

The Scope and Virtue of Educational Tolerance

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Professor Suttle challenges the common wisdom that tolerance is an obvious and even unconditional good in education. I myself share his concern that appeal to tolerance is too often used by educators and students to absolve themselves from critically and normatively confronting their beliefs and practices. Hostility to reason and truth in education is no chimerical problem. So, I think that Professor Suttle is right in trying to rehabilitate intolerance. Still, I am not convinced that tolerance is the enemy he makes it out to be. For conceptual and moral reasons, Professor Suttle wishes to severely limit the place of tolerance in education. I will propose that tolerance should have broader application than he suggests, and need not be morally vicious.

Consider first Professor Suttle's conceptual attack on common uses of "tolerance." He wishes to restrict "tolerance" to restraint exercised "primarily out of respect for the idea that [a person] has the right to think and behave...however he wishes." But common usage recognizes that tolerance can be exercised for a number of legitimate reasons, not just that people have a right to do or think as they please. That is just the problem, Professor Suttle says. However, without doubting the need for critically examining and perhaps modifying common usage, I am inclined to put the burden of proof on those who recommend major revisions. And I do not feel the urgency of the need for change here. For example, why must restraint for the purpose of preserving noncombative relationships (as in Professor Suttle's second example) not be counted as tolerance? There is a long and not obviously wrong-headed tradition in political and moral philosophy that connects tolerance with a desire for social peace and harmony. Besides, it seems to me Professor Suttle's principal concerns can be handled without resorting to the modifications he suggests.

Indeed, I wonder whether his emphasis on conceptual revisions actually distracts from what I take to be his ultimate concern, which is to point out errors in educators' beliefs about good practice. To convince people that they are misusing the word "tolerance" is not to convince them that their educational beliefs and practices are mistaken. It seems to me we would be further ahead if we focused directly on the issue of the warrant for tolerance, rather than on the meaning of the term.¹

When is tolerance warranted? Certainly, much depends on the object of tolerance or intolerance. Professor Suttle's main target is morally evil beliefs and practices. Focusing on those, we should indeed question the scope of tolerance. But we also tolerate things that do not necessarily carry the implication of evil; for example, people's limitations, which may just be annoying or inconvenient.² A professor of a contemplative disposition may be impatient with the intellectually shallow self-assuredness of some students, students who are interested in answers and action and annoyed with "mere" thought and talk. The professor has grounds for thinking their attitude is faulty, yet she may still have good reasons for tolerance, and reasons that have nothing to do with thinking that the students have a right to believe whatever they want here. (This, I am assuming, is different than saying reason can endorse or allow a range of incompatible beliefs here.) Rather, there may be other goods at stake. For example, a democratic society needs people of action as well as people of thought. If we value democracy, to what extent do we wish to extinguish that impatience for action? People's limitations may be the flip side of characteristics we should value.³ In addition, even if the

professor's view, or some synthesis of the two views, is best, the student view might still be good enough. To judge a particular good as best is not to determine what good ought to be pursued.⁴

Now it may be that at some time or in some way the professor should point out to these students the limitations of their attitude. Perhaps this is what Professor Suttle means by the need for intolerance. (Professor Suttle's position would be clearer to me if he offered examples of proper intolerance.) But this does not mean tolerance has no place in this case; there need not be an either-or choice between tolerance and intolerance. For instance, a professor can object to a belief with a quick humorous comment or with an extended polemical argument. It seems to me we can fruitfully think that a professor who responds with a humorous remark is, in a nontrivial and legitimate way, balancing tolerance and intolerance. Maybe we need to think of degrees of tolerance and intolerance.

Perhaps the explanation of the professor's difficulty is that she faces an ambiguous situation. In such a situation, Professor Suttle says, tolerance and intolerance do not even apply, the proper response being suspension of judgments or actions. Surely there are times when judgment and action should be suspended. But tolerance and intolerance may still apply in those cases. The professor in my example may not be sure whether to criticize, but that does not mean her annoyance or impatience should be suspended. To require that persons suspend feelings of attraction and repulsion until conclusive judgments are made distorts moral psychology.⁵ But then some amount of tolerance, in the sense of not acting on the repulsion one feels, far from needing to await the outcome of judgment, must be present if good deliberation is to occur at all.

