Tolerance, identity and difference (An ethical discourse)

Silvia Mineva (University of Sofia)

Abstract
The purpose of the article is to present an ethical reading of the concepts of tolerance, identity and difference, their connection and problematic nature. At the heart of this reading is the idea of the importance of difference and the need for tolerance as a condition for the preservation and maintenance of universal human values such as peace and freedom on the path of mutual respect and solidarity resistance to various forms and practices of coercion and violence. In the same context, the problem of the boundaries of tolerance is considered as a problem of the absolutization of tolerance and the relativization of values.

Keywords: tolerance, identity, difference, values.

Introduction

In one of his recent books *Ecce homo* Nietzsche describes himself as an author and thinker. In the course of this description, he reaches the following acknowledgment of his humanity: "…my humanity does not consist in the fact that I understand the feelings of my fellows but that I can endure to understand those feelings. My humanity is a perpetual process of self-overcoming."[1]

As a subtitle to the famous phrase of Pontius Pilate, the German philosopher adds another famous aphorism: a phrase from the odes of the ancient poet Pindar, which reads: "Become such as you are, having learned what that is!" (γένοι' οἷος ἐσσὶ μαθών).[2] Thus,

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*. (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1908), https://archive.org/details/eccehomo00niet_0),.

[2] Pindar's verse is known to be difficult to translate and has various English translations. A special commentary on these translations and the use and meaning of the verse in Nietzsche's texts is given by Babich, Babette E., "Nietzsche's Imperative as a Friend's Encomium," *Nietzsche-Studien* 32, no. 1 (2003): 29-58.

consistently with the title of his book, Nietzsche problematizes human identity and challenges traditional views of it, as he calls out: "Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, don't mistake me for someone else!"[3]

This invocation, as well as the philosopher's reflection on humanity and self-overcoming, is a fitting start to an ethical discourse of tolerance, identity and difference. Discussing these categories raises questions about what it means to be human and what the boundaries of our humanity are. Nietzsche answers these questions in terms of the ability to understand the feelings of others. According to him, a person's perception of himself as sympathetic is more important than his ability to sympathize with someone else's pain. When compassion is perceived as a test of the ability to endure discomfort, pain, unpleasant sensations, it becomes the boundary for humanity. To sympathize with another's suffering is something painful and unpleasant, because it means suffering with them. No healthy and well-off person in life would want to suffer and feel bad. Therefore, everyone prefers to avoid suffering, including the suffering of other people or sentient beings. So we get to the heart of the topic - the connection between human identity and tolerance as the ability to willingly tolerate conditions that make us feel uncomfortable and unpleasant and even make us suffer. The disadvantage of this is that this does not meet our desires, tastes and expectations and divert us from the natural pursuit of pleasure, peace and comfort. In this sense, tolerance is a kind of courage, since to tolerate what you don't like and don't want seems just as bold as taking a risk and facing the dangers. But what are the actions, people, states and phenomena that deserve to be tolerated, and what could be the ethical grounds for a requirement for tolerance?

We could say that we are willing to tolerate people who appear to be defenseless and vulnerable because, for some reason, they are weaker than we are. Usually, we perceive those who are younger, more inexperienced, less educated, or more physically and mentally vulnerable or disabled in this way. But this does not allow us to

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo. Wie man wird, was man ist*. (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1908) 7, Internet Archive in 2014, https://archive.org/details/eccehomo00niet_0/mode/2up).

distinguish between tolerance and leniency, or between feelings of regret and personal superiority. This also does not help us distinguish between tolerance and indifference to circumstances and people we disapprove of but cannot change, and whom we tolerate to avoid conflict and embarrassment.

Yet another possible answer is that we tolerate those who are different from us. This means that tolerance is directed not only towards the weaker and defenseless, but also at different people who speak another language, profess another religion, and practice other customs and morals. Thus we come to the recognition that our world is filled with countless differences - we speak different languages, practice different customs, profess different religions, and belong to different communities. Our differences are many and no one is completely alike, and yet we can live side by side, thanks to tolerance. In the Declaration of The UNESCO General Conference of 1995, tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In no circumstance can infringements of these fundamental values be justified. Tolerance is to be exercised by individuals, groups and States."[4]

From this definition, it becomes clear that, as an activity, tolerance consists in respecting, accepting and understanding the cultural diversity of our world and the various forms and ways of expressing human individuality. Differences are not valuable for their own sake. They are valuable only when they become the source of our sociocultural consolidation and willingness to help and cooperate.

