

Tolerance, Respect and Earnestness: An Examination of Material Difference and Formal Identity

Björn Freter¹

Abstract

In the so-called modern age, a transition can be observed in Western thought regarding this issue of tolerance. A perceptible shift can be seen in the understanding of tolerance as mere endurance to attempts to conceive of tolerance as a kind of well-grounded acceptance. It is regrettable, however, that this change in thinking has often remained hypothetical rather than heuristic. This certainly has to do with the fact that most of the time only large-scale theological, philosophical, or political projects were negotiated. In this case, as is often happens, the directly concerned individual, the concrete person in the course of the demonstration efforts, was lost. We want to counter this loss with our study. In our investigation, which is based on a phenomenological reflection, we want to examine tolerance and respect as an existential problem couched within an individual. We wish to consider a person who desires to be tolerant and respectful; a person who accepts tolerance and respect as an existential task.

Keywords: tolerance, material difference, formal identity, matter of the heart, earnestness

Introduction

Centring one's exploration on a concrete person actively involved with the existential task of tolerance can be a counterweight to what we perceive as a significant historical oversight,¹ a problem we argue that has not been sufficiently recognized as a problem. This quandary is: it remains unclear how one actually can truly tolerate – and not only endure – the one who thinks, believes, acts differently, without at the same time considering oneself as superior, silently subordinating the other to oneself or compromising one's own thinking, believing, acting for the sake of the other.² By locating our exploration within the framework of an individual facing the existential task of tolerance, we hope to first describe this quandary appropriately and then suggest a way towards heartfelt

tolerance.

A Matter of the Heart

Let us consider a person who has a matter dear to their heart. They attempt to be true to this matter in all that they do. They dedicate themselves to this matter of the heart. They wish to be a person who embodies that which is necessary for the nurturing of this matter. Let us then consider that this person does not understand their matter of the heart as a thought, not as something which they have brought forth themselves, but rather as something that they have discovered. This discovery has had such a powerful effect on them that they have since wished to pour their heart into the matter, henceforth striving constantly to live in accordance with this discovery.

¹Independent Scholar, Berlin, Germany; freterb@gmx.de
Ewanlen: A Journal of Philosophical Inquiry
Vol. 1, No. 1, 2017: 10 – 16

The discovery thus has a normative significance for our person: they have found an *ought* to which they have dedicated their existence. The reality of the discovery itself has forced them to do this. We wish to say that this person accepts their matter of the heart as facticity.³ When using the term facticity, we refer not to objective reality, to reality as it is in itself – we would indeed have no way of explaining what this might be –, but rather to that which somebody, in this case our hypothetical person, *considers* to be reality. When we attempt to describe, therefore, what it means to live under a certain facticity, we use the expression facticity not only ontologically, but at the same time hermeneutically as well. Reality and that which is considered to be reality coincide here. Our person hence considers their matter of the heart to be real. Based on the reality of this matter, they then determine the possibilities available for living their lives. These possibilities are thus determined in the wake of reality. Within the framework of facticity, of that which they consider to be real, the scope of available options opens up for our person to live their life. They see before them their spectrum of possibility.

It is this spectrum of possibility that we wish to call existentiality, and we refer to the practice within this spectrum as existential practice. While facticity thus refers to the assumption of reality, that which one considers to be reality, existentiality is to be understood as the practice of the realisation of possibilities, the positing of reality, the positing of – as we wish to put it – existential facts. We find ourselves situated in facticity and become existentially practical within this facticity. Through this existential practice, we narrow the available spectrum

of facticity. Perhaps our hypothetical person could have turned away from their discovery, but they did not wish to, and it is therefore no longer the case that everything is possible for them that had previously been possible. For they no longer wish to do that which runs contrary to the matter of the heart, so much so that they in fact no longer can do it; this person has thus posited an existential fact. Within our wider spectrum of possibility, therefore, we existentially define a narrower – and ever further narrowing – existential spectrum of possibility. It is through this narrowing of scope that we substantiate our existentiality and determine ourselves.

