

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Tolerance And Intellectual Humility



In *A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues*, the French moral philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville attempts to define tolerance, taken as a moral virtue, and to describe its most important features. Sponville defines tolerance as, to paraphrase, “active forbearance for the sake of another.”

And he regards tolerance as a “limited,” “small,” and “necessary” virtue (Sponville 1996, pp. 157-172). Once properly understood, this definition and these descriptions strike me as spot on (after a minor modification to the definition).

Sponville also claims that it makes sense to consider tolerating something – say, the disrespectful tone of your colleague – only if you are uncertain whether your negative judgment – ‘his tone is disrespectful’ – is true. As Sponville puts it, “When a truth is known with certainty, tolerance is irrelevant,” and “Tolerance comes in only when knowledge is lacking.” In other words, if you “know” someone’s behavior is objectionable, tolerance has, as Sponville puts it, “no object.”

I’ll argue that this ‘uncertainty thesis’ falls to counterexamples, is unsupported by Sponville’s arguments, and is inconsistent with the other important features Sponville attributes to tolerance. The uncertainty thesis suggests that the only moral motive that might properly lead someone to choose to forbear is intellectual humility. Contrary to this thesis, the virtue of tolerance can be exercised, and properly so, from other moral motives, and even when we “know” the other person – your colleague, say – is in the wrong.

1. Am I Being Tedious?

A Small Treatise, Sponville tells us, is a book about “practical morals,” not intended merely for a scholarly audience (Sponville 1996, p. 4). In this book, Sponville’s central aim is to give practical advice that is not only sound and incisive, but also highly engaging and easily put to use by thoughtful readers,

academics or not, who aim to live a moral life. In his brief chapter on tolerance, what Sponville wants to get right is the big picture. Broadly speaking, what is tolerance? Why, and when, is it important to exercise this particular virtue? How important is tolerance compared to other moral virtues? What difficult decisions will a thoughtful person, trying to live a tolerant life, often confront? In a few words, too much distinction-making could simply get in the way of a sensible balance of careful thought and useful practical advice.

This raises the question whether my objections hold Sponville's discussion of tolerance to standards of theoretical rigor and analytic precision that a popular book is not required to meet. My objections aren't, I submit, tedious quibbles. As I said, Sponville very much wants to get right the big picture about tolerance, and the uncertainty thesis threatens to put this big picture seriously out of focus and so to obscure Sponville's otherwise very insightful and very helpful remarks about tolerance.

2. What is Tolerance?

Sponville provides his general definition of tolerance in the following extended quotation:

To tolerate means to accept what could be condemned or allow what could be prevented or combated. It means renouncing some of one's power, strength, or anger. Thus we tolerate the whims of a child or the positions of an adversary, but such forbearance is virtuous only if it involves self-control, the overcoming of personal interest, personal suffering, or personal impatience. Tolerance has value only when exercised against one's own interest and for the sake of someone else's (Sponville 1996, pp. 159-160).

According to Sponville, the question whether to exercise tolerance arises in situations in which, confronting behavior that you find objectionable, you discover in yourself a desire, to one degree or another, to "condemn" or "prevent" or "combat" it. In his view, to tolerate is to put up with the relevant behavior, and so – through self-control – to suppress whatever inclinations you have to act out against it. For this exercise of self-restraint to count as an instance of virtuous behavior, you must forbear for the right kind of reason: for the sake of another, and not merely out of self-interest, indifference, or cowardice. To paraphrase, tolerance is "active forbearance for the sake of another."

This definition is a good start. It fits with clear cases of tolerance. For instance,

consider the father of a teenage daughter who bites his lip when her new boyfriend talks to him in overly familiar terms. He feels a strong inclination to chastise the boy, but chooses not to – not out of selfishness, indifference, or fear but – because he doesn't want to embarrass his daughter. The father's behavior clearly counts as an instance of tolerance, as Sponville's definition prescribes.

Sponville's definition should be broadened, though. Imagine an American public official who has both the power and the desire to use her political office to suppress a torrent of obnoxiously unfair, anti-government rhetoric, but chooses not to exercise this power out of respect for the moral and legal right to free speech. In this case, she exercises self-control to put up with the obnoxious speech, but she doesn't do this "for the sake of another." Her decision to suffer fools is done out of respect for liberal democratic values. Accordingly, we should modify Sponville's definition. Though tolerance can be done from a concern for another person's feelings, reputation, or welfare, it can also be done from other moral motives, such as respect for rules or a sense of duty.

