Cultivating the Virtue of Toleration:
Paradoxes and Pitfalls of a Modern Educational Ideal

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"...paradoxes are not contradictions; they can be lived with." (Cohen 2014, p. 124)

1. Introduction

Toleration is widely considered as one of the core values of liberalism. In modern liberal societies, characterized by deep disagreements concerning the nature of the good and the just, toleration is often regarded as an indispensable political virtue that should be cultivated in every sector of the educational system. The normative and conceptual content of the virtue of toleration is, however, hotly disputed, if not essentially contested in philosophy of education and political philosophy. In the following I will discuss some of the major paradoxes and pitfalls commonly associated with toleration as a political virtue and as an aim of education. Thus, instead of developing a fully developed theory of the possibility and legitimacy of educating to toleration, I will limit the scope of my analysis to some of the central theoretical puzzles and problems every theory of educating to tolerance has to address.

First, I will provide an analysis of the concept of toleration (2.). Afterwards, I will discuss three of the most well-known paradoxes of toleration and the problems they pose for a theoretical analysis and normative justification of toleration as a political virtue and as an educational aim (3.).

2. Toleration: Concept and Conceptions

Based on a Rawlsian distinction Rainer Forst differentiates between a basic concept and different more specific competing normative conceptions of toleration (Forst 2013). As a "*normatively dependent concept*" (Forst 2012, p. 2) the concept of toleration itself does not provide the normative principles and resources necessary for the evaluation, justification and critique of different societal and educational constellations of toleration. Thus, the basic concept has to be spelled out by different normative conceptions of toleration (e.g. permission conception/ respect conception).

The basic concept of toleration has, according to Forst (2012), the following constitutive characteristics:

A) *Objection component*: The tolerated beliefs have to be considered in an important sense wrong or bad.

B) *Acceptance component*: The reasons for objection have to be balanced against positive reasons that trump the reasons for objection, but do not remove them.

C) *Rejection component*: This component specifies the limits of toleration which specify the point where the reasons for rejection outweigh the reasons for acceptance.

Toleration as a contextually embedded, intentional and voluntary attitude or action is constituted by the interplay of these three components. A tolerant person thus is able and disposed to deliberate on her first order reasons (objection component) in light of second order reasons, principles or values (acceptance component). Whether toleration is to be regarded as a private or political virtue[1] or as instrumentally or even intrinsically (cf. Scheffler 2010) valuable hinges on three interrelated questions:

(1) What is the legitimate *normative and justificatory basis of toleration* in terms of the higher order principles spelled out in the acceptance component?

(2) What are the *necessary (or facilitating) preconditions of toleration* in terms of capacities and value orientations of tolerant persons?

(3) What is the *legitimate scope of toleration* in terms of the objects and content of the objection component?

Each of these theoretical problems is tied up with well-known paradoxes of toleration, which will be discussed in the next section.

3. Paradoxes of Toleration and Education to Tolerance

In the philosophical debate about toleration it is common to differentiate between vertical (e.g. between state and citizens) and horizontal (e.g. between citizens) toleration (Hastedt 2012, p. 11). The metaphors of symmetry utilized to conceptualize horizontal relations of toleration are, however, misleading, if they are applied to the educational circumstances of toleration[2], which are usually constituted by multidimensional *asymmetries* (e.g. between parents, state and children) (cf. Macleod 2010). In educational constellations toleration can signify a pedagogical attitude, an aim of

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[1] For an overview on current debates in virtue ethics: cf. Halbig (2013); Alfano (2015), and virtue education: cf. Kristjánsson (2013).

