

## Tolerance in Character and the Character of Tolerance

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It was a pleasure to read Ann Chinnery's well-crafted essay. In this response I will try to advance the investigation into tolerance she has started. Leaving aside the question of whether tolerance should be regarded as a virtue, in the philosophical literature it is widely conceptualized as a trait of character in contrast to other sorts of attributes, and in my response I will treat it as such. It is often helpful to consider individual attributes in relation to character as a whole, rather than in isolation. Hence, before discussing the particular attribute "tolerance," a few comments about the concept of "character" in general are in order.

### TOLERANCE IN CHARACTER

Chinnery is quite right, I think, to call into question the adequacy of tolerance alone to advance such aims as participatory democracy, equality, and social justice. But it is important to recognize that human character usually comprises quite a variety of attributes. For example, a person with a conventionally "good" character might possess the attributes of kindness, generosity, patience, honesty, and courage; together, these attributes are widely thought to be inextricably linked to *eudaimonia*, variously translated as happiness, flourishing, or well-being. It is difficult to imagine any single attribute that would be adequate to all the situations and relations in which humans are typically involved. To flourish humans need many different attributes.<sup>1</sup>

There is considerable debate over the relation between the different attributes that comprise an individual character. Some hold the view that, in the example under consideration, kindness, generosity, and patience are mutually reinforcing and work together to promote particular ends. Others hold that these different attributes provide something like a system of checks and balances.<sup>2</sup> Experience suggests that there is some truth to both these positions. There are times when attributes work in relative harmony; this is often the case with, for example, kindness and generosity. But there are also times when the attributes of a character are in tension; often enough, honesty and kindness pull in different directions. However this debate is settled, it seems clear that different situations call forth different attributes. A person who possesses all the qualities under consideration here may demonstrate kindness with a struggling college student, patience with a child, blunt honesty with a colleague, and so on. Beyond that, the manner in which any of these (or other) attributes is manifested will likely depend on the particulars at hand; kindness, patience, honesty, and the rest, can all be enacted in many different ways.

When viewed as but one of a whole array of attributes a person may possess, all of which are context dependent in various ways, tolerance appears to be less problematic and potentially more helpful than it does when viewed in isolation. A relatively morally mature person may well count tolerance among her attributes, but such a person might also be courageous, honest, and tenacious; she may certainly embrace social justice among other ideals. Tolerance does not require, as some

apparently suggest, turning a blind eye toward cruelty and injustice; a tolerant person need not forfeit her capacity for moral judgment. Before any firm conclusions are drawn, however, there is a need to grapple with the character of tolerance itself.

#### THE CHARACTER OF TOLERANCE

As Chinnery points out, tolerance is often thought to entail putting up with someone or something that one would rather not; I am reminded that doctors often seek to establish how well a patient tolerates a noxious or painful treatment. More positively, as Chinnery also points out, tolerance may entail at least the “recognition of others’ beliefs and practices,” and a willingness to “give space” to “someone or something.” A survey of even a handful of the thousands of web sites on “tolerance” reveals that, to many observers, tolerance has even more positive connotations. On most of these sites the concept of tolerance is yoked together with ideals such as non-violence, equality, justice, and peace. The Museum of Tolerance at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, for instance, tries to educate visitors about racism, prejudice, and the Holocaust as part of its effort to promote universal human rights. The United Nations and UNESCO, both of which celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in 1995, proclaimed that year the International Year for Tolerance. These organizations define tolerance as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. Tolerance is harmony in difference.” Of this attribute, tolerance.org says, “We view tolerance as a way of thinking and feeling, but most importantly, of acting that gives us peace in our individuality, respect for those unlike us, the wisdom to discern humane values and the courage to act upon them.”<sup>3</sup>

As the foregoing may suggest, the word “tolerance” is used in connection with many different attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, and capacities. It is not a clearly bounded attribute, but rather one that is informed by and informs others. Further, tolerance admits of degrees; at one extreme, tolerance connotes an ability to endure, and at the other an ability to embrace. And while “tolerance” is usually regarded as a purely moral attribute, it may also be regarded as an intellectual attribute. Indeed, philosophers working within the tradition of “virtue epistemology” might well consider tolerance an intellectual virtue. At the very least, it seems safe to claim that the willingness and ability to tolerate new ideas is a prerequisite to actually possessing or engaging them.

At several points in her essay Chinnery asks whether tolerance might serve a “strategic function” in classrooms. While tolerance names a fairly wide range of attributes, I question whether these attributes ought to be regarded as strategies. To my way of thinking, to be tolerant is not merely to behave in a certain way; it is to be a certain kind of person — to embody tolerance. Perhaps conceptualizing tolerance in this way rather than as a strategy is more likely to promote Chinnery’s hope that “genuine moral dialogue” will eventually be possible even across differences that at one time appear insurmountable. The distinction between behaving and being is important in this context. One can certainly feign tolerance without actually being a tolerant person. Of course, it may turn out that genuine tolerance does not always, or even very often, enable the kind of dialogue or moral engagement

Chinnery seeks. But it is hard to imagine that merely strategically enacting tolerance will have a more fruitful result.

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Many thanks to Jeff Kuhr for his willingness to discuss the concept of tolerance.

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1. Clearly, character traits alone do not ensure a happy life; there is need for all sorts of material support as well.

2. See, for example, Amelie Rorty, "Virtues and Their Vicissitudes," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 136–148.

3. See <http://www.tolerance.org/about/tolerance.html>.