

The Need for and Inevitability of Educational Intolerance

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Over a dozen years ago I published "The Need for and Inevitability of Moral Indoctrination."¹ In that article I demonstrated that indoctrination is neither inherently pernicious, nor absolutely avoidable. Furthermore, I argued that responsible and dedicated educators know when and when not to indoctrinate students. In a vein similar to the earlier article, I will here argue that responsible and dedicated educators do not tolerate, in their students, beliefs, values, or actions that lack sufficient supporting reasons and evidence. In other words, I will maintain that competent educators recognize the need for, and inevitability of, intolerance, and they realize that either tolerance cannot coexist with responsible teaching or, if it does, then tolerance in such situations is not a virtue.

STUDENTS' THOUGHTS/FEELINGS

For the past few years I have asked my students to complete survey questions, sometimes at the beginning of the course, other times at the end, and still other times at both the beginning and end. While I often change the wording of the questions, the intended meaning has stayed the same. One such question is: "Can a person's beliefs or values be criticized without being critical of the person -- without attacking the person's integrity and character?" Invariably, the vast majority of the students answer "No." In the space open for optional comments, many students elaborate on their "no" answers: "What I believe can't be separated from who I am"; "To criticize what's important to someone is to criticize that person"; "Facts are public, while values and feelings are private"; "No one should ask others how they feel if she's not going to accept the answer uncritically."

I think it would be safe to say that most students expect their beliefs and values will be tolerated, especially by professionals -- such as teachers -- who should know better than to be intolerant of another's feelings. Yet, herein lies a problem. For most students -- and too many educators -- whenever students are asked their opinions, thoughts, or judgments on a given issue, it is automatically assumed that no views warrant criticism since the students are only expressing themselves. Despite the various and complex rationales that can be offered for why students' views are to be tolerated, most explanations seem to rely upon the alleged distinction between what is true (that is, what the majority of people accept as true) and what is one's view (that is, how one analyzes and evaluates something). The notion working here is that if something is not true by consensus -- is not a fact -- then anything goes, for there cannot be a faulty view concerning that about which there is no consensus.

There is, however, another assumption at work here -- an assumption that is as obscure as it is dubious. I am referring to the controversial thought/feeling relation. In the classroom, most students and teachers respect another's feelings and would not judge someone's expressed feelings as mistaken or faulty. So far so good. Yet often, students treat thought and feeling as identical in meaning, as evidenced by the common practice of using the terms interchangeably: "I feel/think stealing is always wrong"; "I think/feel that grades should be eliminated"; "I feel/think that smoking is worse for one than is drinking"; "I think/feel we have the right to stay ignorant." Once thought and feeling become interchangeable concepts, it should be no surprise that students, in particular, are bewildered, if not angered and offended, by teachers criticizing or evaluating their thoughts. Students are alarmed because they took their teacher's question of "What do you think?" as giving

them permission to express their feelings freely and without threat of rejection. And teachers break their promise by subjecting students' feelings/thoughts to critical analysis and evaluation.

Putting together the alleged fact/opinion distinction with the dubious thought/feeling conversion, we end up with the educational restriction that only generally agreed upon truths and falsehoods are to be the proper domain of classroom teaching and evaluation, and if anything else is included, noncritical tolerance of students' thoughts and feelings should be prescribed. Adding force to this prescription is the mounting emphasis on self-esteem. "Poor self-esteem is the single factor underlying social maladies as disparate as chronic welfare dependency and academic failure."² And to recognize the importance of self-esteem entails that we treat each person as having "equal value though we may not agree with their views, their behavior, or their way of expressing themselves."³ To accept such recommendations is to take tolerance seriously. Yet it is not clear whether educators are supposed to tolerate all of these students' views, behaviors, and expressions, or only their personal opinions and feelings, excluding matters of fact.