But what if what we have are two options that really are equally supported by reasons and evidence? Professor Suttle argues that toleration is not appropriate in such a case, for if beliefs and practices are merely differing or are equally justified, then they do not conflict, and conflict is necessary for toleration to be appropriate. Contrary to this claim, though, equally justified beliefs and practices can conflict, if we look at qualitative as well as quantitative factors. A career in music or a career in medicine may be equally good choices for a person, yet be in competition because the constellation of goods involved in each is qualitatively different. The problem is not that more evidence is needed. We can imagine that the person faced with such a decision knows perfectly well what each choice entails. The dilemma is that no one option embodies all the goods that are at stake. Even some synthesis position may be a competitor, say because it will not permit the intensity of activity possible in more single-minded pursuit of one or the other alternative. Nor is it clear that such a synthesis must be better.

In the case of a person watching others face such a choice, cognitively one can recognize that the options are equally justified, yet still regret that a person picks one rather than the other, say because of one's own personal attachment to the option not chosen. Our thoughtful professor may be able to tell herself that, for students, a contemplative life and a life of action are equally good, yet still justifiably regret, or even resent, that students choose the latter. Perhaps some would say the professor has no right to project her preferences upon students in this way. But could not we question her integrity and commitment if she did not have some feelings of regret? Contrary to what Professor Suttle contends, I am not sure that toleration of personal preferences cannot be appropriate.

To put my cards on the table, I am advocating moral pluralism. Professor Suttle appears to put little stock in pluralism, associating it with relativism and skepticism, all of which supposedly exclude rational normative judgments. Perhaps some pluralist positions do this. But other conceptions of pluralism do not.⁶

However, what about beliefs or practices that even pluralists would agree are clearly wrong? Surely we should question the virtue of refusing to acknowledge or act against moral evils. Yet there may be times when moral evils can be, or even should be, tolerated. Suppose a student makes a vile, racist remark in class. Might there be good reasons for withholding criticism? Does such a statement

merit the dignity of a reply? What if this student's comments generally are discounted by the rest of the class, or if this student made the remark just to attract attention, or if this student has been berated before for his comments and further criticism would be merely more alienating rather than educative?² We need not dispute Professor Suttle's claim that this situation is "contaminated," that letting the remark go without response carries a moral cost. But that does not show that tolerance here is morally vicious. "Educating for a particular kind of person" involves more than just getting students' beliefs right. It also involves modeling dignity, compassion, understanding, and proper restraint. On the other hand, can we say intolerance does not have a moral cost? If we adopted Professor Suttle's view, would not intolerance imply the existence of moral evils, and hence that situations of intolerance are necessarily "contaminated"? Even when justified, isn't intolerance a cause for moral regret?

While intolerance may have value, while setting students right about their beliefs and practices is important, there are many other aims and values educators need to be concerned about, and for the sake of which toleration may be justified. And too, we should recall what has often animated the liberal concern for tolerance, namely respect for persons. I have my own reservations about liberalism, but I am hard pressed to say that tolerance for the sake of respect manifests moral cowardice. Professor Suttle shows that tolerance may not serve liberalism's animating impulse, that intolerance of erroneous beliefs may better serve personhood. Liberals need not disagree. But the conclusion should not be to dispense with tolerance but to establish its proper connection to educational practice. Yes, tolerance can be abused; but when it comes to that, so can intolerance. Professor Suttle's paper helps us resist the temptation to place too much faith in tolerance. But I think it would be a mistake to conclude that tolerance is an idea without application or virtue in educational practice.

1. This is not to say that there is no issue here. "Tolerance" has a moral connotation, and as an honorific label it matters how it is applied. I differ from Professor Suttle in believing a broader range of actions deserve to be called "tolerance."

2. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 402.

3. *Ibid.*, 402.

4. Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 328.

5. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 405.

6. For such conceptions see, in addition to Raz and Stocker, John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); J. Donald Moon, *Constructing Community* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Susan Wolf, "Two Levels of Pluralism," *Ethics* 102 (1992): 785-98.

7. It seems to me that none of these reasons for restraint must presuppose the separation between persons and their beliefs that concerns Professor Suttle. Indeed, it could be that intolerance holds the greater danger for encouraging such a separation. "Intolerant" people worried about the effects of criticism on students might be inclined to take solace in a separation between beliefs and persons.