Arguments for tolerance

Tolerance has not universally been thought to be a good thing. Communists argued that it avoids real social change that will improve people’s lives. Conservatives argued that it is morally spineless. Religious thinkers condemn it as leading to the damnation, since people need moral guidance.

These criticisms demonstrate one of the paradoxes of tolerance. If tolerance involves not acting on your opposition to a view you think is wrong, why should we be tolerant? Shouldn’t we condemn what is wrong and seek to correct it? To solve the paradox, we need independent arguments that show how it can be right to tolerate what we think is wrong.

THE THREAT POSED BY STRIFE

If disagreement and opposition are part of human life, then the only alternative to tolerance is conflict. This conflict won’t be resolved – we cannot settle matters of belief and value by force. Such ongoing conflict or ‘strife’ threatens the survival of society.

To avoid strife, we need tolerance. We must find some way of agreeing to live with our differences. Liberalism, on this view, is a modus vivendi – a way of living, based on avoiding the very serious harms of conflict, fear, and humiliation.

We can object that this is not tolerance, but resignation. This is mistaken. If we are merely resigned, we think that, if only we could impose the right beliefs and values on others, things would be better. We think that liberalism is the second-best option really. Thinking like this fails to understand is that even if one view comes to dominate, there will be people who suffer from its intolerance. Tolerance is not a fall-back virtue, the result of failing to achieve something ideal. Instead, the ideal is dangerous. Pluralism should be encouraged so that we avoid a totalitarian society that tries to control people’s beliefs and values.

FALLIBILITY

Someone who is fallible is someone who fails sometimes. We are all fallible, not just individuals, but also governments and societies. The argument from fallibility claims that we do not always know the truth about morality and religion, even when we think we do.

Mill gave a famous argument from fallibility in favour of freedom of speech. Since freedom of speech requires people to tolerate points of view they disagree with, we can use it as an argument for tolerance. His argument appeals to the value of truth, and he sums it up as follows:

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Second, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on
any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. (On Liberty, pp. 115-6)

We must distinguish between certainty and truth. Confidence that our view is correct, and that some other view is mistaken, cannot justify suppressing the expression of that view, because we may be wrong. To allow the truth to be known, we must be tolerant.

But what about, e.g. the belief that racism is wrong? Surely we may claim enough knowledge, and confidence in it, to justify censoring certain expressions of opinion. Why should we tolerate what we know is wrong?

Mill’s response is that if we can have such certainty, this can only rest of the freedom of expression itself. To develop and defend our points of view, to correct our opinions and weigh their value, we need free discussion. And so we will need to tolerate the expression of differing beliefs and values.

We can, however, question Mill’s assumption that freedom of speech will enable us to discover the truth better than (selective) censorship. Compare allowing racist speech to banning it. Which will lead to fewer people making the mistake of thinking racism is right? If we allow it, the emotional arguments appealing to vested interests (‘they come over here, taking our jobs…’) may persuade some people. If we ban it, then they won’t hear these arguments, and so will be less likely to form a false belief. Or so we can argue. Mill assumes that people are rational; perhaps they aren’t.

So if we don’t tolerate certain beliefs and values, we are assuming infallibility – which could deprive people of the truth; if we do tolerate these beliefs and values, then we risk the truth being lost again. In this case, the argument from fallibility is not enough to give us a good reason to be tolerant.

Variation on fallibilism I: Subjectivism

Many people believe that there are no right answers when it comes to morality. Morality is subjective, a reflection of our personal feelings or choices. This is often offered as an argument for tolerance. If my values differ from yours, but values are subjective, then who are you to tell me that my morality is wrong? Subjectivism implies tolerance, many people claim, because no one can correct anyone else. To be intolerant is to assume that your values are the right values – but there are no ‘right’ values.

Whether subjectivism is true or not, it doesn’t support tolerance. Tolerance is itself a moral value. ‘You ought to tolerate other people’s values, because there are no objective moral values’ is self-contradictory. We only ought to be tolerant if tolerance is a good thing. So, turning the tables, who are you to tell someone else to be tolerant? If tolerance is one of your values, what right do you have to impose it on other people?

