

To Think Tolerance

Paul Ricœur

Two essays have been placed under this title. The first is written in the spirit of continental European moral and political philosophy. Its emphasis is on the tensions and paradoxes inherent in the idea of tolerance. The first paradox: the possibility of tolerance, far from being based on the renunciation of the *absolute* nature of the conviction, depends on the contrary on the capacity for absolute engagement which itself gives rise to an unconditional right towards respect. Another paradox: while, in the case of scientific truth (rational or empirical), understanding and consent coincide, in the case of belief (moral, religious, or aesthetic), there is a striking divergence between the *contestable* nature of the affirmation and the *risky* nature of the attachment; but such is the cost of the unconditional. An extreme paradox: it is at the very heart of the idea of truth that a split between *possessing* and *sharing* must be operated; and it is then in the realm of dispossession and non-knowledge that the art of *mimicking* an opposed conviction within oneself – ultimate bulwark against the temptation to impose one's own portion of truth on others – can be learned. The spirit of Karl Jaspers permeates this lucid meditation.

It was left to a philosopher of Anglo-American culture to investigate at their crossroads the *arguments* capable of *legitimizing* tolerance. This discussion is based entirely on "liberal theory," in the ethico-political as opposed to economic sense of the term. In order to arrive at the alternative invoked in the title of the article, the author had to go back from the *practices* of tolerance, compatible indeed with diverse, even opposed, motivations, to the *attitudes* about tolerance that are accessible to discussion. But on which grounds argue from, the moral or the political? When acknowledged to those whose opinions and customs I disapprove of, is the right to not be constrained a moral or political judgment? The

conceptions of tolerance itself will differ depending on the answer to the specific question of the nature of the tie between *disapproval* and *abstention* of constraint. Formulated in terms of morality, the “contrast” inherent in the idea of tolerance is justified with recourse to the idea of moral autonomy: the other’s morality, the argument runs, is in his or her own hands, and it is not the business of others to interfere; political tolerance is then nothing more than a corollary. But how ensure that the value accorded to autonomy by liberalism not rejoin the other doctrines labeled by it as sectarian? We are then thrown on the side of a merely political doctrine of tolerance, based on the idea that it is not the State’s role to impose one way of living as opposed to another, even that which refers to the idea of autonomy. It is therefore on the legitimation of political authority that the debate is displaced; and then a variety of moral attitudes, capable of lending support to political *liberalism*, are presented – among which the author is happy to emphasize the kind of skepticism, or at least the absence of fanatical conviction, that presided in the *practices* of tolerance that arose in the seventeenth century.