

Review Paper

The Distinction of Tolerance and Toleration — Also on the Limits of Tolerance

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ABSTRACT

Tolerance and toleration are a pair of terms with differences and complex relationships, and the connotations and differences between them have always been different, and no clear and relatively consistent understanding has been formed in the academic field. By examining them from a comprehensive perspective, we can find that the differences between tolerance and toleration are mainly reflected in four aspects: status value, psychological expression, the object of concern, and contingency and inevitability. Through the analysis, we can find that tolerance is a higher moral quality or ought-value, and its psychological mechanism is active and proactive, while toleration is an essential requirement and a fundamental norm. Its psychological characteristics are mainly passive and restrained. The analysis of the concept helps us to understand the value of tolerance to individuals and society, but tolerance is not always valuable, and in the public and private spheres, tolerance or not is based on the reasonable limits of law and moral conscience.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Tolerance as a virtue, especially in the Chinese context, has a high spiritual value. However, toleration is a lesser moral imperative that is more oriented towards instrumental values.
- Tolerance is more positive and active in its psychological mechanisms, whereas toleration is more negative and passive.
- Tolerance is more concerned with the person itself and the process, while toleration is more concerned with the thing itself and the outcome.
- Tolerance is ought-value and toleration is an is-obligation.
- Tolerance can only bring its value into play within reasonable limits, otherwise it will evolve into unprincipled indulgence.

Keywords: tolerance, toleration, distinction, limits

In modern pluralistic and democratic societies, tolerance is not only an internal requirement for one's cultivation, but also an external norm for society to resolve conflicts and reach rational consensus, and its importance is self-evident. However, it is often confused with toleration and forgiveness. For example, in his 1959 article *Toleration is more Important than Freedom*, Hu Shi misused the word "tolerance" as "toleration". Tolerance and toleration are a pair of terms with differences in the same and complex

relationship, and their connotations and differences have been viewed differently. The academic community has not yet formed a clear and relatively consistent understanding. At the same time, a brief analysis of the issues related to the limits of tolerance is presented.

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(I) Tolerance in Chinese and Western Contexts

From an etymological point of view, “tolerance”, derived from the Latin word “tolero,” arose in the historical context of sectarian religious division in the sixteenth century, originally meaning the Church’s tolerance of dissident beliefs. With the development of history, the scope of the idea of tolerance gradually expanded to include political and moral fields beyond religion. In modern pluralistic democratic societies, tolerance has gained a broader and more solid space for existence. In his book *Tolerance*, the American scholar Long Fang defines tolerance by citing the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as “the forgiveness of the freedom of action or judgment of others, and the tolerance of disagreement with personal or generally accepted reasons and views” . There are two cores of tolerance spoken of here, namely freedom and respect for difference: tolerance and respect for lifestyles, values, hobbies and interests that differ from one’s own, based on the liberal spirit of equality. There is a classic liberal expression for “tolerance”: “Although I do not agree with what you say, I respect your right to express your views. This reflects that tolerance in the Western context is inseparable from freedom and rights, and the spirit of “tolerance” that Hu Shi wanted to express is the result of the cultivation and training of the Western spirit of freedom, democracy and rights.

The word “tolerance” in the Chinese context is different. As a synthetic word, *Erya* explains “Kuan” as “ample”, *Erya* explains “Rong” as “prevent”, Pu Guo on its note: “the shape of the bed now small curved screen, singing and shooting people so self-protection hidden” *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* “Kuan” and “Rong” is interpreted as: “house-wide “ and “Sheng “ respectively. From the analysis of the single character, tolerance points to the spatial level of the artefact, while tolerance was first used in *Zhuangzi - The World*: “always tolerant of things, not cutting on people, can be considered the ultimate”, where tolerance refers to the realm of heaven and earth that encompasses all things. Later, tolerance was extended to many fields of morality, politics, law and personal grooming and was constantly given new connotations: for example, at the moral level, it refers to a person’s broad-mindedness and generosity, which can be tolerated, as in *Xunzi - Bu Gou*: “A gentleman can be wide and easy to open

the way to others”; at the level of political decrees, it refers to the combination of leniency and strictness of governmental orders, as in *Zuo Zhuan-Zhao Gong 20 Years* : “leniency is to help the fierce, fierce is to help the leniency, and the government is to be in harmony”; at the level of personal appearance, it refers to the look of leniency and relaxation, *Shi Shuo Xin Yu -Yaliang*: “The Wang’s fearfulness is reflected in his colour. The more tolerant Xie is, the more he shows his appearance.” Nevertheless, on the whole, compared with the Western context, which emphasizes tolerance based on freedom and rights, the Chinese context focuses more on the moral cultivation of the subject of tolerance, that is, the virtue that people are tolerant and generous and do not care about pursuing.