Tolerance means not acting on one’s disapproval of other people’s values. So it will conflict with some other values the person has (or there would be no disapproval). So we need reasons to be tolerant, e.g. the value of autonomy. But if these values are also subjective, how can we justify the demand to be tolerant to other people?

If we want to argue that we ought to be tolerant, we should not argue that moral values are subjective. At least some moral values – such as tolerance, respect, autonomy – need to be objective if we want to justify tolerance.
Variation on fallibilism II: Reasonableness

John Rawls argues that disagreement and opposition is the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions (Political Liberalism, p. xxiv)

Equally rational and open-minded people come to different judgments because of ‘the burdens of judgment’:

- that empirical evidence relevant to some issue can be complex and hard to assess;
- that even if we agree about what is relevant, we can disagree about the importance of each factor;
- that our concepts are vague and need to be interpreted;
- that the way we weigh up evidence and values is shaped by our whole life experience;
- that there are different kinds of values for and against a particular point of view, which makes it hard to weigh them up.

Rawls argues that all reasonable people accept the burdens of judgment. As a result, we don’t treat other people’s differing views as a result of their being irrational; people can disagree reasonably. And so we should be tolerant – at least of all reasonable disagreement.

It is important to note that, like Mill, Rawls is not a sceptic or a subjectivist. There is truth, but it is hard to know what it is.

THE VALUE OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy and happiness

Autonomy is acting on ‘rules’ one gives oneself, as opposed to obeying other people’s rules. (The word is from the Latin for self-rule: ‘auto’ means self and ‘nomos’ means rule or law.) Mill argues that

The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way. (On Liberty, p. 72)

Because of its connection to liberty, autonomy is a core value for liberalism.

We can argue that it must also be a core value for any creature that is autonomous. To be autonomous is to be able to reflect on and evaluate one’s desires, beliefs and values. We don’t just act, we choose how to act, we choose which goals to adopt, and we reflect on the reasons for our beliefs. In these ways, we can shape ourselves and our lives; and if we shape ourselves according to our own values, we express our individuality.

Mill argues that

the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being. (On Liberty, p. 120)

Leading our own lives in our own way, making our own choices expresses and develops our thoughts, feelings, and imagination – who we are as individuals. We will only get
pleasure from this if we think, imagine, and choose how to act for ourselves. So to be happy, we need to be autonomous.

If people are autonomous, they are going to express different beliefs and values. To enable this, we must be tolerant.

But does autonomy lead to happiness? We can argue that if people are left without any moral guidance, they will not be happy and they will make bad choices. Mill assumes that people learn from their own and others’ mistakes, that autonomy contributes to happiness because people discover what really is good for them. But we can doubt this. People may not be equally capable of making good decisions. Those that aren’t need firm social expectations to enable them to lead good lives.

**Autonomy, equality and respect**

Rather than see autonomy as valuable because it contributes to happiness, we can argue that it is valuable in its own right. It makes human life valuable. We can guide our lives according to what we value. Without autonomy, we cannot be praised or blamed – unless we choose what we do, we aren’t responsible. So autonomy is a prerequisite for morality.

It may be true that some humans are better at making good choices than others. But we can argue that the state should treat people as equals, as autonomous equals. Even if this is a fiction, it is better than the state treating people as though they are not autonomous.

The value of autonomy requires that we respect the autonomy of other people. This requires that we respect their ability to make choices, adopt values, and form beliefs. It does not require that we respect the actual choices, values and beliefs they have, but we do have to tolerate them as exercises of the person’s autonomy. To be intolerant of others is not to respect their autonomy.

We can object that autonomy is only valuable if we use it to make good choices and adopt the right values. After all, suppose that someone can only choose between equally meaningless options. Where is the value in their having a choice at all? The value of having the power to shape oneself depends on the values one chooses to adopt. So if people choose the wrong values, does the fact that they make this choice on its own matter very much? If it doesn’t, then to argue that we should be tolerant, we need to appeal to more than just autonomy, but also what people do with it.

