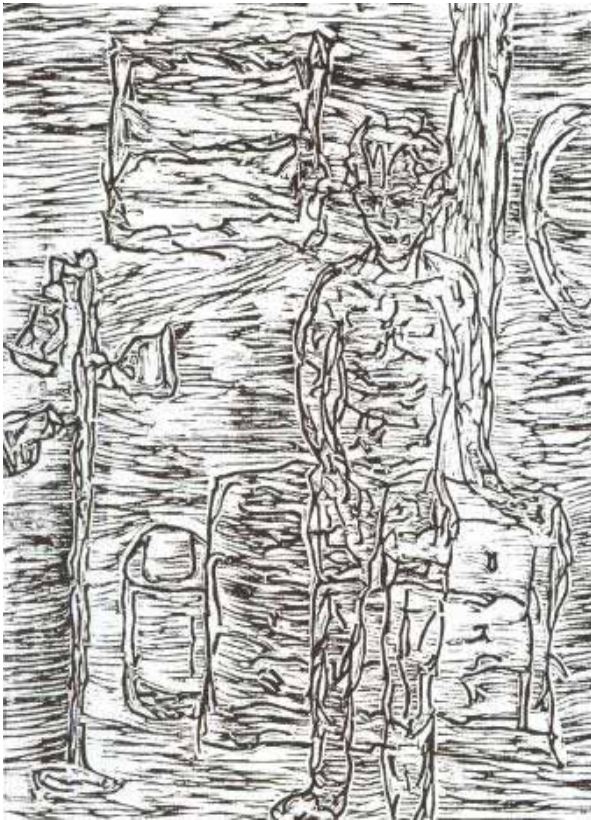


Tolerance and Hospitality as Virtues

Storm Bailey

In the wake of several ugly incidents on and around our campus last year, one of the college pastors gave an important chapel talk in which he eloquently and pointedly denounced hatred. As is our custom, after the talk we sang a hymn; «Eternal Ruler of the Ceaseless Round» was on the program. I don't know if everyone noticed the line, «We would be one in hatred of all wrong,» but I did. An attitude which we denounce and to which in the same breath we aspire seems to reveal the need either to clarify our concepts or to revise our aspirations.



Keslee Martin

The question about *hatred* is this: does the concept have its moral qualities baked in? Is hatred a vice, to be avoided wherever it has the potential to arise, or is it an attitude about which we make moral judgments which are open questions until the circumstances are known? Hate is one of several terms or concepts about which such questions arise. Another - which has received considerable philosophical attention but no consensus - is *tolerance*. I propose at least to raise such questions about *hospitality*.

For clarity and brevity, we'll call that sense of these concepts which takes them to include their moral or normative qualities the «moral sense.» An example of an action-designating term which is always and without controversy taken in the moral sense is *murder*. Since murder means «wrongful killing,» the moral status of any act so designated is not meant to be an open question. By contrast, killing (like running, hitting, wondering, telling), designates a kind of action without intending to imply that the action is good or bad, right or wrong. Call such terms, or the sense in

which they are used, «descriptive.» The question, then, is whether tolerance, intolerance, hatred or hospitality should be taken in the moral sense or the descriptive sense.

I will suggest that - in spite of well-developed arguments to the contrary - tolerance and intolerance are best taken in the descriptive sense. I believe the same conclusion to be warranted in the case of hatred, but will forbear to elaborate that argument in the present paper. Instead, I will turn to hospitality, and offer at least one way in which this concept may be relevantly different. Whether that distinction suffices to support a different conclusion about hospitality or not, I hope that the discussion will provide one framework for exploring and clarifying the concept of hospitality.

IS TOLERANCE A VIRTUE?

One way to show that tolerance is not a virtue is to show that - far from being morally praiseworthy - tolerance is not morally permissible. Suppose that one tolerates another's action A just in case one knows of A, believes A to be wrong, believes oneself to be in a position to prevent A, and voluntarily forbears from interfering with the performance of A. Jeff Jordan has recently argued that in such circumstances one voluntarily abets, by omission, a wrong action.¹ Since, he claims, «it is morally wrong to abet, knowingly and freely, another's wrongdoing,» such acts of tolerance are morally wrong. Morally wrong acts, or dispositions toward them, are not good candidates for virtues.