Here, then, is our working definition of tolerance: the moral virtue of tolerance is a disposition to actively forbear, prompted by moral motives – presumably, when the agent thinks the balance of moral considerations calls for forbearance instead of acting out.

3. Three Important Features of Tolerance

Sponville intends to provide a general account of tolerance and its proper role in a well-lived, moral life. Here are several features he attributes to tolerance.

First, Sponville emphasizes that tolerance is a moral virtue with "limits." There are times when morality requires us to act, not to forbear. For instance, it isn't a moral virtue to be disposed to put up with grievous moral wrongs: "Must we deem virtuous someone who tolerates rape, torture, or murder? Who could find virtue in a disposition to tolerate the worst?" The basic idea is that a good person would have an exceedingly strong inclination to act out against grievous wrongs, and she would generally do so "when they could be prevented or fought against by means of a lesser evil." Sponville puts the point this way: a person who practices "universal tolerance" – who always, as a matter of moral principle, chooses to forbear – is guilty of "an atrocious tolerance" that is tantamount to "forgetting the victims, abandoning them to their fate, and perpetuating their martyrdom." And so, tolerance has limited application; in those instances – not exactly rare – in

which the balance of moral considerations favors action, we should eschew tolerance and act.

Second, Sponville regards tolerance as a “small” virtue. It’s not as “exalted” as respect, generosity, or love. Think about friendship. Almost certainly you want your friends to respect you, to feel warmly affectionate feelings for you, and – to one degree or another – to actively look out for your interests. You want more from them than merely tolerance. A relationship made up of two people who do little more than suffer each other is far from ideal. A similar remark can be made about the relationships between citizens in a broader community. Though I don’t think everyone is morally required to feel warm affection for everyone else, I wouldn’t find it attractive to be a member of a community in which people consistently displayed no more than a willingness to put up with each other. Of course, a merely tolerant society is preferable to a society in which neither tolerance nor respect nor compassion nor kindness nor mercy is present. But an ideal moral community would include citizens who aim for, among other things, mutual respect and not merely tolerance. Accordingly, in the hierarchy of moral virtues, Sponville ranks tolerance lower than respect, compassion, and generosity. As Sponville puts it, tolerance is “not a maximum but a minimum.” In our moral lives, we should really aim for more.

Third, Sponville regards tolerance as “necessary,” at least for people such as us, in a world such as ours. Tolerance, though a “minimum,” is necessary in at least two scenarios. First, there are cases in which a particular person deserves no more than tolerance from you. At least with respect to his racial attitudes, the white supremacist simply doesn’t deserve your respect. Second, there are instances when the problem is not with the other person, but with you. An old friend is groaning under the weight of real suffering and deserves your compassion. But in an episode of moral weakness, you simply can’t summon it. To your dismay, all you feel is cold-hearted impatience. If the best you are able to muster by an effort of will is to suppress your impatience, it might be morally required for you to do at least this. When we are prone to undue impatience, choosing tolerance is “only a beginning.” But whereas generosity and magnanimity are hard to come by, tolerance is often an “accessible wisdom” for those of us who are not moral saints.

Sponville’s big picture – his description of tolerance as limited, small, and necessary – strikes me as compelling and useful. But before I move on to discuss

the uncertainty thesis, it will be helpful for me to draw out several important points from Sponville's descriptions of tolerance as a small but necessary virtue.

Theorists of tolerance often point out that the phrase 'I tolerated him' has, as Sponville says, "something condescending, even contemptuous about it that is disturbing." What disturbs, at least in part, is that an act of tolerance implies what I've called a 'negative judgment'. To tolerate is to put up with behavior that you find in some way objectionable. And so, an act of tolerance suggests, we might say, a "breach" in the relevant relationship.

You might have noticed that Sponville thinks about the morally virtuous life in highly communal terms. In this vein, Sponville quotes Vladimir Jankelevitch approvingly:

Tolerance - though the word is hardly exalting - is therefore a passable solution; while awaiting better - that is, until men become capable of loving one another, or simply of knowing and understanding one another - let us count ourselves fortunate if they can at least suffer each other. Tolerance, then, belongs in the interim period (Jankelevitch 1986, p. 93).

Similar to Kant's discussion of the "kingdom of ends" and the Christian tradition's thinking about the "eternal harmony," the kingdom of God, that will follow Christ's second coming, Sponville attempts to describe what kind of people we ought to aspire to become by describing what an ideal moral community would be like. In his view, living the morally virtuous life is a matter of aspiring to become (more and more like) the type of people who could live in morally healthy relationships, in a morally healthy human community. A morally virtuous person makes it a central aim, in Sponville's view, to become more and more neighbor-loving.