[2] For a detailed analysis of the educational circumstances of toleration: cf. Macleod (2010); Drerup (2015).

education and a functional aspect of institutionalized educational practices and arrangements (e.g. curricula). Educational relations of toleration are asymmetrical relations in which one of the parties is usually neither fully (but only locally) autonomous nor has she usually developed a stable conception of the good (and thus also not stable reasons for rejection or acceptance). This is why in the context of educational constellations the different paradoxes of toleration cannot be discussed independently of the classical *paradoxes of education* that, among others, result from (normative) tensions between certain educational aims (e.g. autonomy or toleration as a virtue, that has to be realized *voluntarily*) and the necessity of the occasional use of different forms of coercion to facilitate these aims (e.g. by structuring choice contexts). Therefore a full-blown theory of education to tolerance has to address three interrelated questions:

(1) How should education to tolerance be *conceptualized*?
(2) How is education to tolerance *possible*?
(3) Why, if at all, is education to tolerance *legitimate*?

In the following discussion I will not attempt to give a systematic answer to all of these intricate problems. Nevertheless it will be useful to keep them in mind as a general heuristic of relevant theoretical problems.

3.1 The Paradox of Moral Toleration

One of the most well-known paradoxes of toleration discussed in the literature is the paradox of moral toleration. The paradox can be summed up in the question: How can it be regarded morally *right* (acceptance component) to tolerate something that is to be regarded as morally *wrong* (objection component)? The most common and arguably also the most plausible solution to this paradox is to distinguish between "various kinds of `moral´ reasons, some of which must be reasons of a higher order that ground and limit toleration" (Forst 2012, p. 2).

The distinction between different kinds of moral reasons is both crucial for attempts to resolve the paradox of moral toleration as well as related paradoxes (e.g. the paradox of drawing the limits) and for attempts to justify and limit the boundaries of toleration as a virtue. The tolerant person is then depicted as a person that conforms to and accepts the different standards relevant in differing normative spheres and justificatory contexts (e.g. the political, the private etc.). The distinction is often based on meta-ethical assumptions concerning kinds of *reasons* that can (or should) be shared and in principle be regarded as (universally) acceptable among agents with different convictions, belief-systems and conceptions of the good and *reasons* that are only valid within the context of a

particular worldview or lifeform. This limitation of the legitimacy of reasons and validity claims (e.g. along the lines of criteria such as reciprocity and generality: Forst 2013; for a critique: Etinson 2014) is often based on assumptions concerning the normative characteristics that agents have in common, for instance in their role as citizens or persons (not as personalities). These shared characteristics then are not to be regarded as legitimate objects of toleration (Balint 2014, p. 267). Their normative function is to provide a *common normative ground* for the justification of toleration and thereby to delineate the normative space in which toleration becomes a relevant virtue, a normative space where controversy is morally legitimate and disagreements are (still) reasonable. Since different theoretical frameworks use different criteria to determine the relevant distinctions between different normative spheres (e.g. moral reasons vs. ethical reasons; public reasons vs. private reasons/ comprehensive doctrines; the right vs. the good), the normative criteria to ground these distinctions are themselves controversial (e.g. in the debate among liberal perfectionists and political liberals: Nussbaum 2011 or in the debate about the primacy of moral criteria over ethical criteria: Wittwer 2011) and often suspected of hiding a not universally shared (or shareable) particular conception of the good behind the cloak of putatively universally valid normative reasons. Along these lines liberal conceptions of toleration are sometimes interpreted as expressions of just another culturally embedded ethical lifeform that is veiling its imperialistic and `intolerant´ aspirations under the label of `toleration´ (e.g. Brown 2006). Moreover, one central question posed by the problem to secure a common normative ground for toleration is not only, whether pluralistic societies can provide such a normative foundation, but also, whether they *need* an account of minimally shared or shareable moral reasons to establish *stable* and *just* relations of toleration. Instead one may argue that in the context of a *pluralistic and functionally differentiated society* we can get along without a *single common* normative basis for toleration and its justification.

