

# Tolerance: Between Liberty and Truth\*

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Tolerance is not, as is often thought, an attribute of urbanity that can be equated with other similar values, such as politeness. Nor is it – or at least it should not be – considered the oil that facilitates the smooth functioning of the engine of human desires, in spite of their differences of opinion. Rather, true tolerance takes root in the same soil as human rights. And this root is at the same time shared by liberty and truth. It is an untamed, barely diplomatic, root, burrowing deep in the soil of an absolute demand.

It is because the human being is capable of committing himself absolutely – risking life and sometimes more than life – that he is entitled to unconditional rights. It is because his commitment to that considered true can be absolute that a violation of the human dimension as such can take place: it occurs when there is an attempt to impose a different point of view or a requirement that one behave in a manner opposed to his or her belief. The absolute nature of this conviction or moral exigency demands of the other human being not a lessening of his or her own conviction or moral exigency; it requires instead an absolute respect for the other's conviction or different exigency, even when far from sharing it. This is the very foundation of human rights. And it is also the foundation of true tolerance, which in no way renounces the search for truth.

The attempt to impose – by threat or actual violence – a mode of behavior or belief on another is not only a violation of human rights but an essentially meaningless act. This is because any conviction, any voluntary action, is the realization of a thought. But

\* The editors wish to express their warm thanks to Professor Hersch and to UNESCO for allowing *Diogenes* to reprint this article which was first published in the UNESCO volume *Tolérance, j'écris ton nom*, Paris, 1995.

all constrained thought is non-sense, that is to say non-thought. Thought exists only when there is a search for true meaning. If this were not the case, it would be possible to conceive of a truth, made coherent and intelligible to the mind, that would nevertheless not require assent. In such a case it would be possible to say, for example, in response to a demonstration of a geometric theorem: "I understand the proof, I just don't agree with it." But because the proof is of a purely rational nature, such a declaration would be meaningless. Either I do not understand the demonstration, which means I do not experience the constraint that it seeks to exercise upon my reason, and as a consequence, my thought remains free in regard to the proof; or else I do understand it, which means I accept its necessity.

On the level of pure reason, as well as on the level of empirical experimentation (although to a somewhat lesser degree), acknowledgment of evidence and free judgment coincide, that is, there is accord between "understanding" and "consenting." But this accord or coincidence ends as soon as the thinker's subjectivity comes into play – as soon as the historical data constituting the subject's "I," in all its inexhaustible concreteness, intervenes.

It is on this level that the problems associated with free choice, and the concomitant temptation of constraint, first appear. It is here too that cultural diversity – the various traditions, philosophies, and religions – comes into play; which seems to go without saying sometimes requires the total stake of life and being, remains forever subject to challenge and never can be evident. And it is here, because their respect is never a given, even though their violation is absurd, that the respect of human rights imposes itself absolutely.

Some believe that the concept of an absolute, in any form, is the irreducible enemy of Human Rights. And these try, in exchange for increased peace and tolerance, to declare the absolute as out of bounds, thereby reducing human existence to a set of rational or empirical certainties provided by the sciences. I believe they are heading in the wrong direction. Indeed, the empirical level itself provides us with an extreme alternative: to live or to die, which humanity experiences differently from all other species, through our historical consciousness. If we were to suppress from human

nature the absolute, which bears man's moral nature, we would reduce the human being to its animal nature alone, thereby dooming it to the struggle for life, without either law or faith in anything other than success. This would be the end of human specificity. And there would be no more human rights; intolerance might lose its sting, but tolerance would lose its meaning.

If we want the human factor as such to exist, we must accept everything that comes with this condition, including the risks of the absolute that our moral nature embodies. There can be no cut-rate humanity, simplified and stripped of its inherent difficulties. This is why humans *must have* rights, and absolute rights. And this is also why the maze of these rights is so entangled, so full of contradiction and paradox. It is not only that contradiction excludes the recourse to force; it is also that the respect owed to absolute convictions seems sometimes to require its use.

The fundamental demand of intolerance is that the other make him or herself similar in kind to a supposed majority or to another self. This reductionist demand has four primary fields of application: thought, belief, action, and being. The imperialism of intolerance is based on the exclusive valorization of one's own opinions, in opposition to what others might think, believe, do, or be. At the heart of this attitude lies the identification of the self, and all its personal, ethnic, cultural, religious, and historical characteristics, with human values *per se*; so much so that this self sees itself as coinciding with the good of humanity as such. Thus at the root of all forms of intolerance is the presumed possession of a privileged model. On the level of thought, it is a matter of possessing the truth, or at least of mastering the methods that guarantee possession of it. On the level of belief, it is about belonging to the tradition whose foundation best corresponds to the historical data, as well as being the most fruitful and creative tradition over the centuries, the one that best satisfies the requirements of human development. On the level of action, it is a matter of laying claim to those historical developments most favorable to the promotion of peace, well-being, and the organization of human societies. On the level of being and becoming, of highlighting those accomplishments most apt to provide – both extensively and intensively – the widest possible array of ideas and thoughts, inspiring human

beings to actualize the various aspects of their responsible freedom in their own lives: the ability to invent their earthly presence and to choose the trace they want to leave behind.

However, it is strikingly obvious that such a form of intolerance, while laying claim to these values and to these ends, is in direct contradiction with its own justification because of its very claim to possess the single correct model of humanity. The nature of the human condition is such that it cannot escape its own inner contradictions; moreover, the essentially unresolvable nature of these contradictions must be consciously acknowledged as soon as humanity takes responsibility for itself. In brief, far from being justified in designating a single model of the human condition as valid and then proceeding to impose this model on all others *ad majorem hominis gloriam*, mankind's humanity demands instead an act of asceticism, an exploration of non-knowing, of a field of irreducibly contradictory demands, corresponding not to the knowledge of a model but to the discipline of a dispossessed knowing.