Given this emphasis, consider tolerance. An instance of tolerance is, in the very least, not a model of an ideal human interaction. A society in which people continually suffer each other is a society in which there are divisions. Thinking someone else is in the wrong is not, of course, essentially or invariably condescending, let alone contemptuous, but it does suggest a suboptimal (episode in a) relationship. A relationship in which one person suppresses a desire to act out against another does not mimic the behavior and attitudes of citizens in the Kantian-Christian "kingdom of ends," which is, Sponville thinks, community at its best.

No doubt, in some instances the breach between the tolerant and the tolerated is minor. Say your toddler has become tired and cranky, and you judge it best – an “accessible wisdom” – to put up with his present outburst. This act of patient forbearance won’t call into question the viability of your long-term relationship with the child. It’s a minor episode, a momentary breach in what might very well be a wonderful relationship. Even so, an episode of toleration isn’t, morally speaking, a paradigm of human interaction. The practice of tolerance will be disturbing to us to the degree that we hope for much better.

4. What Does the Uncertainty Thesis Really Say?

According to Sponville’s uncertainty thesis, we cannot properly tolerate behavior we “know” to be wrong. In his thinking, uncertainty is, we might say, a prerequisite for tolerance. If you “know” that your negative judgment about someone else’s behavior is true, it is not “valid” – not apt – for you to even consider putting up with the behavior. Otherwise put, it’s only if you are uncertain that your negative judgment is correct, that the question whether to tolerate, whether to choose to forbear, even “comes in.”

It’s natural to wonder what Sponville means by “know” when he is expressing his commitment to the uncertainty thesis. Whenever a philosopher speaks of knowledge in the context of a treatise on moral virtue, metaethical questions arise: Is there even such a thing as moral knowledge? Do normative judgments (such as ‘his tone is disrespectful’) have truth-values? Can they be the proper objects of knowledge? “How,” you as a reader might wonder, “would Sponville answer these questions?”

My brief answer is, “I’m not sure.” Recall, Sponville’s main concern is not theoretical, and so he minimizes his discussion of metaethical questions. Also, his remarks about the possibility and the reality of moral knowledge, which are sprinkled throughout *A Small Treatise*, are complex, and my brief essay isn’t the place to work them out. In response, I’ve decided to make an interpretive assumption. I will read Sponville as employing the word ‘know’ in the same “unpretentious” sense that Simon Blackburn uses the word in the following quotation:

So is there such thing as moral knowledge? Is there moral progress? These questions are not answered by science, or religion, or metaphysics, or logic. They have to be answered from within our own moral perspective. Then, fortunately, there are countless small, unpretentious things we know with perfect certainty.

Happiness is preferable to misery, dignity is better than humiliation. It is bad that people suffer, and worse if a culture turns a blind eye to their suffering. Death is worse than life; the attempt to find a common point of view is better than manipulative contempt for it (Blackburn 2001, p. 134).

In his book *Being Good*, from which this quotation is taken, Blackburn attempts a modest defense of this “unpretentious” moral confidence. He thinks that those of us who make moral judgments such as ‘culture should not turn a blind eye to suffering’ should continue to hold and to express such judgments. Upon reflection, he argues, we are justified in this confidence. In fact, Blackburn spends much of his book arguing against common “threats” to the sense that this “perfect certainty” is justified. I see some of the same spirit in Sponville’s book.

So, here is my proposal. When Sponville says that “Tolerance comes in only when knowledge lacking,” I will take him to mean that if you are confident in your negative judgment, and you have strong reasons to think that your negative judgment is justified, the question whether to tolerate the relevant objectionable behavior is not apt. It is only if you are uncertain of your negative judgment that tolerance might be called for.

Recognize that if my attribution of the uncertainty thesis (so understood) to Sponville is incorrect, this would not mean that my arguments about tolerance and intellectual humility are unsound. It would merely mean that they aren’t arguments against Sponville’s views.