But the question of whether tolerance is a virtue is not, I think, so easily answered. I see no reason to accept the unqualified claim that it is wrong to voluntarily abet by omission the wrong acts of others. Surely aiding others in wrongdoing is culpable only when one has permissible means to avoid such aid. To offer an extreme example: if my only means of preventing a petty theft were to maim or kill the would-be thief, my refusal to interfere would not be wrong.² Jordan's assertion that it is wrong to permit wrong *other things being equal* seems an inadequate response to this, since other things so rarely are equal, when we are discussing interference with the free acts of other agents.

Although Jordan fails to make the case that tolerance cannot be a virtue, his position is an instructive place to begin, since it is centered on the apparent «paradox of tolerance.» Any instance of tolerance (as characterized by Jordan) which is either morally obligatory or morally praiseworthy seems to portray a situation in which one has moral reasons for and against a particular course of action. Even if, contrary to Jordan, this tension is not an irresolvable contradiction, it requires - and has received - the attention of theories presenting tolerance as a virtue.

Notice also that even this brief description of Jordan's project involves stipulating acts of a certain kind (tolerating A)³ and asking whether acts of that kind are permissible, obligatory or praiseworthy. Thus Jordan's project takes what I have called the descriptive sense of tolerance as primary. This alone may mean little - certainly no argument has been put forward for starting with the descriptive sense. But it is not immediately obvious how to even raise Jordan's question apart from this starting point. Nearly everyone thinks that some instances of forbearance are morally wrong; but if the term «tolerance» is reserved for the virtuous ones, then the task of distinguishing the good from the bad is

complicated by the need to introduce a new set of descriptive terms. What is the benefit of such complication?

Probably the most prominent motives for characterizing tolerance as a virtue are cultural and historical. David Heyd introduces the idea as follows:

[I]n the liberal ethos of the last three centuries, [tolerance] has been hailed as one of the fundamental ethical and political values, and still occupies a powerful position in contemporary legal and political rhetoric.⁴

I would add, as does Heyd, the prominence of the idea in the rhetoric of morals and character. Consider your own reaction in hearing someone described as a tolerant person, or as intolerant. If we are to capture the moral connotations often implicit in such use, it seems that we must explicitly define and use tolerance in the moral sense.

But such definitions are notoriously difficult. Heyd describes the difficulty as the «compression» of the concept between two unacceptable poles. On the one hand is the intolerable: there are actions, attitudes and beliefs which we seem obligated to resist (in others as well as in ourselves). Failing to do so would be immoral permissiveness rather than virtuous tolerance. On the other hand, forbearing to interfere with others because we are indifferent to their beliefs and actions, or because we have purposed to endure what we in fact have no good reason to be bothered by in the first place, hardly seems to be virtuous either.

Heyd tackles these difficulties by urging us to distinguish between the actions, or views, of which we might justifiably disapprove and the persons who perform, or hold, them. Tolerance then becomes a form of respect directed toward the persons in question; on the basis of this respect we forbear to interfere with their projects. Robert Paul Churchill has recently offered a more detailed version of this approach, which he summarizes by leading off with the oft-repeated exhortation of Mohandes Gandhi to «hate the sin and love the sinner.»⁵

The conception of tolerance as a species of respect elaborated by both Heyd and Churchill is plainly moral, since it is a form of respect. Such tolerance is, furthermore, clearly distinguishable from permissive or indifferent forbearance. It seems to be an alternative to the concept of tolerance as mere endurance - which strikes some people rather unpleasantly as only partial acceptance - since it is based on full acceptance of (that is, respect for) persons as persons. Finally, this moral conception of tolerance presumably resists compression from the side of «tolerating the intolerable,» since interfering with the projects of others is sometimes compatible with respecting them. (It isn't clear what we'd call such interference, however; neither «tolerance» nor «intolerance» will do. I will return to this point below.)

It should be clear that the honor or respect that people show to the autonomy of others in the form of virtuous tolerance leads to no «paradox of tolerance.» Churchill admits a tension between one's moral disapproval of another's project and the moral impetus to allow it. There is, however, no contra-

diction here. The first is a moral judgment about the beliefs and actions of another, the second about one's own beliefs. It does seem that these judgments enjoin, other things being equal, conflicting courses of action, but as suggested above other things are not equal in such cases. «Respect,» says Churchill, «supplies the grounds for one's decision to assign greater weight to the other's attachment to the belief or behavior in question than one assigns to one's disapproval of it.»⁶

The concept of tolerance as a virtue of respect, then, accords with its usage within what Heyd calls the «liberal ethos» of our moral and political culture. Tolerance in this sense leaves room for the intolerable - for that which ought to be resisted - while distinguishing itself from indifference and mere endurance, and in so doing avoids paradox or self-contradiction. Though I've offered at best a cursory summary of these features and the reasons for them, I hope this provides a sufficient backdrop for two evaluative points.

