

Holy Apostles College & Seminary

Tolerance Is not a Virtue

by
Jeffrey Camlin
Graduate Student, Christian Wisdom

Dr. Francisco Romero Carrasquillo
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In contemporary thought today, we often come across with the claim “tolerance is a virtue.” Upon closer examination of these claims none of them mention relativism, conventionalism, or even any mention of what the actual virtues one should practice. All too often a call for “tolerance is a virtue” is more the attempt to establish tolerance as a blind requirement or obligation, or as a statement to conform to ideological beliefs that may have nothing to do with either tolerance or the person or thing we are supposed to be tolerant towards, (or intolerant towards).

This paper will first examine tolerance in general to see if tolerance meets a general criterion as a moral act or virtue. Second is a series of parts that examines tolerance as an individual virtue, and lastly, we find the mechanics and practice of tolerance and intolerance is close to the cardinal virtue of prudence, with a variation of tolerance and intolerance practice called virtue signaling, which is not a virtue.

1. Examination of Tolerance in General

Virtues exist in two ways. First there are the intellectual virtues, which perfect the intellect, and second there are the moral virtues, which perfect the will. Tolerance is not a virtue per se, so we will first examine the intellectual process of toleration’s being, (or ens) as an act. It is important to first realize that in things, each one has so much good as it has being: since good and being are convertible.¹ So, let us consider the being of tolerance.

Perhaps to best determine the substance of tolerance is to examine what it is not. In and of itself, there is no good or evil which tolerance moves us closer to. If we are moved to anything, tolerance is a certain indifference towards others. Taken to the extreme, it follows a path of separating people from each other with different peculiarities to the point where if nothing is done, distinct groups of humans exist with differences so remarkable that one group

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a. 1, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

does not recognize the other with a common humanity at worst, and at best enduring painful or even harmful acts. Its contrary, intolerance, replaces indifference towards others with a sort of hypervigilance of others noting differences in behavior or convention as unacceptable, also moving to drive a wedge in between people in general and turning “brother against brother” so to speak, as there is a certain level of difference all people maintain due to free will and without restrictions an intolerant attitude is a slippery slope to declare even the most negligible difference of act harshly intolerant.

Making the claim tolerance is “morally right” is not productive either, as it is an exercise in relativism, particularly in light of the previous paragraph as the act of tolerance or intolerance does not give us any insight as to a human good, but rather what is known as right or wrong within established societies or persons and even has the power to move different societies closer or farther apart. In fact, the differences may be so subtle that the acts are mere conventions, (and thus conventionalist versus tolerant), not associated with beliefs of right or wrong at all. So, the claim that “Tolerance is a virtue” is meaningless with no other information since no actual virtue is being referenced, to which Feldman describes this situation thus:

There exists no merit whatsoever to the following line of thought: Since conventionalism is true, we should be more tolerant to the behavior of other people in society. For they are only acting in accord within their own conventions, as they should.²

In the case of conventionalism, we are talking about one society, with individual conventions that are either tolerable or intolerable. Feldman also notes this situation is problematic if conventionalism is true in cases where tolerance is a universal right,³ particularly when it is the convention of a person to treat others without their convention with intolerance. After all, if we accept the convention that tolerance as a right, then we must also accept the convention that

² Feldman, Fred, *Introductory Ethics*. (New Jersey Prentice-Hall, 1978), 171.

³ Feldman, *Introductory Ethics*, 172.

some people may have the convention of intolerance, thereby negating the “right” or “virtue” of tolerance, (and by extension tolerance is the opposite of good).

In sum, tolerance and intolerance have no moral species in and of themselves. At their most basic level, they can be said to be more akin to acts, more specifically, acts of indifference and acts of intervention.

2. Examination of Tolerance and Intolerance as an Individual Moral Virtue

What makes acts of tolerance or intolerance good or evil? Let us examine moral virtue in general to distill where we can place tolerance and intolerance in the moral matrix. First, there are two kinds of virtue, intellectual and moral. Moral virtue is derived from customary action (mos). Hence by a slight variation of the original term we have this name “moral.”⁴ So, tolerance and intolerance can be considered customary action to something, and can squarely be placed in the category of moral virtues due to the fact it implies inaction or action.

Moral virtue is not instilled in us by nature, for example unlike a rock that always gravitates down we human beings do not possess a natural “moral compass” to guide us, rather doing good or evil acts require practice. Moral virtues are not in us by nature nor are they in us contrary to nature. We do have a natural aptitude to acquire them, but we are perfected in these virtues by use.⁵ The terms “using tolerance” and “using intolerance” is non-sensical, and a better way to describe a contemporary understanding of these terms of acts of tolerance and intolerance is using the acts of *indifference* and *intervention*. If it is argued the idea of tolerance and intolerance is more complex than that, the complexity is more in the linguistics than the concept itself.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, Lecture 1, (245). trans Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964).

⁵ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, II, L1, (249)

3. Moral Determinants of Tolerance and Intolerance

The good or evil of an action, as of other things, depends on its fullness of being or its lack of that fullness.⁶ The fullness of an act's being can be examined with its object, its end, and its circumstance, otherwise known as moral determinants. Goodness of tolerance or intolerance, or more specifically, indifference and intervention can be determined as it is called, by its fullness, and any lack of fullness, (also known as privation of a good), can be considered an evil. St. Thomas guides us in that we will need to establish the moral determinates of an act by its object, end, and circumstance.