5. Why the Uncertainty Thesis is False

The primary reason to reject the uncertainty thesis is that it falls to counterexamples. There are cases in which a person knows (in the relevant sense) that his negative judgment is true, and yet he clearly exercises the moral virtue of tolerance. We’ve already come across two such cases. The father of the teenage daughter is clearly justified in thinking that his daughter’s boyfriend should not speak to him as though he were one of his teenage buddies. And yet (as Sponville’s own, unmodified definition prescribes) the father’s question whether it is best, all things considered, to suppress his inclination to chastise the boy is valid. Also, the public official who chooses not to exercise all of the power vested in her by the state to suppress the obnoxiously unfair political rhetoric is clearly practicing tolerance. She can be confident, even justifiably confident, that the rhetoric is deeply unfair and yet choose to put up with it out of respect for the

right to free speech.

Notice, when you evaluate my purported counterexamples, the salient issue is not whether you think the father and the public official have chosen, all things considered, the best possible course of action. Perhaps in one or both of these cases, you happen to think that the moral reasons for acting out were stronger than the moral reasons for forbearing. Even so, the central question is whether it is valid for these two agents to consider putting up with objectionable behavior, even though they each knew that the behavior they confronted was objectionable. They needn't, I submit, lack knowledge for the question 'Is it best, morally, for me to forbear?' to be appropriate.

Here is a third counterexample. Say a fundraiser for a properly well-regarded anti-poverty group is in a meeting with a wealthy potential donor. The fundraiser's presentation has clearly impressed the would-be philanthropist; his checkbook is on the table, his pen is in his hand. But then, shockingly, utterly out of the blue, in a casual, offhand manner, the would-be philanthropist makes a racially insensitive remark about the people the charity benefits. The fundraiser is offended by the remark, as she should be. Accordingly she feels a strong inclination to speak up against it. Let me stipulate that the fundraiser is not a moral coward; she has often spoken up against racism before. But this situation presents her with a particularly difficult and consequential question: 'Is it better, all things considered, for me to let this particular slur go unremarked?' It is perfectly sensible for her to worry that if she were to speak up, the checkbook would be put away. If she chooses to forbear on the grounds that such restraint is likely to preserve the donation and all of the public good it will do, she clearly counts as having exercised tolerance.

To put the point bluntly, for the question 'morally speaking, is it best for me to put up with this?' to be apt, the fundraiser need not first wonder whether her negative judgment - 'racially insensitive comments are morally wrong' - is really true. If we are justifiably confident in any moral judgments - and I certainly agree with Blackburn and Sponville that we are - we know racial slurs are morally wrong. In summary, the fundraiser knows the would-be philanthropist is in the wrong, and - contrary to what the uncertainty thesis implies - she exercises tolerance.

These counterexamples reveal that the uncertainty thesis is false. They also

suggest a broader lesson. In the end, the question whether or not to practice tolerance should be answered through what Sponville himself calls a “casuistry of tolerance,” in which the reasons to forbear are weighed against the reasons to act out. The father, public official, and fundraiser are not prompted to forbear, and need not be, by intellectual humility or by any form of uncertainty. They are driven by, respectively, a sensitive concern for someone’s feelings, a deep respect for moral rights, and a strong desire to promote the public good.

6. Why Sponville’s Argument for the Uncertainty Thesis is Unsound

In support of the uncertainty thesis, Sponville appeals to an example: “One would not tolerate an accountant’s refusal to correct mistakes in his calculations.”

We are to imagine, I suppose, a case in which an accountant has not only made an arithmetic mistake in his work, but this mistake has been pointed out to him by, say, his boss. In response, the accountant refuses to correct the mistake.

Sponville regards the accountant’s obstinacy to be intolerable. In his view, the accountant should be reprimanded, sanctioned, or even fired by his boss. Sponville seems to think that the salient feature of this case, the *reason* that the accountant’s obstinacy cannot be tolerated, is that the boss knows (with certainty) simple arithmetic claims (such as ‘ $3 + 5 = 8$, not 9’). Since the boss does not have any reason to hesitate to judge the accountant’s behavior as in the wrong, he doesn’t have any reason – Sponville infers – to hesitate to “condemn” or to “combat” it. It is from this example that Sponville draws the conclusion, “The right to error applies only *a parte ante*: once an error has been proven, the right no longer applies.” In brief, if your behavior has been proven to be objectionable, you have no grounds to request tolerance.

I don’t deny that the accountant’s boss knows – is justifiably confident – that the accountant is in the wrong. Not only is the accountant’s arithmetic calculation demonstrably wrong, but the accountant’s unwillingness to correct his mistake is deeply unprofessional and violates his profession’s code of ethics. This is true whether his obstinacy is caused by a shocking level of arithmetic incompetence, laziness, petulant ill-will, or something else. In conclusion, I agree that this is a case, as Sponville suggests, in which the relevant agent, the boss, knows his negative judgments are true.

