtues. Appeals to the misery and cruelty and manifest stupidity involved in intolerance may, in favorable circumstances, have some effect with those who are not dedi-

many of them. There is no argument of principle to show that if *A* thinks a certain practice wrong and *B* thinks that practice right, *A* has to think that the state should suppress that practice or that *B* has to think that the state should promote that practice. These are considerations at different levels. Nevertheless, there is a famous argument to the effect that the liberal ideal is in principle impossible. Some critics of liberalism claim that the liberal pluralist state, as the supposed enactment of toleration, does not really exist. What is happening, they say, is that the state is subtly enforcing one set of principles (roughly in favor of individual choice—at least, consumer choice—social cooperation, and business efficiency) while the convictions that people previously held deeply, on matters of religion or sexual behavior or the significance of cultural experience, dwindle into private tastes. On this showing, liberalism will come close to being “just another sectarian doctrine”: the phrase that Rawls used precisely in explaining what liberalism had to avoid being.

What is the critic's justification for saying that the liberal state is “subtly enforcing” one set of attitudes rather than another? Nagel distinguishes sharply between *enforcing* something like individualism, on the one hand, and the practices of liberal toleration, on the other, though he honestly and correctly admits that the educational practices, for instance, of the liberal state are not “equal in their effects.” This is an important distinction, and it can make some significant difference in practice. Being proselytized or coerced by militant individualism is not the same thing as merely seeing one's traditional religious surroundings eroded by a modern liberal society. The liberal's opponents must concede that there is something in the distinction, but this does not mean that they will be convinced by the use that the liberal makes of it, because it is not a distinction that is neutral in its inspiration. It is asymmetrically skewed in the liberal direction. This is because it makes a lot out of a difference of procedure, whereas what matters to a nonliberal believer is the difference of outcome. I doubt whether we can find an argument of principle that satisfies the purest and strongest aims of the value of liberal toleration, in the sense that it does not rely on skepticism or on the contingencies of power, and also could in principle explain to rational people whose deepest convictions were not in favor of individual autonomy and related values that they should think a state better that let their values decay in preference to enforcing them.

If toleration as a practice is to be defended in terms of its being a value, then it will have to appeal to substantive opinions about the good, in particular the good of individual autonomy, and these opinions will extend to the value and the meaning of personal characteristics and virtues associated with toleration, just as they will to the political activities of imposing or refusing to impose various substantive outlooks. This is not

cated to toleration as an intrinsic value or to the respect for autonomy that underlies toleration as a virtue. As a virtue, it provides a special kind of foundation for the practice of toleration, and one that is specially Kantian, not only in its affinities but in what it demands: its worth lies partly in its difficulty, in its requirement that one should rise not only above one's own desires but above one's desire to secure the fullest expression of one's own values.

It may be that the best hopes for toleration as a practice lie not so much in this virtue and its demand that one combine the pure spirit of toleration with one's detestation of what has to be tolerated. Hope may lie rather in modernity itself and in its principal creation, international commercial society. It is still possible to think that the structures of this international order will encourage skepticism about religious and other claims to exclusivity and about the motives of those who impose such claims. Indeed, it can help to encourage restraint within religions themselves. When such skepticism is set against the manifest harms generated by intolerance, there is a basis for the practice of toleration, a basis that is allied to liberalism but is less ambitious than the pure value of liberal toleration, which rests on the belief in autonomy. It is close to a tradition that can be traced to Montesquieu and to Constant, which the late Judith Shklar called "the liberalism of fear."²

It is a good question whether toleration is a temporary problem. Perhaps toleration will prove to have been an interim value, serving a period between a past when no one had heard of it and a future in which no one will need it. At the present moment, in fact, the idea that intolerant outlooks will sink away from the world seems incredible: such outlooks are notably asserting themselves. If they are successful enough, there will once more be not much room for toleration; it will be the tolerant who, hopelessly, will be asking to be tolerated. More probably, we can expect in the medium term some situation in which there will be a standoff between liberal toleration and intolerant outlooks of various kinds. However, as I implied earlier, one thing that the modern international order does make less likely is the self-contained enforcement of opinion in one society over a long time. It will be harder than in the past for a cultural environment of fanatical belief to coincide for a considerable length of time with a center of state power, remaining shielded from external influences. Liberalism and its opponents will probably coexist on closer terms than across tightly controlled national boundaries.

In those circumstances, toleration and its awkward practices are likely to remain both necessary and in some degree possible. If so, it will be all the clearer—clearer than it is if one concentrates on the very special case of the United States—that the practice of toleration has to be sustained not so much by a pure principle resting on a value of autonomy as by a

wider and more mixed range of resources. Those resources include an active skepticism against fanaticism and the pretensions of its advocates; conviction about the manifest evils of toleration's absence; and, quite certainly, power, to provide Hobbesian reminders to the more extreme groups that they will have to settle for coexistence.

Notes

* A shorter version of this paper has been published in the *UNESCO Courier*, June 1992.

1. Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 156.

2. See her article with that title in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

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TOLERATION

AN ELUSIVE VIRTUE

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