THE MEANING OF TOLERANCE

To clarify the range and content of the proposed educational tolerance, we need to be as exact as possible about the meaning of, and conditions for, tolerance, in general. Virtually everyone speaks, reads, and hears "tolerance" with a confidence that belies their ability to explain its meaning. Meanwhile, scholars lack consensus on their definitions of, and qualifications for, tolerance.⁴

Most dictionaries characterize "tolerance" as the act of permitting, or the capacity to endure those beliefs or practices that differ from or conflict with one's own. Yet even this dictionary definition can be challenged. Richard Pratte questions whether permissiveness should be understood as a central quality of tolerance, for "permissiveness may be employed to express a view of not caring. We may be permissive because we simply do not care enough to act otherwise."⁵ Furthermore, as Thomas Hearn concludes, if "tolerance were exhausted by 'permissiveness,' intolerance would have to do with the strict enforcement of norms or adherence to practices."⁶ But surely a police officer, for example, who strictly enforces the speed laws is not being intolerant. Therefore, tolerance should not be understood as being restricted to permissiveness. Equally, tolerance should not be confused with what is entailed by relativism, pluralism, or skepticism. Each of these positions excludes (for different reasons) the condition of judging another's thought, value, or action as being wrong, faulty, or harmful. Only with such a negative judgment is there the option to tolerate another's beliefs or practices. In other words, one must be capable of intolerance in order to be responsibly tolerant. Finally, given the questionable linking of tolerance with permissiveness, one is left with a concept of tolerance that centers on the capacity and willingness to endure those beliefs and practices that differ from, or are in conflict with one's own.

How important is the difference between "differ from" and "conflict with?" Clearly they are different, for while all conflicts involve differences, not all differences are conflicting. More exactly, beliefs or practices are conflicting if, and only if, it is logically impossible for the beliefs or practices of the parties in the dispute to be equally justified. And since tolerance is so often looked upon as the recognition and acceptance of a difference that, nonetheless, involves equally valid judgments, then tolerance cannot be seen as applying to conflicting beliefs or practices.⁷ Accordingly, one cannot tolerate another's beliefs or practices if they are interpreted as conflicting with one's own, for that which is judged to be in conflict with one's own beliefs or practices cannot, at the same time, be judged to have an equally justified status as one's own beliefs or practices. Furthermore, while we might not understand, or might find it difficult to appreciate, for example, what another person puts into her mouth as food, we surely do not judge it an occasion for tolerance. Therefore, in addition to conflicting beliefs or practices, instances of personal preference should not be understood as being open to tolerance.

What then is tolerance? To answer this question I suggest that we concentrate on the necessary conditions for one person to tolerate another's beliefs or practices.⁸ Sally is tolerant of Jim's belief or practice if, and only if, all five of the following conditions are fulfilled:

1. Sally is aware of Jim's belief or practice;
2. Sally judges Jim's belief or practice wrong, faulty, or harmful;
3. Sally sincerely desires to criticize or to change Jim's belief or practice;
4. Sally assumes the ability and opportunity to criticize or change Jim's belief or practice;
5. Sally withholds criticism of Jim's belief or practice, or refrains from attempting to change Jim's belief or practice, primarily out of respect for the idea that Jim has the right to think and behave, in this situation, however he wishes.

WHAT PASSES FOR TOLERANCE

If tolerance is thought of as applying either to conflicting beliefs or practices, or to personal tastes, then "tolerance is in fact, impossible for anyone."⁹ Accordingly, true believers cannot be tolerant. Actually, anyone who is committed to a belief or practice cannot tolerate dissenting beliefs or practices. But what of tolerance as the capacity to endure those beliefs or practices that differ from one's own? Yet isn't this an imbalance? If Jim's beliefs or practices are only different from Sally's (for example, while Sally drives her car forth and back to work, Jim rides his motorcycle), isn't Sally enduring an overreaction to the difference? And if Jim's beliefs or practices are such that Sally enduring them is the appropriate response (for example, while Sally believes that the democratic process is the best possible social/political arrangement, Jim believes that only tyranny can bring about social/political good), aren't the beliefs or practices conflicting, not merely different? Either way it will not pass muster: If tolerance involves enduring conflicting beliefs or practices, then tolerance is not possible, for conflicting beliefs or practices can never be judged to have the same status or value; if tolerance involves permitting differing beliefs or practices, then tolerance is not possible, for as long as another's beliefs or practices are inoffensive or nonchallenging, and are such that there is no disagreement, then there is no possible cause to prompt the action, attitude, disposition, or character of tolerance.