(II) Toleration in Chinese and Western Contexts

The examination of “toleration” needs to be based on both Western and Chinese contexts. Toleration in the Western context is also derived from the Latin word “tolero,” which is derived from “tolerance” and is a concrete expression of “tolerance,” but “toleration” has a narrower meaning, referring more often to restraint in the face of persecution. In his book *Freedom of Conscience - From the Puritans to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution*, John Van Taylor mentions: “Toleration ‘does not have any objectivity and open-mindedness in its meaning”, while tolerance means treating dissenters with objectivity and fairness and being open-minded to freedom from self-paranoia.

In the Chinese context of “toleration”, we focus on the word “Ren”. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* : “Endure, Neng.” Yucai Duan notes: “Neng is the genus of the bear. Neng is the genus of beasts. Therefore, the sageis called Neng. And strong is called Neng Jie.” “Neng” is a pictographic character, written in the shape of a “bear” in bell-cauldron inscription, which has the characteristic of hibernating and waking up in spring, and can change with the cycle of the seasons, becoming the animal imagery of life and regenerative energy, so the ancients regarded it as the embodiment of divine power, that is, the embodiment of superhuman energy. Meanwhile, the ancient pronunciation of “Neng” is “nài”, the same as “Nai”, which means to hold down

the feelings and not allow them to be expressed, i.e. “to be able to bear “. This meaning is consistent with the explanation of “Ren” in *Guangya-Shiyuan*: “Ren”, after which “Ren” extends to mean “ruthlessness cruelty,” etc. And “toleration” is first used in *Hanshu - He Wu Wang Jia Shi Dan Zhuan*: “Only your majesty is attentive to the selection of virtuous, remember the good and forget the faults, tolerate the subjects, do not blame.” The word “toleration” here means “forgiveness” and “toleration” is interpreted as “tolerance” or “patience” in the *Cihai*. That is to say, the word toleration mainly contains two types of intentions, if interpreted from the positive point of view, i.e. “Rong”, then toleration is the meaning of tolerance, but from the opposing point of view, toleration is more about endurance, forbearance, restraint, and even cruelty. This is close to an unconscious psychological state and way of dealing with the world. From the above, it can be seen that the connotation of toleration in the Western context is narrower and focuses on negative values than the dual connotation of toleration in the Chinese context.

(III) The difference between tolerance and toleration

Through the above combing of the concepts of tolerance and toleration, we find that, if interpreted from the perspective of “Rong”, there is a certain degree of similarity between tolerance and toleration, which has led to the mixing of them in academic research and daily life applications, but on closer examination, there is a clear separation between the two in terms of their value hierarchy, psychological mechanism, focus on the object, and so on.

First of all, there is a difference between high and low-ranking values. Tolerance is a high-ranking value or a higher moral quality whose value and connotation are much higher than toleration. It requires a high degree of mental freedom, the ability to form definite opinions, and the virtues of communication, listening and accepting others, and taking them seriously. In other words, Zhuangzi’s “always tolerating things” realm is even more unattainable. In short, tolerance as a virtue, especially in Chinese, has a high spiritual value. Toleration, on the other hand, is a fundamental value requirement or a lower moral requirement, and

its value tends to be more instrumental. The entry of “Ren” in the *Chinese Philosophical Dictionary*, Zhengtong Wei points out that whether “Ren” is a virtue is not inevitable and depends on the motivation of agent. Only when toleration is positive, active, and reflective, rather than negative, passive, and inexorable, can it be taken to mean tolerance; in other words, toleration is incomplete tolerance, and it requires the guidance of value norms.