**THAT COERCION IS INEFFECTIVE**

In 1689, John Locke wrote a famous defence of religious tolerance entitled *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. He argued that it was irrational to attempt to impose particular religious beliefs. The state can only force people to do things; it can’t make people believe things. Religious faith is a form of belief, and belief can’t be forced. Of course, the state can force people to go through certain religious practices, such as going to church. But this is pointless, if the aim is to save people’s souls, because religious practice without religious belief is worthless; to be saved, someone must have religious beliefs. Attempting to coerce someone into a particular religion is completely ineffective, so it is irrational to try. Being intolerant in this way is irrational.

Just as you can’t coerce religious belief, you can’t coerce moral beliefs either. You cannot force someone to have the “right” moral values, so there is no point trying. And if you are
aiming for a more harmonious society in which people don’t disagree about such matters, force won’t achieve that either. People will continue to disagree even if they can’t express their disagreement, and their resentment at oppression will threaten to destabilize society.

**Objections**

We can challenge this argument on three grounds.

First, Locke assumes that the point of persecuting or outlawing people with different religious beliefs is to get them to change their beliefs. But intolerance may not have this aim. If it aims to kill people with offensive views, or just to prevent them from acting on their views, then coercion is not ineffective. And it may create a more harmonious society by driving people out of society (this is the aim of those who argue that different races should live separately).

Second, is it true that beliefs cannot be brought about by force? You cannot simply choose to believe something. But beliefs can be indirectly influenced. For instance, beliefs respond to our experience. Legislation could restrict our experience of the world and of ideas, e.g. by banning certain books, making it illegal to teach particular points of view, and restricting access to public sources of information.

(More direct methods do work sometimes, e.g. the techniques of brainwashing. However, it seems that brainwashing only works for a time. Once the person returns to normal conditions of living, they often shed the beliefs and values adopted under pressure. So brainwashing has to be constant to be effective.)

Third, we can object that even if Locke is right and intolerance is irrational, this is not what is wrong with intolerance. This is the wrong reason for condemning intolerance. When intolerance is wrong, it is wrong because of its effects on the people suffering it, not because intolerant people are irrational.

**THE VALUE OF DIVERSITY**

As people ‘pursue their own good in their own way’, they conduct what Mill calls ‘experiments of living’ ([On Liberty](#), Ch. 3). They discover what works in life and what doesn’t, what leads to their good and what detracts from it. To limit these experiments will be a mistake for a variety of reasons. To impose a way of life on someone else is to assume infallibility about what is good; but our moral values might not be right – there might be better ways to live, which we have yet to discover. ‘Genius’ can introduce new good ideas into society. Second, misguided ways of life may still contain some partial insight; so even if we are mostly right in what we believe is good, generally bad ways of living may still reveal something we don’t know or haven’t thought of. For example, we may have too narrow a range of experience. Third, diversity encourages people to think about how they live, because they are challenged by alternatives. This creates a context in which they seek to improve their lives. Finally, different people need different conditions in order to develop; one size does not fit all. For all these reasons, diversity will lead to better ways of living, to social progress, to greater happiness. But diversity requires tolerance.

A diverse and tolerant society will have other valuable features, argues Mill. The constantly bubbling up of ideas and new ways of doing things will lead to a creativity and
energy in society as a whole. It will be constantly progressing and will display confidence and vigour in its pursuit of ways to make life better. By contrast, societies that are not tolerant will stagnate. What is new is always something that has to be tolerated at first – it is rarely welcomed straight away. So in an intolerant society, few genuinely new ways of doing things will appear or be accepted.

**Objections**

We can make similar objections to this argument that we made to Mill’s argument from fallibility. First, is Mill right to think that allowing diversity will help people find better ways of living, ones that will make them happy? Mill is assuming that people learn from their and others’ mistakes, so that diversity will lead to knowledge of what is truly good. But in the time since Mill wrote, we can argue that there has been greater diversity – the development of pluralistic societies – but no great increase in happiness or good living. Is individuality in the sense of pursuing our own good in our own way such a good thing? Or would people be happier with strong social guidance on how to live?

Second, is Mill right to think that if we limit diversity, society won’t discover new ways of living and new values? ‘Genius’ has not flourished under liberal societies alone. For example, the rule of Frederick the Great of Prussia in the 18th century was a dictatorship, but during his rule, there was great artistic invention. Would a lack of diversity really contribute to a lack of social progress and development?