What, then, passes for tolerance? What are people really doing when they mistakenly take themselves as tolerating another's beliefs or practices? I suggest that there are at least eight alternative answers to this question, and, befitting the concept of tolerance, they are equally valid.

1. Sally judges that it would be foolish and nonproductive to either try to show Jim how mistaken he is or to try to convert Jim into believing or acting as Sally does. This decision is based on the awareness of the high likelihood of Jim being as deeply committed to his beliefs or practices (for example, Buddhism) as Sally is to her beliefs or practices (for example, Christianity); consequently, as Sally would not change her beliefs and practices, she realizes that Jim would not change his beliefs and practices. So, Sally concludes, it would be foolish to try to change Jim's thoughts and behavior.

2. Sally values, most highly, the absence of any fights, any disagreements, any tension between herself and those whose beliefs or practices are contrary to hers. In other words, Sally is more concerned with keeping a noncombatant relationship with Jim than she is concerned, either with the quality of her own beliefs or practices, or with the quality of others' beliefs or practices. Accordingly, Sally neither criticizes Jim, nor defends herself when Jim criticizes her.

3. Sally just does not care how others judge her beliefs or practices, for she does not consider others' judgments (for example, Jim's judgments) as having any relevance to the quality of her beliefs or practices. Sally thinks that the only person who is authorized to evaluate her beliefs or practices is herself, and she extends this same individualistic thesis to others. Therefore, Sally criticizes no one.

4. Sally fears, above all else, being publicly proven mistaken in her beliefs or practices, and she realizes that the likelihood of this happening increases proportionally with the frequency of her criticism of other's beliefs or practices. Therefore, in order to be assured that she will not be criticized by others, Sally criticizes no one's beliefs or practices.

5. Sally, knowing how embarrassing it is to be criticized, does not wish to subject Jim to such embarrassment. Therefore, even though Sally does not agree with Jim, she does not criticize or attempt to change Jim's belief and practice.

6. Sally judges that it is not worth her time and effort to criticize or attempt to change Jim's beliefs or practices, for she does not care that much about either. For example, while Sally does not like Jim's habit of publicly picking his nose, she does not judge it worth her time and effort to inform Jim that she dislikes his habit and why she dislikes it.

7. Sally judges that the harm or wrong done by Jim thinking or behaving as he does is less than the harm or wrong that would result from changing or trying to change Jim's beliefs or practices. For example, Sally judges that Jim, being the type of person he is, could very well be worse off if he gave up his belief in immortality and adopted the position that Sally deems superior. In other words, Sally judges that Jim does not have a strong enough character to accommodate the subsequent changes that would result from Jim's change in belief -- therefore, Sally neither criticizes nor attempts to change Jim's belief.¹⁰

8. Sally believes that certain controversies -- notably moral, religious, and political issues -- cannot be justifiably resolved. Given this assumption, Sally concludes that the only reasonable thing for her to do is to refrain from making any negative judgments of those whose beliefs or practices differ from hers. For example, while Sally holds that certain abortions are morally permissible, Jim holds that they are never morally permissible. Yet, since Sally assumes that moral beliefs or practices cannot be justified, then the only reasonable thing for Sally to do is to refrain from criticizing Jim's moral beliefs about abortion.¹¹

WHAT TOLERANCE IS NOT

Common to the eight descriptions is the deliberate absence of Sally either criticizing alleged faults in Jim's beliefs or practices, or attempting to change Jim's beliefs or practices to those of her own. In this respect, common to the eight cases is the appearance of tolerance. Yet, in each case, at least one of the five necessary conditions for tolerance is not fulfilled. Furthermore, as was established in the second section of this paper, tolerance of a conflicting, or an equally valued belief or practice, is not possible. Tolerance, as originally conceived, is a myth. Accordingly, if we use the eight cases as instances of, or as representative of, what passes as tolerance, then what is at issue is our attitude and behavior toward those who believe or practice what we judge to be wrong. We do not tolerate beliefs and practices that we judge to be faulty. Rather, we choose to refrain from criticizing or attempting to change the believers and practitioners whose beliefs and practices we judge to be faulty. And we do this for a multitude of reasons, none of which is our respect for another's right to think or behave in a faulty way.