While this is also an empirical question, when it comes to the justification and practice of education to tolerance, it seems that the higher order principles, reasons and values that provide the normative basis for the acceptance component are deeply entangled with other important and (often) controversial educational aims (e.g. critical thinking; respect for political or personal autonomy, enabling or facilitating of a flourishing life). In the context of a democratic education the potential plurality of justificatory orders and normative resources therefore nolens volens will have to be *aligned* (at least to a certain extent) with other educational standards and democratic virtues (e.g. standards of rational argumentation). An educational constellation is usually to be regarded as preferable, for instance, if the higher order reasons for acceptance of X are the result of autonomous reflection and not the result of thoughtlessness, lack of knowledge or some sort of manipulation. Thus, even if one remains sceptical concerning any particular attempt to provide a common normative ground for the justification of toleration (instead of a plurality of different normative

resources and justifications) and also if one grants that educational purposes and aims are always plural and of a multidimensional nature, justifiable forms of education to tolerance in the context of public educational institutions in liberal democracies will always display a normative bias towards particular ways of drawing the distinction between different kinds of reasons and will thereby have a tendency to promote or even enforce a *convergence* of higher order principles which count as acceptable normative basis for toleration. This is not only the case because democratic forms of education have to ensure social cohesion in pluralistic societies, but also due to the fact that educational organizations and practices inevitably have to conform to their own rationality standards and to their own inherent logics which are grounded in and justified by other important educational aims which can only in theory, but not in practice, be separated from toleration as an educational aim. Therefore, every attempt to resolve the paradox of moral toleration has to deal with normative tensions and conflicts that are related to the foundational paradox of toleration, which cannot be escaped in the context of educational constellations.

3.2 The Foundational Paradox of Toleration

There are certainly many roads to toleration and also to education to tolerance. Accordingly relations of toleration may be grounded and justified with recourse to a variety of normative sources and traditions. Especially political liberal (Rawls 2003) and neo-kantian (Forst 2013) conceptions attempt to justify toleration without taking recourse to any particular conception of the good. Standard criticisms of liberal conceptions of the tolerant person, however, suppose that these conceptions are based on perfectionist presuppositions and values that could be interpreted as an expression of intolerance towards members of traditional communities. Justifications of toleration that are based on a perfectionist conception of autonomy, for instance, suggest that the limits of toleration should be determined by the question, whether the agent is to be regarded as sufficiently autonomous in a particular context. Thus, as a rule, primarily autonomous decisions are worthy of being tolerated. Likewise, in this justificatory framework the ascription of toleration as a virtue depends on the question, whether the interplay of the acceptance and objection component can be interpreted as the result of autonomous reflection. Toleration as a virtue, understood along these lines, thus is prone to be interpreted as an illiberal perfectionist imposition, a means to enforce a particular conception of the good (Nussbaum 2011; Galeotti 2015). The foundational paradox of toleration accordingly can be summed up in the question, how it may be possible to justify a conception of toleration and of the tolerant person in a `tolerant´ way, that is, in a way that does not impose particular conceptions of the good on agents or groups that do not share the relevant values.

In educational contexts the paradox is both related to the paradox of positive freedom and to the paradox of education: On the one hand it is a conceptual presupposition of toleration that the tolerant person has to develop a tolerant attitude *voluntarily*. If, on the other hand, one presupposes a stronger conception of autonomy in determining what `voluntarily´ could or should mean in a particular context, the more likely this conception could be interpreted as an illiberal imposition. Even if one grants that there are no *necessary* conceptual, normative or empirical interconnections between controversial educational aims (e.g. personal autonomy) and toleration as a political virtue, the paradox is not easily resolved. *First*, even if the capacities often depicted as preconditions for the development of the virtue of toleration (critical self-reflection, self-distancing, self-control etc.) are not to be identified with a perfectionist ideal of an autonomous *lifeform*, a person who *fully develops* these capacities will probably not be able to cultivate a fully affirmative and non-ambivalent relation to the traditions of her parents. Thus, especially rationalistic neo-kantian conceptions of the virtue of toleration have a strong tendency to operate as Trojan horses for perfectionist ideals, which cannot be justified within the normative framework they rely on. *Second*, neo-kantian and political liberal justifications of toleration try to deal with the foundational paradox of toleration by excluding any recourse to particular conceptions of the good. Instead all the relevant normative weight is based on formal conceptions (e.g. of equal respect). Therefore any perfectionist or pragmatic justification of toleration (as a virtue) will count as illegitimate that takes the form: Y should be tolerated (or not tolerated) *because* this will enable (or not enable) a flourishing life X for Y or Y should develop the capacities necessary for toleration as a virtue *because* this will contribute to a flourishing life X for Y (or more generally) in pluralistic societies. While this may be a plausible assumption when it comes to adults, in the case of children it is rather hard to see how we may justify toleration without relying at least on some perfectionist premises either built into the presuppositions of toleration as a virtue or based on assumptions concerning the relation between toleration and a good life. In educational constellations we tend, for instance, to adopt a tolerant attitude towards developing and not yet fully autonomous agents, if we assume that the relevant actions are still in line with certain assumptions about a flourishing life. We tolerate the developing agent not just due to respect for his agency as such or due to respect for her personhood but on perfectionist grounds. *Third*, in the context of educational constellations the fear of perfectionist impositions (e.g. personal autonomy), even though certainly legitimate in many contexts, has to be balanced against the dangers of other kinds of problematic impositions (e.g. by parents, traditional communities). Consequently one also has to take into account the consequences of *not* imposing a sufficiently strong conception of personal autonomy as one relevant normative factor in determining the limits of toleration and of grounding the virtue of toleration. *Fourth*, from an educational standpoint we usually want the reasons for acceptance and objection to be