What is the object of indifference and intervention, (tolerance and intolerance)? What is the fullness of an act of indifference? Of intervention? Indifference and tolerance are the acts of not acting in a particular circumstance. It is important to note, however, that there exists no indifferent act as far as virtue is concerned, and that every human action that proceeds from deliberate reason, (if it be considered in the individual), must be good or bad.⁷ So to be a virtue, tolerance and indifference can be measured by moral determinants. Under the guidance of moral determinants as it relates to *acceptance*-tolerance, and *intervention*-intolerance, the object, or exterior act is either acceptance of the circumstance or intervention in the circumstance. Within the species of tolerance/intolerance the end is for the benefit of another person, and not the self, otherwise a person would need intervention of the self which is more a health-related circumstance than a moral one. While it is intuitive that there exists person-to-person contact, it is just as well that the person tolerated or in-tolerated is not aware they are being tolerated or in-tolerated. For example, a person could see from afar or via media another person, and tolerate / accept that other person, just as well as a person could switch off media / throw a magazine in

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a. 2, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 18, a. 9.

the garbage to be intolerant of another person without the other person even knowing what happened that they have been met with intolerance, or that a person intervened in a situation due to intolerance of the other person.

There is, then, a case that two subspecies of tolerance and intolerance exists: one where there is person-to-person contact and another where the other person being tolerated or intolerated has no idea of the act of the first person. A name for the latter type of tolerance / intolerance act is *virtue signaling*. The object and even the circumstance could be the same, but the ends sought is different. For example, a person, instead of intervention-intolerance of an actual object of giving to a poor person a cooked and ready to eat Thanksgiving turkey, (because there exists the circumstance of some poor hungry people in his city), the person rather places a sign on their lawn that says, “feed the poor people.” The end is not in actuality helping poor people but rather a sign that signals an intolerance to the fact there are poor people without food to give the appearance of virtue for the benefit of the person putting up the sign.

In this light, is virtue signaling virtuous? While the object is the same for both the person who directly helped feed the poor people on a direct individual basis and the virtue signaler who finds hunger of the poor intolerable, in the same circumstance, the ends are different. One act is direct intolerance-intervention of the situation for a good cause other than self and the other act is tolerance-acceptance of the situation in the form of simply a sign for the benefit of the self being viewed as virtuous. So virtue signaling is not virtuous for an individual and is simply self-serving to appear virtuous.

4. Is Tolerance and Intolerance a Subspecies of a Cardinal Virtue?

Tolerance-indifference and intolerance-intervention when not virtue signaling is to not only do absolutely nothing, but act by not acting, perhaps to another’s act, perhaps to a

circumstance not involving human beings. Some words for this could be abstaining, “looking the other way,” or not acting to an apparent evil.

On circumstance, St. Thomas guides us:

...a virtuous man acts as he should, and when he should, and so on in respect of the other circumstances. Therefore, on the other hand, the vicious man, in the matter of each vice, acts when he should not, or where he should not, and so on with the other circumstances. Therefore human actions are good or evil according to circumstances.⁸

With circumstance, we could interpret this as saying the virtuous man both acts when he should, (intervention), but also does not act when he should not (indifference). In at least one case, there is a circumstance where the vicious man is indifferent when he should not (looking the other way to evil tolerant indifference to evil), or does act when he should not, (vicious intervention of intolerance). This has the form of the cardinal virtue of prudence.

Just as we are to tolerate what should be tolerated, and be intolerant of what should be intolerated, so to this mirrors prudence thus:

Now it belongs to prudence, as stated above (Article 1, Reply to Objection 3; Article 3) to apply right reason to action, and this is not done without a right appetite. Hence prudence has the nature of virtue not only as the other intellectual virtues have it, but also as the moral virtues have it, among which virtues it is enumerated.⁹

So, we can firmly say that virtue signaling is not a virtue at all, and it is possible to claim the practice of tolerance and intolerance as a virtue with prudence, acting tolerant or intolerant after good counsel and for a good end. It must also be said that since there exists a false prudence, there exists false tolerance and intolerance which we have seen fits the description of virtue signaling.

5. Conclusion

⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 18, a. 3, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

⁹ *ST* II-II, q. 47, a4.

We have examined tolerance and found it is not a virtue or a moral species in and of itself, rather tolerance exists with its contrary of intolerance. If we reduce tolerance and intolerance to its bare acts, we find that tolerance involves an act of indifference, and intolerance involves an act of intervention. Some may find that it is problematic with associating tolerance with indifference, but for it to be practiced as a virtue as such, those are the acts that must be performed. Additionally, not only must acts of indifference and intervention be involved for tolerance in general to be a moral virtue, the level of indifference and intervention must be appropriate for the circumstance as its relevant guiding cardinal virtue dictates. Lastly, as all things good, there exists an evil form of tolerance and intolerance known as virtue signaling which meets the criteria of false prudence and should not be tolerated.