Some Remarks On Tolerance And Education

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I

In the multicultural world of today, it is quite common to emphasize the need for tolerance. This is not a new phenomenon; philosophers such as John Locke, Voltaire and John Stuart Mill were among its early defenders, and among the more recent ones we find John Rawls and Michael Walzer. Since today’s societies are made up of people with different values, backgrounds, tastes, customs, lifestyles and likings, many regard tolerance as a prerequisite not only between different societies but also within a single community that value equality and wishes to maintain some kind of stability and peace. At first sight then, tolerance seems to be something we all should promote and likewise encourage and foster. Though as soon as one gives this a second thought, several problems come to the fore; for instance, what is this thing that we are so eager to promote? Is it a certain attitude? What do we mean when we say we should be tolerant? What should be tolerated and on what grounds? Is it possible to foster tolerance? If it is, how ought this to be done?

Instead of trying to answer all these interesting questions relating to tolerance in this particular paper, I will concentrate upon a few certain aspects. One of my purposes is simply to shed some light upon a few disputes concerning what may be called the core conception of toleration or tolerance.¹ Several thinkers have pointed out what to them seem to be the components or building bricks that together constitute tolerance, and I want to depict one of these suggestions. The first part of the paper will therefore consist in a presentation of a brief concept analysis of tolerance made by John Horton.² This analysis may provide a good point of departure in order to grasp what the controversies or different conceptions are all about. However, I would not be interested in this kind of inquiry if it was not of at least some interest

¹ I use “‘tolerance’ interchangeably with ‘toleration’”. Some writers do not, for instance W. Paul Vogt who uses toleration as a “separate category of governmental action”. Vogt writes that this takes place “when a government establishes legal supports to protect individuals from others who would not tolerate them”. As to tolerance, Vogt uses this “for the interpersonal realm of individuals’ attitudes and actions”. See W. Paul Vogt, Tolerance and Education, 1997, p. 7.
concerning certain normative questions. I will here pay some attention to what in a broad
sense is referred to as civic, moral and multicultural education, and hence my second aim will
be to somewhat explore whether it matters in an educational context how we understand
tolerance, and if so, in what way it matters.

II

In our ordinary understanding we may conceive of tolerance as a person simply putting up
with something or someone that she or he does not like or may be indifferent towards. But it
is possible to analyse this further; John Horton has suggested the following:

The principal components of the concept of toleration are: a tolerating subject; an
action, belief or practice which is the object of toleration; a tolerated subject, who
undertakes the action, holds the belief or engages in the practice; a negative attitude
on the part of the tolerator towards the object of toleration; and a significant
exercise of restraint in acting to interfere with that which is negatively valued by
the tolerator. 3

Before entering deeper into the more problematic elements, let us begin by considering the
tolerating subject, or the tolerator. It seems clear that tolerance can be exercised at different
“levels” or between different entities; tolerance may occur between persons and/or groups, as
well as between states, etc. In A Letter Concerning Toleration, Locke stated: “What I say
concerning the mutual toleration of private persons differing from another in religion, I
understand also of particular churches which stand, as it were, in the same relation to each
other as private persons among themselves.” 4 If we are to conceive of tolerance as something
that is only applicable to humans, then tolerance may be exercised whenever human beings
are involved.

The second constituent is not one but several: the object of tolerance may be an action as
well as a belief or practice, but there are more suggestions as to what may count as a proper
object of toleration, for instance values, lifestyles and human beings. Of course these often
merge, in the sense that a person may engage in a particular practice as an effect of a certain
value being embraced by that person (and certainly we do not have to settle for only one

3 Horton, p. 8.
4 John Locke, A letter concerning toleration, 1963, p. 15. Locke is probably not intending so say anything
detailed concerning the nature of this relation, but it is possible to reflect upon what it would mean to say that the
same relation prevails, and if this involves some idea of collectives as agents.
entity being a proper object of toleration!). But another point to make is that one can
distinguish between a certain entity being a proper object of tolerance (for instance norms and
lifestyles), and the “content” of that entity being a suitable object of tolerance (particular
norms or practices).