An increased indifference to what is true does not – as some have asserted – produce an increase in true tolerance. On the contrary: what must be done is elucidate the values, criteria, and meanings that constitute the various embodiments of human truth, thereby clarifying the nature of the agreement that each kind of truth requires. One does not agree with the verification of a scientific hypothesis in the same way as one does a political principle, a religious faith, an ethnic doctrine, an art form, a musical composition, an aesthetic system, or a scale of moral values.

The nature of intolerance will itself vary according to the kind of agreement in question. However, the first thing that must be established is the value attributed to the various kinds of difference or even divergence. A difference of opinion may provoke hostility or scorn; but it may also produce curiosity and interest. Initially, everything depends on the depth of interest or conviction in the way the evidence is treated – but it also depends on the imaginative favor with which heterodox attitudes are considered from the outset. Some people are open to anything and everything, which however does not prove a true and deep openness to otherness: it may rather be the consequence of a superficial attitude or total lack of commitment to anything. At the same time

there are other people, profoundly rooted in a given conviction, who may nevertheless try to understand – to mimic – with equal depth the conviction of another; they will “lend” their own inner being to it; and in so doing they may find an unsuspected creative dimension unleashed from within themselves. Such are the risks, and the opportunities, of true human communication.

A prerequisite to such inner growth is the abandonment of a single form of knowledge. But this is not simply a matter of a “negative dogma.” It is a matter of really having experienced the inner unity of being – a unity irreducible to the multiplicity of our approaches, to their discontinuities and complexities, to the contradictions and incoherences of our own mind, or to the inadequacy of the criteria we use in forming judgments. Once having experienced this unity we can then grasp and accept that the human project remains forever rooted in time. And that the other person, whoever he or she is, is rooted in time differently than I am, in his or her own manner; and because for him or her, just as for me, the possible forever outstrips the actual, we both deserve that absolute respect, of which tolerance is but the tormented reflection.

In this sense, rather than being a lukewarm commodity rooted in indifference, tolerance realizes its never-ending and absolute purpose in the historical condition of the human being, forever in search of an unattainable truth.

In other words here again, the error – and the temptation – consists in substituting a presumed “possession,” a “holding” of truths and of principles of action, for a deepening of being, a revealing of the self. The alternative is always: will I impose on another my way of thinking, my beliefs and ways of organizing life, my actual conception of “the true” and “the good,” and use every means of constraint at my disposal in order to insure that this “true” and this “good” are imposed on the world outside me – OR, will I, by an act of imagination that will permeate every level of my being, try to “mimic” with my own being the other’s way of thinking, his beliefs or her ways of organizing life and action, others’ versions of “good” and “true,” by conceding that my original attitude was full of limitations and errors that could have resulted in mutilations of my potential human condition, of which it is my duty as a free and responsible subject to realize?

This is the alternative for human subjects who are themselves always transcended by the truth of their mission. Obviously, this mission entails an element of non-knowledge, of definitive non-possession – and I mean here, along with Karl Jaspers (and in contradiction with what many others have asserted), that no commitment can be considered truly absolute without a sense of the transcendence of the true.

Other strange reversals have arisen. We are beginning to understand why philosophy, for example, can only be the “friend” but not “owner” of wisdom – why “the love of wisdom” fundamentally precludes the claim to possess it. We are beginning to grasp the role that contradiction can play even within rational thinking, which without it would be unable to say itself – even if somewhat grudgingly – that the absolute respect for human rights is not only something that I owe to each and every human being regardless of the person’s stage of development or ethnic group, but that the very possibility for *my* thought to have meaning is conditioned upon a prior acceptance of the principle of the absolute nature of human rights.

On the other hand, any attempt to impose on human beings, whomever they are, a way of thinking, believing, acting or judging, is solely doomed to the non-sense of the force of causality, except that it remains irrevocably a betrayal of the self.

In order to clarify the matter a bit more it might be useful here to try to understand the nature of the impatience, even the irritation, we feel when confronted with the other’s refusal to conform to our ways. It will be necessary to distinguish among various levels of the phenomenon and to use examples in which the concrete stakes are as small as possible; this because what we are trying to understand is the nature of divergent judgments themselves, independent of any consequences.

Let us assume that a divergence has cropped up between two persons regarding the authenticity of a document playing a role in a sacred history. This divergence may be a matter of little import to one of them, while to other it strikes at the very heart of his or her faith. For the latter, the result may be a suspension of faith or, in an opposite direction, the document may take on added significance as a result of its having been contested. The contested naked

fact therefore takes on, depending on the case, a signification, and from this, a different efficiency. Its assessment depends on something other than its empirical reality. It passes through the constitutive suspension of a non-knowing.

And it is by the awareness of this non-knowledge, and by the search for truth, that each one of us needs to understand – truly understand, that is to say, mime – the effort of knowing, and the partial awareness of truth, which is that of the other.

It follows from the preceding that true tolerance, far from renouncing the search for truth in exchange for peace, stimulates a profound and authentic quest for it. Yet this does not mean that the search itself can be the basis for peace. This is because truth is not the only matter at hand here. Man, Rimbaud wrote, is a body and a soul. And once the body is invoked we are talking about living and dying, and not about the self alone. Yet, as recent developments have shown, all assistance to life ultimately leads to a choice between the use of force and its abandonment. However, a right imposed by force alone is neither a right nor a truth; and yet there are no rights without a police to defend them. Otherworldliness is an inhuman luxury – hence the birth, at the United Nations, of a new risk and a new hope, with the duty of intervention in the affairs of all States.