Two Matters of the Heart

Let us now consider a second person. This second person also has a matter dear to their heart, and they, too, understand their matter of the heart as a discovery in reality. We do not at this stage wish to define what their respective matters of the heart are, but let us simply assume that they are deeply contradictory to one another: the first person's matter of the heart can only be reality if that of the second person is not, and the second person's matter of the heart can only be reality if that of the first person is not.

Let us then consider that these two people cross paths. They soon notice the other's matter of the heart and must recognise that each person's matter is opposed to that of the other. If one is real, then the other cannot be real. Our two hypothetical people cannot agree upon facticity. And, as happens when people live alongside one another, the one person's matter of the heart will eventually demand that which the other person's forbids, and vice versa. In addition to the respective facticities, the two existentialities

now also stand in confrontation with one another.

The Existential Problem

Even just a quick glance at human history will suffice to conclude that in this moment of confrontation, we have frequently attempted to enforce our own point of view through the use of violence. But we do not wish to broach this issue here. This moment, when two (or more) matters of the heart stand in opposition to one another, does namely not necessarily bring forth violence. For the person who – for whatever reason – does not wish to condemn, to oppress, to corrupt the other, this moment results in deep existential perplexity: »What should I undertake«, our two hypothetical people may now ask themselves, »so as not to condemn the other, although they live contrary to my matter of the heart? And if I manage to live with their matter of the heart, will I not thus condemn my own matter of the heart?«⁴

But our two protagonists would indeed have felt uneasy long before the moment of existential conflict. It was already a strange constellation to consider one's own matter of the heart to be of all-encompassing importance while simply putting up with, simply enduring that of the other. »Is it appropriate«, one could ask well before the respective facticities and existentialities come into direct conflict, »merely to put up with, merely to endure the other's matter of the heart? Would it not be desirable to be able to accept the other and that which is their own, and not just acknowledge their presence?«

These are the moments, be they of the former or of the latter variety, in which the concept

of tolerance enters our lives as a problem, as a task. And, as the former situation in particular demonstrates, this task involves us going beyond the version of tolerance which merely consists of the mistrustful endurance of the other. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe summed it up in wonderfully laconic fashion in his *Maxims and Reflections*: »Toleration«, he writes, »should, strictly speaking, be only a passing mood; it ought to lead to acknowledgment and appreciation. To tolerate a person is to affront him.«⁵ An interest in respect, therefore, which goes beyond the mere endurance of the presence of the other, is the true object of our investigation.

The Political Intention

It seems of importance to us to delve more deeply into the existential origins of this interest in respect. The rampant populism of our current political climate – e.g. in Europe from the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany to the *Front National* in France and *Chrysi Avgi* in Greece – attempts, along with a number of other turpitudes, to portray this existential interest as contemptible by repeatedly claiming that one's own cultural sphere should not be burdened by another. In other words: the populists of our time wish, primarily through their neo-nationalism, on the one hand to make the necessity of respect for the other superfluous by ensuring that this other, this foreign element, remains in its own – foreign – country, while on the other hand attempting to align people – usually those who, in the eyes of the respective party, are the legitimate members of a certain nation – with a narrow conservative canon of norms based exclusively on the recognition of their own cultural sphere.

It is for this reason that it seems to us to be of

such great importance to clarify how those who wish to respect the matters dear to the hearts of others can in fact realise this respect. Our aim here is thus not the conversion of intolerant people, but rather to provide a solid philosophical-phenomenological basis for the existential practice of the actively respectful person.

Material Difference in Facticity

Let us return to our two hypothetical people and define their matters of the heart more precisely. Let us say that one is of Muslim faith and the other of Christian faith.⁶ Their discovery within reality is their God. It is him to whom they have dedicated themselves. He is the normative facticity. Their founding scriptures of facticity are, respectively, the *Koran* and the text corpus consisting of the *Hebrew Bible* and the *New Testament*. In the *Koran* and especially in the *New Testament*, Jesus is of great significance. However, who this Jesus was and what tasks were assigned to him within the normative facticity are questions that are answered very differently in the two texts. While in the *New Testament*, the crucifixion of Jesus constitutes the absolute centrepiece of the narrative, according to the *Koran* (Sure 4, 157), this crucifixion never even took place.⁷

Which of these versions of events is true then? Which story of Jesus is the real story? Here, there can be no agreement. A discussion of this question can hardly end with one participant conceding ground to the other. Furthermore, it is impossible for one person to admit that the other is correct without giving up their own matter of the heart. It is impossible for an outside observer to determine the primacy of one facticity

over the other in a quasi objective manner, just as it is impossible to create any kind of harmony between the two facticities which would make it possible for both people to accept both versions of Jesus simultaneously. Correspondingly, there will also be existential differences. The existential spectrum of possible action will inevitably be different depending on whether Jesus is understood in his facticity as being one of many prophets or the one and only messiah.