As a third component, we find the tolerated subject. This may seem a bit confusing; Horton
does not include this subject as one of the entities that may count as an object of toleration,
and still he says that this subject is being tolerated. Perhaps the important thing is that the
subject is being tolerated by virtue of being the subject that acts, believes or engages in a
certain practice. But why does Horton not include persons or humans as objects of toleration,
in the same way that actions, beliefs and practices are included? Maybe this has got to do with
an ambivalence concerning whether human beings may count as a proper object of tolerance;
some may very well find this a startling thing so say. A way of avoiding this is to say that
human beings never should count as primary objects of toleration, but only by virtue of being
the agents and believers acting in certain ways or embracing certain values.5

The fourth constituent is a negative attitude on the part of the tolerator towards the
tolerated object. But one may ask if a certain attitude is at all necessary for something being
an instance of toleration. Can we not conceive of tolerance as primarily certain actions, for
which no such thing as a particular attitude is needed? Sometimes I act tolerantly; why bother
whether a certain attitude has to be present or not? And there seems to be occasions when we
speak about such things as the tolerance exercised between states, or tolerant legislation, and
it looks like no attitude is present in those cases.

Firstly, we can indeed distinguish between tolerant actions and tolerance as a certain
attitude, and this allows us to say that a person acted tolerantly without us having to think of
her or him as a person with any specific attitudes. To possess a tolerant attitude may be
interpreted as a possession of a disposition to act tolerantly or to perform tolerant actions, and
people may definitely act in many different ways without being disposed to do so.6
Concerning the second question however, even if we may conceive of tolerant legislation as
an instance of toleration where no attitudes are present, it is more likely for this legislation to
be brought about and upheld if at least some people hold a certain attitude. Yet this is not to
say that the attitudes are or have to be “attitudes of tolerance”; perhaps tolerant legislation
would appear if we held other attitudes than the ones conceived of as tolerant. And perhaps an

5 I will make a brief return to this discussion below.
6 However, if an agent repeatedly performs certain actions, it would not be a too far-fetched guess that she is
disposed to act in the particular way.
even more tolerant society would appear if we did *not* possess these tolerant attitudes but other ones. Even if that is possible, it is tempting to believe that it would be an exception.

Now, even if we are not convinced concerning the necessity of any attitude whatsoever, let us all the same ponder on the proposed attitude being *negative*. Much have been said about how this “negativeness” is to be understood:

> [h]ere there are two schools of thought: some believe that toleration is a concept which can properly be applied only to things of which we disapprove morally. Others claim that it may equally properly be applied to things which are merely disliked. The former construe toleration narrowly, the latter more widely.\(^7\)

Peter Johnson is a representative for the first view in saying that a necessary condition for tolerance is that “it is exercised towards conduct which is sincerely regarded as wrong”.\(^8\) Mary Warnock conceives of tolerance in a different way, saying “one would often think oneself tolerant if one refrained from criticising something that one disliked, hated, or regarded with varying degrees of distaste”.\(^9\)

An alternative to seeing these suggestions as “different schools of thought” is to consider them as different degrees of tolerance and Warnock argues that there is a continuum from moral disapproval to dislike. This however, may bring us to some quite different paths, and quandaries about how all this is related to metaethical questions. Peter Nicholson claims that toleration or tolerance “is a matter of moral choice, and our tastes and inclinations are irrelevant” and thereby sharply distinguishes between moral judgments and “tastes and inclinations”.\(^10\) He regards only the former an appropriate domain for tolerance and would probably not accept the idea of degrees of tolerance, in *this* sense.\(^11\)

But do we really have to make up our minds concerning the status of moral judgments before we are allowed to talk about the negative component involved in toleration? Perhaps too much emphasis is given the *attitude*; why settle for one understanding of the negative constituent being the one and only proper for tolerance? Why not simply say that the

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11 I suppose that he could accept other differences in degree concerning tolerance, such as for instance a difference in strength of moral disapproval.
“negativeness” may include dislike and moral disapproval, and resist taking a stand on whether this is a difference in kind or degree? Sometimes I am inclined to say that I tolerate something and with this I want to say that I do not like a certain thing; at other times I may say that I tolerate something and with this mean that I morally disapprove of it. I may still be called tolerant in both cases, since we are able to put more weight on other things and/or constituents than the negative attitude. The same goes for which interpretation that is the most correct or accurate one. Even if we agree on the negative attitude being a necessary component of tolerance, we do not have to attribute all components equal importance. And similarly, perhaps we do not have to form such a firm link between “negative” and “attitude”, but can allow ourselves to talk about a “negativeness” without having to decide whether this has got to do with an attitude or not.