Human right, equality, self-determination

Or will we tolerate organized, collective actions of people who come together not only to practice and maintain different languages, cultures, religions, but also impose and disseminate them? The answer depends on the approach to tolerance we choose. In his book "On Toleration", contemporary tolerance researcher Michael Walzer

[4] United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Declaration of Principles on Tolerance* (Culture of Peace Programme ,1995), 71, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000101803.page=75

lists the following as Regimes of Toleration - Multinational Empires, International Society, Nation-States, and Immigrant Societies. In this book, as well as in separate articles, he comments on each of these historically shaped political models for tolerance and describes their advantages and disadvantages in order to conclude that: "Now tolerance begins at home, where we often have to make ethnic, religious, and cultural peace with our spouses, in-laws, and children - and with our own ambiguous (hyphenated or divided) selves. Religious fundamentalism must be understood in part as a rejection of any such peace, an attack on ambiguity."[5]

In this context, the major challenge to tolerance today is not about tolerating eccentric individuals who isolate themselves because of their differences, but tolerating eccentric and dissident groups among ethnic and religious communities that require "some kind of extended social space (outside the household) for the sake of assembly, worship, argument, celebration, mutual aid, schooling, and so on." [6]

Typical for the liberal democratic societies is the argument for tolerance that any person can be respected in the name of their human dignity as a person who is unique and autonomous in choosing how to live and manage their life. To this end, it is sufficient for modern public order to guarantee individual autonomy and personal inviolability through the protection of human and civil rights. In this context, recognizing difference cannot be an aim, but merely a means, of achieving equality, which requires everyone to respect the other's right to self-determination as a fundamental human right. Thus, tolerance is tied to values of equality and civil society as a community in which people come together, guided by the notion of themselves as citizens. I.e free and equal, thanks to the reciprocal recognition of everyone as free and autonomous to govern their lives, make their own decisions and make personal choices. Freedom of association, the rights to practice sacred religion and to use one's mother tongue fall within the sphere of these choices. But all these rights relate to specific traits that can be respected by others that share them, in the name of equality of all citizens as a principle

[5] Michael Walzer, *On toleration* (Yale University Press, 1997), 87.
[6] Ibid., 10.

of their society. Michael Walzer states the following on tolerance: "Individual men and women are encouraged to tolerate one another as individuals, difference being understood in each case as a personalized (rather than stereotypical) version of group culture - which also means that the members of each group, if they are to display the virtue of tolerance, must accept each other's different versions. Everyone has to tolerate everyone else."[7]

In other words, the right to self-determination on religious, ethnic and other cultural or natural grounds is a matter of human right, but civic identity is a matter of political identity. Their differentiation is required because there are "different" authorities, especially religious ones, that are potentially intolerant - most religions are organized to control behavior and ultimately to restrict individual freedom in one way or another. [8] For example, the concept of "neighbor" to the Christian religion can impede the courage to create and live with others when it is considered valid only for members of the Christian community. In Islam, the same function fulfills the concept of "righteous". It allows self-determination as belonging to this religious community on the basis of distancing from all others as "infidels," respectively ungodly people. This also leads to the ordering of the world by this religion by distinguishing all people into two groups - "Islam" and "unbelievers." According to the German philosopher Norbert Boltz, this order is characteristic of those religious groups and communities that refuse to recognize a religion as one among many possible and existing social systems. On the contrary, they strive to ensure recognition and respect for their community and religion, not by way of mutual tolerance, but by opposing and counteracting the views of others.[9] Understood in this way, religion, in order to be respected and taken seriously because it inspires respect, cannot be tolerant. A religion is interested in tolerance only if it does not have sufficient power to impose itself in conditions of tolerance, because one in power does not need tolerance to exist and adapt to the world.

[7] Ibid. 31.
[8] Ibid. 70-71.
[9] Norbert Bolz, *Das konsumistische Manifest* (Brill Fink, 2002), 19-45.