Secondly, there are both positive and negative psychological differences. Whether in Chinese or Western contexts, when we mention the concept of toleration, it usually gives people a feeling of repression and resistance at the psychological or subjective level. This is because our use of toleration often tends to have a negative connotation of “Ren”. As mentioned above, toleration is often a restraint from persecution, and there is nothing objective or open-minded in its meaning. When an individual or a group chooses to face differences and dissimilarities with a tolerant attitude, then we will consider the subject’s behaviour of tolerance as positive, active and approved, which is not only an “acceptance” of the result within a reasonable range, but also a confirmation of the psychological level of the agent. On the contrary, if the subject chooses to face the situation with toleration, then we can judge only the acceptability of the result by the subject, and its psychological level is mostly considered negative, passive and restrained.

Then, the object of concern is the difference between human and matter focus. The core of tolerance in the Western context is freedom and rights, which is ultimately the consciousness and humility of the limitations of human cognitive ability, that is, the consensus on the limited nature of human reason, and thus extends to the tolerance of things related to the subject. It can be said that the object of tolerance includes not only human beings themselves but also the things related to them. However, toleration is generally only a concept and behavior in the sense of a result, which focuses more on the matter itself and does not concern the agent’s attitude of value. Tolerance in the Chinese context is more often a manifestation of the moral consciousness of the actors themselves, who regard tolerance as a moral quality or a moral state to be pursued. In the

Analects of Confucius, Zi Zhang asked Confucius about benevolence, and Confucius said, “If you can do the five things in the world, then you are benevolent.” These five are “respect, generosity, trust, sensitivity, and favor”, in which “generosity” means tolerance, and generosity wins the hearts of the people. Tolerance as a virtue has its own value and can be called a virtue-oriented tolerance. However, the object of concern of toleration is basically the same as in the Western context, which is a kind of result-oriented toleration.

Finally, the difference between ought-value and is-obligation. Tolerance is an extensive topic, referring mainly to a wide range of areas of affairs, such as religious, moral, political, cultural, etc. In the legal sphere, however, we do not generally speak of an obligation of tolerance, but rather of an obligation of toleration. The application of toleration as a special obligation in the legal field began in the ancient Roman period and was gradually established through a series of developments and refinements. It is intended as a restraint of rights when parties with overlapping rights must cede or share some of their rights to avoid conflicts and maximize the overall utility. The values of harmony, friendliness and tolerance contained in the obligation to toleration are the legal expression of moral norms, which provide the medium for the interaction between law and morality. In other words, the obligation of toleration is the social norm of interpersonal interaction deduced from the virtue of tolerance. In daily life, tolerance, as ought-value, does not have inevitability, while toleration, an is-obligation in interpersonal interactions, is essential to social norms.

Tolerance and toleration have semantic continuity, correlation and similarity, but they should be avoided from being mixed, especially in academic research, which should be strictly distinguished from the different cultural contexts of China and the West. In conclusion, tolerance is a higher moral quality or ought-value, which is active and proactive in its psychological mechanism, while toleration is an essential requirement and a is-norm, mainly passive and restrained in its psychological characteristics.

(IV) The limits of tolerance

Clarifying the difference between the two is not only beneficial to the rigor and standardization of academic research, but also to the cultivation of individual virtues of tolerance and the creation of a tolerant culture in society. However, it should be emphasized that tolerance is not always valuable, and there is a reasonable limit to tolerance, and once this limit is exceeded, tolerance will become the opposite of unprincipled tolerance and indulgence. The definition of the limit of tolerance is difficult, combined with the current academic discussion, I think, can be considered from two perspectives: Firstly, the private sphere of tolerance, whether we want to tolerate in the private sphere, seems to depend entirely on the attitude of individuals, but this limit needs to be consistent with the basic moral conscience, otherwise personal tolerance will be reduced to the behavior of the people of the countryside or even create more evil because of their own connivance; Secondly, the public sphere of tolerance, mainly involving public life things, the limit of tolerance should be based on justice or not, legal or not.

In short, for the understanding of tolerance, we should not only pay attention to the distinction between it and related concepts, realize the value of tolerance to individuals and society, but also grasp the reasonable limits of tolerance in different fields.

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