But there are more things to consider concerning the negative attitude. Do we really have to assert that I am the one possessing the negative attitude if we are to say that I am tolerant? Peter Gardner writes that “this is not a necessary condition for the use of the concept of tolerance; it is good enough for the proper use of the term if others have had, have or are likely to have such attitudes”. Now, one can dwell upon whether this is good enough, but let us just settle with that Horton’s fourth component (a negative attitude on the part of the tolerator towards the object of toleration) can be questioned in several ways.

Horton explicates the fifth and last constituent (in the literature sometimes referred to as “the power condition”) as a considerable “exercise of restraint in acting to interfere with that which is negatively valued by the tolerator”, and writes that this has got to do with the exercise of toleration, not with the disposition. One does not have to have the power to interfere to possess a tolerant disposition, but “if a person or group had sufficient power then it would not choose to use it intolerantly”. This goes for the negative attitude as well; to be disposed to act tolerantly only demands that if I were to dislike something and do not interfere, (then) I am exercising tolerance. Now, perhaps one should add that I am thus far only “formally” exercising tolerance, that is, what I am doing can be described in terms of Horton’s components, but nothing is hitherto said concerning whether we actually would say

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12 However, that I sometimes prefer to say that I morally disapprove of something instead of saying that I do not like it may indicate that there actually is a difference of importance present. What I prefer or find appropriate to say in these matters, may not be as arbitrary as it sounds here.
14 Horton, p. 8.
15 Horton, 8.
that what I am doing is tolerant. To be able to do so, we also need a normative background to provide us with those norms and values that we endorse.16

Let me recall the question as to whether human beings might constitute a proper object of toleration and briefly return to that discussion. At least one philosopher, David Heyd, ends up saying just that in arguing for a “perceptual shift”. His main idea is that by engaging in a kind of “personalising” (to switch our focus from the particular belief to the subject holding the belief) we will escape the weighing of reasons for and against interference that may appear when one considers whether to interfere or not:

Tolerant people overcome the drive to interfere in the life of another not because they come to believe that the reasons for restraint are weightier than the reasons for disapproval, but because attention is shifted from the object of disapproval to the humanity or the moral standing of the subject before them.17

I do not think that Heyd intends this to be a switch of tolerance in the sense of simply replacing the object of toleration in a trivial way, but rather something that diminishes intolerance through a different way of “perceiving” the person in front of me. It is of course desirable that this switch has that particular effect, but there are no guarantees. Instead one might argue that as an alternative of not liking a certain lifestyle, one ends up not liking the other person. This is a rather ungenerous reading of Heyd, but my main point is that if we are to keep the negative attitude and something that we describe as a tolerated object, while at the same time engage in the perceptual shift, we may end up tolerating human beings. And some of us do not find that an appealing thought, at least not if we prefer to make some kind of everyday distinction between person and thing.

Yet, that human beings are the proper objects of tolerance, is exactly what Heyd says: “According to the perceptual conception, only human beings are, strictly speaking, the objects of toleration.”18

Will the “perceptual shift” help us in escaping the difficulties concerning whether we ought to interfere or not? Certainly, if we are to understand it somehow “psychologically”, the understanding I get by involving in this shift of why someone encompass a certain belief (for instance, facts about the persons background or how the particular belief relates to her or his

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16 Horton stresses this point in saying that “toleration is an inherently normative concept”. Horton, p. 9.
other beliefs and way of life) may be of help when I am to decide what to do. But sometimes it may not.

III

Now, do these conceptual questions have any significance? Does it matter in what way we understand or analyse different concepts and/or what components we prefer to hold as their constituents? Surely, the answer to these questions ought to be that that depends on what kind of significance we are looking for. I agree with Horton in that conceptual concerns sometimes are of importance to practical ones; however, when they do matter, they do so in different ways and their importance vary. So, does it matter how we understand tolerance, and in what way does it matter?

There is at least one way in that the analysis matters. Whenever we are engaged in a discussion concerning tolerance, it certainly makes things easier if we have got some kind of consensus regarding what we are talking about. On the other hand, firstly, this goes not only for tolerance but also for most, if not all concepts, and secondly, we often achieve this consensus not through a concept analysis, but through a consensus in use.\footnote{This consensus in use is probably not unrelated to a consensus concerning what the concept may “include” if we were to involve ourselves in conceptual analysis; my point is simply that we do not involve ourselves in such an exercise prior to using the concepts.}

The tolerance analysis may also be of a certain meta-ethical interest as to how we are to conceive the attitudinal condition and it seems clear that the analysis is of some theoretical importance.