First, I agree with Heyd, Churchill⁷ and others that this conception of tolerance performs as advertised in avoiding the traps and pitfalls which mark the field of this discussion. More importantly, I agree that the kind of respectful restraint here designated as tolerance is indeed a virtue and is to be practiced and encouraged as such.

I do not agree, however (and this is my second evaluative point), that only these virtuous actions should be designated as tolerance. Nothing is lost, as far as I can tell, by holding to a descriptive conception of tolerance and referring to the virtues catalogued above as instances of tolerance demanded by respect - and there is somewhat to be gained.

For one thing, a descriptive conception of tolerance does not leave us seeking a new term for actions which are in every respect like virtuous tolerance -, except not virtuous. Suppose, for example, that I refrain from interference (with that of which I disapprove) out of resignation, or because I am permissive or indifferent. What do we call my behavior? On the descriptive account, we call it tolerance and judge further that it is unjustified, or at best that it is not praiseworthy. If «tolerance» is to mean virtuous forbearance only, we must devise other locutions even to talk about a common array of behaviors.

The same is true, of course for «intolerance,» and it is probably not necessary to multiply examples. I've already mentioned the fact that tolerance as a virtue of respect allows us to interfere with the projects of others, but doesn't tell us what to call it when we do it. This is more than an issue of convenience, since it is now common practice to use the language of tolerance in the descriptive sense in such cases. («We aren't going to tolerate theft, racism, abuse, etc.») If we acknowledge a moral sense of tolerance, then given current practice there is not a univocal sense of the term. This creates the potential for (and indeed has led to) all manner of illicit persuasion in discussions of morality and public policy. For example: given the moral sense of tolerance (or intolerance, or hatred), if we can successfully attach these terms or labels to particular kinds of actions, we have in effect confirmed their moral status. But it is possible to attach these labels without very much substantive moral argument (if any). Equivocation is a more subtle means for doing this than loud repetition, but both are, alas, common and effective. If clarity and integrity required that we allow the circumstances for such abuse, then we

should - ever watchful - do so. But, as I've indicated, I see no benefits—moral or practical - which suffice to outweigh the negative ramifications of defining tolerance as a virtue.

HOSPITALITY

I have only a few initial reflections on hospitality. It seems plain to me that the same sorts of questions are applicable to this term or concept. That is, it can be taken in the descriptive sense - with the moral qualities of any actions or attitudes so designated as an external question - or it may be taken in the moral sense (with the moral character of the action baked in). I am not sure that there is as much riding on the distinction in this case, but that may be because of my relative inexperience. In any case, hospitality is a concept with increasing influence in our deliberations over social interaction and public policy, and clarity in this area is no less important (even if less pressing) than in others.

Hospitality seems most generally to be used in the moral sense; nearly every use of the term or idea seems intended to convey moral approbation. To put this another way, the questions «Why be hospitable?» or «Is hospitality a good thing?» never seem to lie unanswered beneath the surface when the concept is introduced into any deliberation. Is this - if true - because hospitality is less often brought to bear on controversial questions of social policy,⁸ or because it is widely taken in the moral sense? The term is used descriptively, as when for example we talk of the desert: - or the swamp - being inhospitable to certain forms of life. But it is difficult to imagine using «inhospitable» to refer to the dispositions or behavior of a *person* without the connotation that this is a vice.

On the other hand, it seems relatively easy to think of circumstances in which persons justifiably withhold cordial, generous welcome. We may even suppose that the withholding of welcome is obligatory in some cases. If I may continue to abbreviate the complex character of hospitality as «welcome,» the question parallel to the tolerance question is: is it the case that there are virtuous and vicious instances of «hospitality,» or, is it the case that there virtuous and vicious instances of welcome, and the virtuous ones are hospitality? (Being inhospitable in the latter case would mean withholding welcome which it would be virtuous to offer.)