Contrary to popular opinion, one is not being tolerant when one withholds criticizing another's beliefs or practices, or when one refrains from attempting to change another's beliefs or practices. Equally fallacious is the widespread notion that tolerance is a virtue or a moral ideal. "To tolerate is first to condemn and then to put up with or, more simply, to put up with is itself to condemn....For these reasons toleration is far from a moral ideal; it is contaminated, so to speak, by that very implication of evil which its meaning contains."¹² Again, "it is difficult to explain why toleration should be considered a moral ideal where the thing tolerated is believed to be morally wrong, for thinking something morally wrong implies thinking it right to prevent it. And how can it be right to tolerate, or allow, something which is believed to be morally wrong?"¹³ Finally, it is important to

realize that the options of being tolerant or intolerant do not apply to situations that are ambiguous, or where there is either a scarcity of any kind of reasons and evidence, or the alternative views appear to be equally supported by reasons and evidence. On such occasions, one is to suspend relevant judgments or actions; this decision would express neither tolerance nor intolerance.

INTOLERANCE JUSTIFIED

Little else need be said of toleration in general than that it is either impossible or of doubtful moral worth. What, then, of educational tolerance? Perhaps the best way to start answering this question is to return to a conviction common to many teachers, but rejected by students: "The beliefs and reasons that are offered are separate from the person and can be examined in a respectful way without discrediting the person...The views and the reasons for holding them may be examined without threatening or invalidating the student who offers them."¹⁴ Perhaps so, but many students, over the years, have denied this. They agree with William Glasser who holds that "nothing we encounter leads to a greater or quicker loss of control than to be criticized. And, equally, it is harder to regain control when we are criticized than in any other situation."¹⁵ And the exceptional "perhaps so" would apply only to those students who have self-esteem. "While definitions vary, most experts agree that a person with high self-esteem derives his or her sense of security and well-being from inner contentment...self-esteem means appreciating our own worth and importance, and having the character to be accountable for ourselves and to act responsibly toward others."¹⁶

Most people, and certainly most students, have not achieved high self-esteem and therefore are unable to separate themselves from any criticism of their beliefs, values, or actions. So, there is no independent self that is insulated from criticism of the self's beliefs, values, or actions. And is this really that bad -- is it really that good for one to be able to separate oneself from one's actions (for example, a rapist from the act of raping)? Also, we know that people identify themselves by their qualities; who someone is cannot be described adequately without reference to what that person thinks, values, and does. To separate the thinker from her thoughts, the assessor from her assessments, the doer from her deeds is either impossible, or is a disservice to the person. Tolerance requires this separation and, as such, can be judged as misrepresentative, if not destructive of the person. On the other hand, intolerance assumes no such separation between self and attributes and, accordingly, faults the person when her thoughts, values, or actions are judged faulty.

To deny a separation between self and attributes does not, however, sanction a disregard for the well-being of those who are judged. Rather, this holistic concept of self treats people as malleable, responsible beings who can, under proper tutelage, change their thoughts, values, and actions, and in so doing become a different (presumably better) person.

Hugh Wilder characterizes the teaching approach exhibited by the principle of liberal tolerance as follows:

In evaluating assignments, and ultimately students, the teacher cares most about whether students are sincere in expressing themselves and with the reasons they have for thinking as they do. The specifics of what is thought are of less concern than is the relative quality of the argument used to support the specific conclusions.¹⁷

Wilder goes on to argue "that the principle of liberal tolerance is itself intolerable."¹⁸ This assessment draws from two lines of reasoning: 1) "Liberal tolerance can lead to epistemological relativism; and, epistemological relativism can lead to misology, or distrust and hatred of reason."¹⁹ 2) "We ought to care about what students think, not just about how they get their thoughts and how they argue for them."²⁰ Germane to our consideration is Wilder's second point, which he elaborates in moral terms: The principle of liberal tolerance is "a cover for a kind of moral cowardice...because it encourages teachers to not deal with students as whole people."²¹ Finally, "some beliefs are intolerable, and we are not caring about people when we tolerate their intolerable beliefs."²²