sufficiently epistemically and normatively well-grounded (for instance in knowledge about the relevant object of toleration or in knowledge about social facts). The stronger the epistemic presuppositions for a certain attitude to count as an example of the virtue of toleration, the more probable it becomes that the corresponding conception of the tolerant person relies on perfectionist premises. This is why the foundational paradox of toleration is closely related to the paradox of the tolerant racist.

3.3 The Paradox of the Tolerant Racist

Any normatively adequate characterisation of toleration as a virtue must give a plausible account of the legitimate content and scope of the objection component. What counts as a legitimate reason for objection? What are legitimate objects of toleration (and what not)? What kinds of prejudices are compatible with toleration as a political or private virtue? How much should an agent know[3] about the objects of toleration, if her judgment is to count as an expression of toleration at all?

These and other problems are addressed in attempts to dissolve the paradox of the tolerant racist (also known as the paradox of the censorious tolerator; cf. the detailed discussion of: Bessone 2013). The paradox results from the problem that if one considers toleration as virtue, one necessarily has to limit the scope of acceptable reasons for objection. Otherwise one would have to ascribe the virtue of toleration also to such persons that cultivate ethically unacceptable prejudices (racism etc.). As Forst puts it: "What is more, the racist would be more `tolerant´ the stronger his racist impulses are if only he did not act on them (cf. Horton 1996). Hence, seen from a moral perspective, the demand that the racist should be tolerant has a major flaw: it takes the racist objection against others as an ethical objection that only needs to be restrained by adding certain reasons for acceptance. It thus turns an unacceptable prejudice into an ethical judgment" (Forst 2012, p. 2). The paradox of the tolerant racist points to the normative fact that toleration cannot be regarded as a virtue per se (for instance, when morally illegitimate conduct is tolerated or toleration is grounded in illegitimate prejudices). Therefore, in the case of education to tolerance, tolerance talk is often misleading. In educational circumstances in many cases we do not want that certain prejudices and forms of objection begin to play a role in the first place (Burwood/ Wyeth 1998, p. 469). It would be illegitimate, for instance, to teach children to tolerate different sexual orientations since this would imply that these orientations would count as something to be rejected (and not as something to be accepted). Thus, in these cases we certainly do not want to cultivate toleration, we don´t want toleration to become necessary. Accordingly Royce states: "If moral education is to

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[3] Interestingly the educationally important problem of an adequate *knowledge base* of toleration is often ignored in the literature.

consist in encouraging virtues in people then what is required is the justifiable selection of these and not suggestions that people should tolerate each other no matter what their differences" (Royce 1982, p. 180).