Even so, Sponville’s argument is unsound, for several reasons. First, there is a

basic logical concern. An appeal to one instance in which a known wrong is intolerable simply does not establish that uncertainty is a prerequisite for tolerance. If Sponville is to effectively establish the uncertainty thesis, what he really needs to argue is that purported counterexamples against the uncertainty thesis, such as my three, do not work.

Second, Sponville is mistaken when he claims that the boss's knowledge makes the question of tolerance irrelevant. Under some circumstances, surely it does make sense to consider tolerating an accountant's demonstrable mistake, and even an accountant's obstinate refusal to correct a demonstrable mistake. If the accountant's mistake is insignificant, but the costs of correcting it would not be, it might be best to put up with the error. And though there is in the very least a strong presumption in favor of reprimanding or punishing a strikingly obstinate employee, there are circumstances in which forbearance is called for. Say the accountant has had a long and stellar career, and he has recently gone through personal struggles that would strain the fortitude of even the most resilient and responsible human being. In light of this, the boss might sensibly choose to put up with the accountant's recent episode of poor behavior.

Again, in a context in which you find behavior objectionable and are thinking about acting out against it, what is called for is the casuistry of tolerance. For the question whether to forbear to be apt, there simply needs to be (weighty) moral reasons for the agent to consider suppressing the desire to condemn, prevent, or combat the relevant objectionable behavior.

Here is an important point, especially relevant to this discussion of the uncertainty thesis. Say that you notice some evidence against your negative judgment 'my colleague's tone is disrespectful', and so you lose some confidence in it. This loss of confidence does provide you with some reason to "hesitate" to act out against your colleague. If your colleague is not guilty of disrespect, then he certainly doesn't deserve the cold treatment. (He might not deserve it anyways. Must a disrespectful tone always be punished?) Hence, a humble recognition of the fallibility of your negative judgments might properly prompt you to hesitate to act out. But however wise this insight - Sponville cites Montaigne and Voltaire, approvingly, when they make this point - this sense of fallibility is not the only consideration that might call for forbearance. As I've been arguing, in some cases, it is concern for another's feelings, respect for rules, or a desire to preserve a donation to a good cause that should prompt restraint.

7. Why the Uncertainty Thesis is Inconsistent with Sponville's Big Picture

Recall that Sponville claims, when describing the uncertainty thesis, that tolerance has “no object” if you know that another person’s behavior is objectionable. But given my arguments, this simply can’t be correct. To illustrate, let’s say that at first you believe your colleague spoke to you in a disrespectful tone. But prompted by intellectual humility, you begin to reconsider: “Maybe I’m wrong; I’m fallible.” And let’s say that as you continue to reflect on your fallibility you decide to revoke the negative judgment. You change your mind. You no longer believe he disrespected you. It is actually in this type of situation, a situation in which you’ve completely lost your confidence in your negative judgment, that tolerance has “no object.” If you think someone’s behavior is objectionable, there is something for you to consider putting up with. But if you do not accept a negative judgment, such as ‘his tone is disrespectful’, there is nothing for you to forbear.

Of course, your feelings of irritation with your colleague might persist even after you no longer find these feelings justified, in which case you will need to make sure you do not act on them. But your “hesitation” to act on these lingering, but rejected feelings – even if it mimics the self-restraint involved in tolerance – doesn’t count as an act of tolerance. In restraining your desire to act out, you aren’t “putting up with him.” Instead, you’re attempting to act in line with your present best judgments. Your hesitation to act is a matter of simple integrity, of doing what you actually think is best. You have to think the other person has done something objectionable for the question ‘should I tolerate him?’ to be apt. And so, the uncertainty thesis does not cohere with Sponville’s definition of tolerance, which implies the presence of a negative judgment.

The exercise of intellectual humility does have, it is worth noting, a tendency to undermine tolerance’s small stature. I agree with Sponville that tolerance can be prompted by intellectual humility, for humble thoughts might weaken a person’s confidence in her negative judgment rather than lead her to utterly reject it, and this weakened confidence might factor into her decision to forbear: “I continue to think he’s in the wrong, and I’m very annoyed with him; but I’m not confident enough in my judgment to justify act out against him.” This is tolerance in action. But in cases such as this, the presence of humble thoughts in the agent tends to undermine the very type of negative judgment, and so the type of relational “breach,” that actually is a prerequisite of tolerance.

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