A more pressing question (at least for a philosopher interested in normative and applied ethics) may be if this kind of concept analysis is of any practical importance. Does the analysis of the concept of tolerance have any relevance when it comes to normative issues?

In order to investigate this question it may be rewarding to turn to the vast discourse of education and especially to what is called civic, moral and multicultural education or CMMC\footnote{This abbreviation is taken from Vogt, p. 177ff.} My present concern is not the “CMMC” that pupils inevitably and sometimes implicitly get by merely attending school, for instance those norms and values that teachers and other pupils possess, but the CMMC that is spoken of in curricula’s and syllabi. Without getting into quandaries as to what constitutes and distinguishes civic from moral and multicultural education, it suffices to mention that these are often accentuated in national
curricula’s of several countries; sometimes as special subjects in the syllabi, at other times as important aspects of every subject.\textsuperscript{21} And it is not too unlikely to assume that CMMC will be even more emphasized in the future.

Many curricula’s stress the importance of particular norms and values, and it ought not to surprise anyone that one of these is tolerance.\textsuperscript{22} If we as adults ought to be tolerant, it seems necessary to foster the pupils to be tolerant so that they eventually and hopefully become tolerant adults and citizens, and it is declared that the educational system has a vital mission in promoting this virtue in every child and adolescent.

Now, if we are to retain our core concept of toleration as suggested by Horton and others, this seems to cause us some problems.\textsuperscript{23} What are we to say concerning the call for schools and teachers to promote tolerance?\textsuperscript{24} Note that the question is not: “Ought schools to promote or foster tolerance?” but rather “What (if any) implications do Horton’s concept have for the imperative to foster tolerance?” Answers to the first question would be given in terms of arguments for why we ought to tolerate or be tolerant, such as that tolerance diminishes the risk for conflicts; that it is closely related to freedom and autonomy and if we value these highly we should be tolerant, since tolerance allows people not only to choose their own way of life but also actually pursue it; that it is reasonable to be tolerant;\textsuperscript{25} that tolerance may help us on our way in search for truth etc.

Surely we can interpret the above stated imperative (that schools and teachers ought to promote tolerance) merely as a wish for more children to become tolerant and for already tolerant children to become even more so. But how does one become more tolerant?

If one of the main aims of schools were simply to make children more tolerant, this could be achieved by increasing their disapproval of more and more conduct, but at the same time encouraging them to choose not to act on that disapproval. The

\textsuperscript{21} One can study ethics as a separate subject as well as discussing norms and values in for instance religious studies and/or history.

\textsuperscript{22} Concerning the educational system in Great Britain, Edward Hulmes writes that “the inculcation of tolerance is a major aim in education”, Edward Hulmes, \textit{Education and Cultural Diversity}, 1989, p. 18.

\textsuperscript{23} It will probably do so not only when we are concerned with education, but in every context where toleration is involved.

\textsuperscript{24} Vogt distinguishes political toleration from moral and social tolerance. I do not take that into account here.

\textsuperscript{25} This is Locke’s view: “The toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion is so agreeable to…the genuine reason of mankind, that it seems monstrous for men to be so blind as not to perceive the necessity and advantage of it in so clear a light.” Locke, p. 15.
highly tolerant person would then be somebody who disapproved of much, but
always refrained from acting on that disapproval.26

The quote above indicates that there are several variables involved; it seems possible to
increase the disapproval or dislike as well as the acceptance (the refraining from interfering)
and the number of phenomena being disapproved of or disliked. The first and the third
suggestion seem quite contra intuitive, but Vogt touches upon the first line in saying that
“were a person actually to tolerate something he or she hated, this would count as more
tolerance than if the person were to tolerate something about which he or she had less intense
negative feelings”.27 Concerning the third idea, it may sound a bit odd to say that a certain
person has become more tolerant, by an increase in the number of disliked objects. On the
other hand, by increasing the range of possible items to tolerate, there ought to exist further
occasions for me to exercise tolerance and make use of my disposition to be tolerant in
actually acting tolerantly. If I am inclined to dislike very rare or few phenomena, I would
seldom get the opportunity to act tolerantly. However, this may sound as if it is desirable to
maximize the number of tolerant actions in the world, and that seems quite unlikely. We may
conclude that the wish for children to become more tolerant is almost certain a wish for them
to be more accepting, and it is this that one wants to accomplish by CMMC.