This vexing situation is certainly a peculiarity of inter-religious dialogue: there can be no material compromise, since the knowledge in question has not been attained by, but rather bestowed upon mankind – for example through revelation. And somebody who believes the one revelation cannot believe the other. Even if the two revelations were to contain the same information, we would still be unable to grasp this fact, since mankind can only understand that which God has chosen to reveal – and even that only to a very limited extent. It seems to us to be entirely futile to attempt, as is repeatedly the case with so-called inter-religious dialogue, to emphasise the many common elements of Islam and Christianity, for example. While these common elements certainly do exist and are certainly fascinating, pointing them out is of no assistance when we are faced with such fundamental differences as can be found in the perception of the man Jesus. We should take these differences seriously. A Muslim and a Christian person live in respective facticities which cannot be fully reconciled with one another.

Moreover, it would be extremely strange if an inter-religious dialogue were only

possible or meaningful between religious facticities which were similar to one another. This would drastically restrict the possibilities for such a discussion. Should a Christian and a Sikh not be able to conduct a meaningful discussion? Or even a Christian, a Sikh and an atheist?

We therefore assume that a discussion on the level of facticity is not of direct relevance *for the question of mutual recognition and respect*. The *material difference* between Muslim and Christian facticity, for example, can be neither denied nor discussed with the goal of harmonisation. This material difference in facticity can only, to put it in extreme terms here, be presented for the purposes of reciprocal acknowledgement.

Formal Identity of Existentiality

However, when we think back to the interest of our Moslem and our Christian, is this material difference of any significance at all for the problem of respect? Does the question of whether I can respect the other actually concern the material of facticity? The material difference in facticity and hence the differences in existential practice are surely the origin of the question of whether or not one can respect the other. It is only through the material differences that this question becomes necessary in the first place. This does not mean, however, that mutual respect is only possible through the removal, however that may be achieved, of these differences.

We wish to propose that for the question of how one can respect one's own matter of the heart and that of another simultaneously, it is not the material difference in facticity that is of primary importance, but rather the *formal identity of existentiality*. Here, we find

precisely that which we can respect in the other, enabling us to respect them without condemning ourselves in that moment.

Starting from our facticity, our hermeneutics of reality, we form our existentiality. If I then wish to respect another who claims to be subject to a different facticity, and thus becomes existentially practical in a different way, I can shift my focus from the material to the form of their existentiality: I can respect another by attempting to take them seriously in their existential practice, despite the fact that this practice may differ from mine in terms of its content. I can attempt to reflect on the fact that the other person has also dedicated themselves with earnestness to their matter of the heart. And this earnestness, this form of existential practice, can indeed be the same as the earnestness with which I approach my matter of the heart. This formal identity of earnestness should, in our opinion, be the focus of attention when working on the problem of respect, and not, as we have explained, the material difference. To transform this difference into identity would mean to practise respect by enforcing uniformity. What is necessary is to take the difference seriously as a difference and to reflect not on the difference itself, but instead on the identity of the existential effort on both sides. While one person may believe one thing and another may believe another, I can take them seriously in their belief, even if I consider it to be incorrect in its facticity, if they are existentially practical with earnestness. I can respect them in this earnestness while at the same time admitting differences in facticity, without condemning myself in doing so.

Working Towards Earnestness

When we speak of the formal identity of existentiality, we thus mean on the one hand – almost on an anthropological level – that we humans become existentially practical in general, and on the other hand the earnestness with which one person becomes existentially practical. To take somebody else seriously means, in our context, to recognise and respect the matter of the heart *as* a matter of the heart, to recognise and respect that which is important to them *as* something that is important. For this to occur, it is not necessary to share the material of that which is important. When we take somebody else seriously, we recognise and respect *that* something is dear to their heart, and not *what* is dear to their heart.