A typical example of this other way of looking at tolerance is the attempts of Islamic missionaries to conduct religious services in Turkish language among groups of Bulgarian-Mohammedans and to suggest that their children must study Turkish, even if their parents do not identify themselves as Turks by origin, and the official language of the country is Bulgarian. [10] Thus, the religious motive and the associated claim of tolerance become a convenient cover for the pursuit of ethnic assimilation through the help of the notion that a Muslim should speak Turkish. Experience relies on the fact that groups such as Bulgarian-Mohammedans, who form a minority, not so much because of their religious differences but because they are socially and economically weaker and more backward than the majority of the population and live in closed off and in isolation because of their poverty, are more susceptible to assimilation.

Thwarting such attempts requires, first of all, breaking the link between a group and underdevelopment / poverty and overcoming its isolation through various state social assistance measures such as special education programs and public policies. Unfortunately, the mobilization of this resource in our country is often a problem, because our society struggles to recognize itself as a community of citizens, and not just relatives, neighbors, friends and colleagues who are ready to defend the violated rights. In Bulgaria, the manifestations of such solidarity are still weak, delayed or absent. The reason for this is a deficit in the sense of solidarity and understanding that each of us is one of us, regardless of our origin, education, religion or place of residence. For the same reason, our society is in debt to its separate members as well as to separate vulnerable and isolated groups. The example of the Bulgarian Mohammedans is just one of the various examples of a lack of adequate policy, social sensitivity and solidarity. Other illustrations of socially disadvantaged and isolated groups can be added to that example, such as groups of children without parents and people with disabilities. Instead of being incorporated into the norms and values of the common civic culture, they become the target of attempts at assimilation via a sort of "religious sermon," so to speak. The way

[10] Георги Фотев, *Криза на легитимността*. (УИ „Св. Климент Охридски," 1999), 268.

to integrate them, therefore, is not by means of tolerance at all costs, i.e. of cultures, religions and languages as valuable simply because they are different. On the contrary, tolerance for the sake of tolerance itself creates the risk of the tyranny of minorities and the aggressive pressure of groups of the "different" who advertise their difference with a "scream" in order to impose it on everyone.

Relativism of values and the paradox of tolerance

Another problem of tolerance is the relativism of values, produced by the idea that all differences are valuable, i.e. nothing can be more valuable than anything else. The same relativism deprives modern liberal societies of the ability to vigorously defend one or the other moral ideal. Therefore, no less problematic than the absence or deficiency of tolerance are its absolutization and reduction to the rejection of one's own values in order to recognize another's difference. In this context, unconditional recognition of the right to membership in some culturally separate community seems controversial and even dangerous. It hides the potential risk of self-destruction of the very democratic model of pluralism as a peaceful coexistence of differences on the basis of two of the fundamental values of modern democracy: individual equality, enshrined in the principle of citizenship, and the freedom to be authentic, in relation to a particular culture or religion. According to another well-known contemporary tolerance researcher, Charles Taylor, the main reason for this absolutization and reduction is the attempt of today's liberal-democratic societies to reduce social inequalities by recognizing the right of „equal chances for everyone to develop their own identity, which include - as we can now understand more clearly - the universal recognition of difference, in w hatever modes this is relevant to identity, be it gender, racial, culural, or to do with sexual orientation…“[11] Therefore, the main question when defining boundaries for tolerance is: what will be the priority in a tolerant policy? Should individuals be tolerated personally because their choices will be understood in a personal rather than a stereotypical way? In this case, tolerance will be addressed to the free, voluntary

[11] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 50.

inclusion or exclusion of everyone in one or another religious and/or cultural community. Or will the requirement for recognition of the group or community itself be tolerated? This is a requirement that often extends beyond association and worship to other practices. In any case, the way to integrate and absorb the values and virtues important for the reproduction and preservation of a civil society as democratic and pluralistic in the contemporary sense cannot be to tolerate different, minority cultures, religions and languages as wholly self-sufficient and autonomous bearers of political identity. This poses a real danger of replacing political pluralism with tribalism. To avoid this, it is necessary to affirm a democratic civic culture. Having such a culture means sharing a common political identity and understanding that as a citizen you are free and equal in your choice of cultural membership and identity, but this self-determination is only possible because you are a citizen-participant in the broader political community. It also means that all differences acquire significance and value and can only claim tolerance in the context of this community as a community of mutual respect in the name of peace and human dignity. In this is also the new or contemporary meaning of others, of different identities or of those differences that have emerged as natural, as "ethnic," "religious," etc. In all cases, equality is a basic norm, and tolerance of differences is justified when their protection and acceptance are not at the expense of the freedom of others and the right to protection from coercion, incl. coercion by minority religions and cultures with respect to their members. Coercion is violence, the deprivation of the freedom to choose. This makes it intolerable, whether it is exercised in the name of the family or religious values of a minority or in order to recognize one's religious, cultural, sexual difference.