Ann Diller reminds us that "the tasks of teaching require us to make real demands upon students, to hold them to standards of achievement; to expect otherwise is to underrate the teaching function and to over romanticize the teacher-student relationship."²³ Also, if education's goal is the development of a particular kind of person,²⁴ and if tolerance involves respecting people as they are, then succeeding in our educational goals requires being intolerant of certain ways of thinking, valuing, and acting. As education is impossible without change, so change is irresponsible without a goal. To educate for a particular kind of person is to discourage the maintenance or development of certain types of persons. Therefore, educational intolerance is as necessary as it is unavoidable.

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1. Bruce B. Suttle, "The Need for and Inevitability of Moral Indoctrination," *Educational Studies* 12, no. 2 (1981).
 2. Wanda Urbansak, "Self-Esteem: The Hope of the Future," *New Woman* (March 1991): 52.
 3. Sarah Redshaw, "Philosophical Applications: Cultivating Alternative Approaches to Dispute Resolution," *Thinking, the Journal of Philosophy for Children* 11, no. 2 (1994): 12.
 4. For example, compare: Joshua Halberstam, "The Paradox of Tolerance," *The Philosophical Forum* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1982-83); Geoffrey Harrison, "Relativism and Tolerance," *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, ed M. Krausz and Jack W. Neiland (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Thomas K. Hearn, Jr., "On Tolerance," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 8, no. 2/no. 3 (1970); Gustav Ichheiser, "On 'Tolerance' and 'Fanticism': A Dilemma," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 24, no. 4, (Oct. 1969); Craig K. Ihara, "Moral Skepticism and Tolerance," *Teaching Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (July 1984); Jay Neuman, "The Idea of Religious Tolerance," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (July 1978); Richard Pratte, "Tolerance, Permissiveness, and Education," *Teachers College Record* 87, no. 1 (Fall 1985); R. J. Royce, "Pluralism, Tolerance and Moral Education," *Journal of Moral Education* 11, no. 3 (May 1982); Maurice Cranston, "Toleration," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 143-46; Susan Mendus, "Toleration," *The Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Vol. 2, ed. Lawrence C. Becker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), 1251-52; J. Budziszewski, *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgment* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1992).
 5. Pratte, "Tolerance, Permissiveness, and Education," 111.
 6. Hearn, "On Tolerance," 224.
 7. R. J. Royce, "Pluralism, Tolerance and Moral Education," 174.
 8. For a slightly different version, see Bruce B. Suttle's "On God Tolerating Evil," *Sophia* 26, no. 3 (October, 1987).
 9. Joshua Halberstam, "The Paradox of Tolerance," 190.
 10. Jay Newman makes a related point when he observes that there are three kinds of religious intolerance: philosophical, altruistic and prudential. "That is, men seek to change the religious beliefs of other men because they are concerned with either truth or their fellow man's welfare or their own welfare" in "The Idea of Religious Tolerance," 190.
 11. While I suggest that this description has only the appearance of tolerance, Ihara offers it as the core of his definition of tolerance in "Moral Skepticism and Tolerance."
 12. Cranston, "Toleration," 143.
 13. Mendus, "Toleration," 1251.
 14. Redshaw, "Philosophical Applications," 12.
 15. William Glasser, *Control Theory* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 164.
 16. Urbanska, "Self-Esteem," 52-54.
 17. Hugh T. Wilder, "The Philosopher as Teacher: Tolerance and Teaching Philosophy," *Professor's Duties: Ethical Issues in College Teaching*, ed. Peter J. Markie (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994): 129.
 18. Wilder, "Philosopher as Teacher," 134

19. Ibid., 137.

20. Ibid., 139.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 140.

23. Ann Diller, "Can We Reach A Reapproachment Between Educational Criticism and Nurturance?" *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994): 239.

24. Harvey Siegel, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness," *Philosophy of Education Society 1991* ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992).

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