We find the primal scene of this recognition and respect in the love of parents for their child: the child may do whatever it likes, including things that the parents may find entirely misguided. We understand immediately though why parents can nevertheless respect their child: it is the earnestness of the child in its actions that is of primary importance, and only after that the actions themselves.

And it is equally directly understandable that parents love their own children without ever, in the course of exercising this love, questioning the – formally identical – love of other parents for their respective children. This love occurs formally again and again, although the material of this love is quasi unique in each case. The ability to take somebody else seriously is something that I must work to attain. In order to make this possible, inter-religious discussion is necessary. This discussion, however, is too often held up by helplessness or ignorance in

the face of material differences between religious normative facticities. We should reflect upon the necessity to respect each other in a formal-existential sense, meaning to take each other seriously. We can learn about the existentiality of the other in the course of interaction, and indeed only in this way. In doing so, we can experience and respect the other as another's own.

Let us consider one last time our Muslim and our Christian, applying our deliberations as we do so: the Christian who believes in the Bible does not have to disrespect the Muslim who believes in the Koran. While the Christian cannot materially respect the Muslim's grasp of existence, the former can nevertheless take the Islamic grasp of existence seriously in its existentiality, and thus respect it. The Christian and the Muslim can respect each other despite the material differences because they can take the formally identical existentiality of the other seriously without thereby betraying themselves.

Conclusion

We have attempted the return the problem of tolerance to its existential core. We have tried to argue for the dignity of the matter of the heart and to explore how it might be possible to commit oneself to one's matter of the heart without the annulment of another. We did not focus our concern on the conversion of an oppressor, rather we addressed the dilemma of a person who sincerely does not know how to deal with two competing matters of the heart. This problem, becomes manageable as soon as we understand that it is simply not the material difference in facticity that is of primary importance, but rather the formal identity of existentiality. A person may

believe something else than I, I can still take them seriously in the existentiality of their belief, even if I assume that they are wrong in its facticity. It was important to us in this modest phenomenological study to bring philosophy into the immediacy and intimacy of an individual person and their crucial question: »I want to accept my neighbor, but how can I do that?«. We conclude that philosophy as a discipline must give greater consideration to these exigent, lived questions.

Endnotes

1. The modern and truly comprehensive standard work on tolerance is: Rainer Forst. *Toleranz im Konflikt. Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003). The book is also available in an English translation: *Toleration in Conflict. Past and Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Forst also provides a very comprehensive bibliography in this work. A very condensed overview on tolerance, also written by Forst, can be found here: "Toleration" (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Fall 2017 Edition), accessed September 20, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/toleration/>.
2. See Forst, *Toleranz*, 30-52.
3. The concept of facticity (and also the concept of existentiality, which will be introduced immediately), we have developed and detailed in our study: *Wirklichkeit und existentielle Praxis. Vorarbeiten zu einer Phänomenologie der Normativität entwickelt an narrativen Texten der altgriechischen, neutestamentlichen, mittelhochdeutschen und klassischen deutschen Literatur* (Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2016).
4. This problem is illuminated by Kwasi Wiredu from an African perspective. See: Kwasi Wiredu. "Problems in Africa's Self-Definition in the contemporary world." In: *Person and Community. Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, edited by Kwasi Wiredu, and Kwame Gyekye, (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), 57-68, accessed September 20, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/29313292/PERSON_AND_COMMUNITY_Ghanaian_Philosophical_Studies_I. See esp. pp. 61-62.
5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. *The Maxims and Reflections* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1893), 137 [= 356], accessed September 20, 2017, <https://archive.org/details/maximsreflectio00goet>.
6. A classic work on tolerance in Islam is: Adel Th. Khoury. *Toleranz im Islam* (München: Kaiser, Mainz: Grünewald, 1980). Interesting new impulses can be found in: Khaled Abou El Fadl. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002). For a comprehensive account of tolerance within the Christian framework, we refer to Forst, *Toleranz*, 53-180.
7. A solid overview of Jesus in the Koran is provided in: Martin Bauschke. *Der Sohn Marias. Jesus im Koran* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013).