Different proposals to limit the range of acceptable reasons for objection can be categorized alongside a continuum between *maximalist* and *minimalist* normative conceptions of toleration. *Maximalist* conceptions tend to operate with strong normative constraints concerning the acceptability of reasons and prejudices as a basis for toleration. *Minimalist* conceptions, in contrast, allow for a broader scope of reasons as a basis for toleration. Maximalist conceptions sometimes have a tendency to programmatic self-dissolution and loss of practical relevance, because they interpret only very few and very specific relations of the self to the self and to the social world as instances of genuine toleration. Toleration according to these conceptions becomes an ideal that is present in only very few political contexts and conflicts. Maximalist conceptions of toleration tend to rely on elitist and arguably overly demanding assumptions of what it means to be a well-informed and politically dedicated citizen in liberal democracies. In extreme cases a maximalist conception will consequently have the questionable implication that agents who do not conform to the high epistemic and normative standards set by the relevant ideal of citizenship will not count as tolerant persons due to the lack of differentiation and complexity of the categories they use to make sense of the social world. Minimalist conceptions, by contrast, will in some cases classify attitudes as expressions of toleration that could or should be regarded as illegitimate from an ethical point of view. Thus, in these cases to many objects of and reasons for objection are tolerated.

The problem of determining the proper scope of toleration as a virtue is not only tied up with competing versions of (moral) pluralism, but also with epistemic and normative questions concerning the intricate relations between different identities, believes and practices, that may (or may not) count as legitimate objects of toleration and that, moreover, may as well form the constitutive basis of reasons for objection. In the latter case a pedagogical approach often has to problematize strong reasons for objection that are grounded in the (developing) identity of the agent. This kind of approach that often does not aim at the cultivation of toleration as a virtue (since it tries to make reasons for objection and thus toleration obsolete), is confronted with the charge of intolerance towards particular communities and has to deal with the problem that the critical reflection of identity-constituting believes can lead to alienation from a given cultural tradition (Newey 2001, p. 335). With regards to the former case it is hotly disputed what the modern expansion of the scope of toleration in political and private contexts[4] from primarily religious

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[4] "And just as the modern liberal focus on competing conceptions of the good represents a generalization from the case of diverse religious commitments, so too the idea that liberalism should protect diverse cultures may seem like a natural next step" (Scheffler 2007, p. 118).

differences to identities, conceptions of the good and `cultures´ implies for the evaluation of the objection component. Some authors, for instance, limit the legitimate scope of toleration to non-ascriptive characteristics and thus to all aspects of an identity that can count as chosen (Galeotti 2001). Thus, ascriptive characteristics such as race or sexual orientation will not count as legitimate objects of toleration. Apart from the intricate question what kinds of characteristics can count as chosen (difficult cases are, for instance, religion, culture and immigration), it also remains hotly disputed what kind of role conceptions of culture may play in different normative conceptions of toleration. From a maximalist perspective the idea of tolerating a `culture´ or cultural practices almost inevitably will not count as a proper basis for toleration, but rather as either epistemically too undifferentiated or as an expression of some form of unacceptable cultural hegemony. From a minimalist perspective different cultural practices or (in the case of an extreme minimalism) even whole `cultures´ may be integrated into the scope of legitimate forms of toleration. While the former may be (more) legitimate from the viewpoint of ideal normative theory, the latter is probably both more realistic and more in line with a non-elitist conception of democratic culture. In short: The paradox of the tolerant racist confronts us with pedagogical and ethical *selection-problems* that will not only have to be addressed in any conception of education to tolerance, but will also inevitably lead to theoretical and political conflicts. Since these conflicts will often not be easily resolved, they in turn presuppose: toleration.

4. Conclusion

The different paradoxes of toleration are interconnected with each other in the sense that any attempt to resolve one of the paradoxes inevitably also has the deal with some of the others. Sometimes the resolution of one (apparent) paradox will be incompatible with possible solutions to other paradoxes and it will often not be possible to resolve all paradoxes at once or in an uncontroversial fashion. In the end it is important to remember that there is a crucial difference between the way the paradoxes of toleration are dealt with on a conceptual and normative basis in theory and the way they are processed (not necessarily resolved) on a daily basis in the context of educational practices and arrangements.

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