Today, we have different means and approaches to tolerance, but there are few principles that we can rely on to justify tolerance. This means that tolerance requires us to carefully examine the grounds and circumstances on which its manifestations depend. For the same reason, some philosophers speak of "casuistry of tolerance."[12]

[12]André Comte-Sponville, *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues—The Use of Philosophy in Everyday Life* (Holt/Metropolitan. Reprinted, 2003, by Vintage, Random House, London, UK), 162.

Another reason to insist on this casuistry is that tolerance is necessary and valuable only when it is not infinite. Otherwise, we risk ending up in a situation defined by Karl Popper as "the paradox of tolerance."[13] The paradox is that endless tolerance would lead to the demise of all tolerant people and tolerance itself.

Conclusion

Tolerance can be justified as a principle and norm of conduct only if it is not boundless. It is not tolerant to recognize anyone's right to differentiation at any cost, for example, to profess a religion that is different from the official or most popular one in a society when its confession is fanatical, aggressive, and aimed at deliberately separating and isolating minority groups by instilling hostility to other religions and beliefs. In other words, the ethical discourse of tolerance cannot exclude the recognition that there are intolerable things that cannot and should not be tolerated. So we come to the question, what are the intolerable things that require us to set limits to tolerance? First of all, these are arbitrary violence and murder. On the occasion of them Fr. Fukuyama writes: "But what we notice in the first instance is that random violence against other members of the community is prohibited in every known human cultural group: while murder is universal, so are laws and/or social norms that seek to prohibit murder."[14]

Walzer and the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur take an analogous position. One insists: "Even those of us who are enthusiasts are bound to come up against differences, cultural and personal, that give us trouble. For we don't want to tolerate hatred and cruelty; nor does our respect for difference extend to oppressive practices within groups (which were commonly tolerated by imperial bureaucrats)."[15]

---

[13]Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1945), 226.

[14] Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), 125.

[15] Michael Walzer, "The Politics of Difference: Statehood and Toleration in a Multicultural World," *Ratio Juris* 10.2 (1997): 175.

Paul Ricœur, for his part, believes that for every individual, for every society and every national community, there are non-tolerable things, such as racism, anti-Semitism, apartheid, as well as the sexual exploitation of children for pornographic purposes.[16] According to the same author, only one thing can be a universal criterion and the basis of a general agreement on what cannot be tolerated. This criterion is that in no way is something that is in its essence a lack of respect deserving of respect. Thus, the cultural and social universality of the resistance against the absence of respect necessitates for violence to be defined as intolerable when its origin is the lack of respect - tyranny, fanaticism, cruelty, humiliation...
They can't be tolerated because they threaten the values that are important to every person and every society - life, prosperity, peace, freedom, justice ... In this sense, tolerance is necessary to us because of values, not differences. But it is most needed to us when we lack love so that we do not hurt those we cannot love but can understand in order to live in peace and prevent negations of humanness.

Silvia Mineva is PhD, Professor of Ethics at the Department of Logic, Ethics, and Aesthetics, University of Sofia "St. Kliment Ohridski". Shi teaches academic courses in the field ethical theory and moral philosophy. Her fields of research and publication are applied and work ethics, modern and postmodern ethics.
From 2008 until 2014 prof. Mineva is the president of "Association of Univesity Teachers of Philosophy in Bulgaria". From 2016 she is the editor in chief of e-magazine *Cyber Ecology* (http://cyberecology-bg.com)
e-mail: smineva@phls.uni-sofia.bg ; silvia_mineva@abv.bg

[16] Ricœur, Paul, "Toleranz, Intoleranz und das Nicht-Tolerierbare," in *Toleranz. Philosophische Grundlagen und gesellschaftliche Praxis einer umstrittenen,* ed. Forst, Rainer (Tugend, 2000), 26-44.