The latter case (hospitality in the moral sense) seems to accord with our common use as I've suggested above. But given that not all instances of welcoming are morally appropriate, does the moral sense of «hospitality» simply place the moral question one step back and force the invention of new language, as I suggested the moral sense of tolerance does? Assuming for the moment that this is a question worth pursuing, I will offer one possible difference in the cases.

Consider a possible case of justified withholding of welcome: Though we love him dearly, my wife and I have at times pointedly, but cordially, denied welcome to one of our older children. This necessity (as we saw it) was a cause of great pain for us, but the moral appropriateness seemed fairly evident, and continues to seem so in retrospect. Such action seems inhospitable insofar as it is a denial of welcome. But the moral sense of hospitality requires either denying that or denying the moral appropriateness of this course of action. One solution to the dilemma is to say that this is neither a case of being hospitable or inhospitable, since it does not concern the treatment of strangers.

One prominent kind of circumstances which might oblige us to withhold welcome involves knowledge of those we welcome. In such cases, virtues related to treatment of strangers would be irrelevant. On this view, there is a non-moral difference (as well as a moral one) between being inhospitable and justifiably withholding welcome.

I'll conclude with one more illustration. Early this year seven men escaped from a maximum security prison in Texas, and the national news gave us daily updates, as you may remember, on the search for these armed and dangerous fugitives. Five were eventually captured in a trailer park in Colorado, where they had lived for 3 weeks. During that time they had interaction with neighbors and others, and received a cordial, generous welcome. They shared meals, went to church, and generally enjoyed the hospitality of those around them. Those same neighbors - seeing the fugitives on the news - withdrew their welcome and were instrumental in having these men captured.⁹ Were they inhospitable in so doing? Or did their knowledge make the former recipients of their generosity no longer strangers? If the latter is true, then hospitality as the virtue of «serving strangers» (suggested by the title of this conference) is not applicable.

This solution, admittedly, relies on a fairly narrow conception of hospitality (one that rules out hospitality to our friends and family for example). Nor does this account provide resources for sorting out other kinds of cases in which withholding welcome may be morally appropriate. The proposal does, however, suggest one way in which hospitality might be designated a virtue without the difficulties which accompany the use of tolerance in the moral sense.

NOTES

1. «Concerning Moral Toleration,» in *Philosophy, Religion and the Question of Intolerance*, Mehdi Amin Razavi and David Ambuel, eds. (New York: SUNY Press, 1997) pp. 212-229. I would strengthen Jordan's account by noting that it applies even if A is not wrong. Since one believes A to be wrong, one intends to permit a wrong; if it is immoral to permit a wrong then it is immoral to intend to permit one. (But the question in either case is whether it is immoral to permit a wrong.)

2. On this point I agree with Bernard Williams, who claims that the tension here is not a moral contradiction, but «that familiar thing, a conflict of goods.» see «Tolerating the Intolerable,» in Susan Mendus, ed., *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) pp. 72-73.

3. S tolerates P's action A just in case S knows of A, S believes A to be wrong, S is in a position to prevent A, and S voluntarily forbears from interfering with the P's performance of A.

4. David Hey, ed., *Toleration: An Elusive Virtue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)p.3.

5. Robert Paul Churchill, «On the Difference between Non-Moral and Moral Conceptions of Toleration: The Case for Toleration as an Individual Virtue,» in Razavi and Ambuel, pp. 189-211.

6. «Individual Virtue,» p. 202.

7. There is one possible (and, in Heyd's case, curious) exception: Heyd and Churchill both claim explicitly that tolerance in the moral sense is not a characteristic or action of states. Churchill warns against «failure to distinguish between toleration as an individual virtue and toleration as a public or social good (... resulting from principles regulating the conduct of public life).» [p. 202] Heyd is even more direct. «Governments,» he says, «cannot strictly be said to be tolerant. ... The state has no views, no likes and dislikes, which it has to

suspend so as to honor people's autonomy or liberty.» [pp. 15-16]. Both writers prefer the term «neutrality» In referring to states.

8. This is not to imply that it never is, or shouldn't be. Either conclusion would be mistaken.

9. I am grateful to Professor Terry Sparkes for suggesting this illustration.

Address correspondence to:

Storm Bailey
Philosophy Department
Luther College
Decorah, IA 52 101

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