The above show that we get some negative and contra intuitive consequences out of
retaining the core concept with the negative attitude included. Some might consider these
strange effects to be good arguments in order to get rid of the negative attitude as a
component of the concept of tolerance. However, I want to consider some discourses
concerning tolerance, which will be easier to understand if we retain the negative aspect as a
component.

There are several arguments against tolerance and some of them may be captured in the
phrase “tolerance is not enough”. Vogt stresses that multicultural education aims not at
tolerance but rather broadmindedness, and writes that many educationists considers toleration
to be “a way one might enter the path leading toward valuing diversity”.28 This seems to
involve the idea that toleration somehow does not fit with valuing diversity wholeheartedly,

26 Les Burwood and Ross Wyeth, “Should schools promote toleration?”, Journal of Moral Education, Vol. 27,
27 Vogt, p. 3. This kind of discussion can be found in much literature, for instance in Philippa Foot’s “Virtues
and Vices”, where she considers the question of which man is the most virtuous; the man who finds it hard to be
virtuous, or the one who finds it easy. See Philippa Foot, Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral
Philosophy, 1978, p. 11.
28 Vogt, p. 188.
because it does not “go all the way”. It is quite easy to suspect that it is the negative attitude or “negativeness” involved in the concept of tolerance that is the main target here, and that one cannot be considered to value diversity if one retains a negative attitude. It may be fruitful to here (once again) distinguish between different entities being valued or tolerated: I may value or cherish a diversity of norms, values and practices generally, but still dislike or morally disapprove of a particular norm and/or practice, and therefore be “unable” to appreciate this particular practice in the same manner. This leaves room for tolerance while still emphasizing the value of diversity and a support for pluralism. However, if a person was to dislike or morally disapprove of many practices, I do not think that we would continue to consider her or him a person valuing or cherishing diversity.

Concerning the Argument About Diversity (which comes in several versions, not all of them of interest in this particular context), Vogt explicates one version as: “Some wish to tame diversity by embracing it, liking it, loving it. They challenge the negativistic character of tolerance and say that we should respect and encourage, not merely tolerate, differences among our fellows.” In saying this, Vogt is not doing justice to all of those who consider tolerance not to be enough, since all of them certainly do not wish to “tame diversity” by the quest for more than tolerance. The claims for respect and recognition instead of tolerance get very understandable when one bears the “negativeness” imbedded in the tolerance concept in mind, but those claims are certainly not intended to tame diversity. However, maybe some actually want to tame diversity, and perhaps it is in this spirit that Burwood and Wyeth writes: “Our argument here is that educating for toleration includes not simply learning to refrain from acting on disapproval, but coming to disapprove of fewer things.”

That the claims for respect and recognition get comprehensible in light of the so-called minimal toleration does not, however, entail that a tolerated group or person does not at all benefit from being tolerated. A certain group may benefit from tolerating another group, but the second group may benefit from being tolerated as well. And further, the group being tolerated may have to act as tolerators themselves. The asymmetry of toleration is frequently emphasized, and rightly so, but that it sometimes constitutes a tool for an oppressive majority,

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29 The negative attitude does not have to be the target here; the critique may be directed at a negative interpretation of the power condition (that one should refrain from interfering). Some consider a positive interpretation of it to be more accurate: that one should encourage or support the things one dislikes or morally disapproves of.
30 Vogt, p. 6. In emphasizing both respect and encouragement, the quote seems to have the negative attitude as well as the negative interpretation of the power condition as its target.
31 Burwood and Wyeth, p. 4. Note that they do not emphasize the things one should not disapprove of, but the number of things.
does not mean that it is never good to tolerate. As long as we have differences, not-likings and a wish to live in peace, tolerance may do its work by reaching as far as we believe it ought to reach.

IV

In this paper I have tried to show that how we analyse the concept of toleration matters to some extent. If the core concept of tolerance does not involve a negative attitude (on part of the tolerator), we get rid of some disturbing “paradoxes” concerning the “negativeness”. On the other hand, if we wish to retain the negative attitude in the concept, at least one thing makes better sense: the quest for more than tolerance. However, that the discourse and the claims of recognition get easier to understand is not an argument for retaining the negative component. But that need not to cause us problems; my primary interest here was not to argue for what concept of tolerance we ought to adopt. I am merely interested in what consequences can be drawn from different understandings of the concept. And when educationists are to teach about tolerance in civic, moral and multicultural education, this may perhaps be a starting point before entering more substantial discussions concerning the limits of tolerance.