

The Very Important Virtue of Tolerance

Introduction

The central task of moral philosophy is to find out what it is, at the deepest level of reality, that makes right acts right and good things good. Or, at least, someone might understandably think that after surveying what some of the discipline's most famous practitioners have had to say about it. As it is often taught, ethics proceeds in the shadows of three towering figures: Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. According to this story, the Big Three theories developed by these Big Three men—virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism—divide the terrain of moral philosophy into three big regions. Though each of these regions is very different from the others in important ways, we might say that, because of a common goal they share, they all belong to the same country. Each of these theories aims to provide an ultimate criterion by which we can judge the rightness or wrongness of acts or the goodness or badness of agents. Although the distinct criteria they offer pick out very different features of acts (and agents) as relevant in making true judgments concerning rightness and moral value, they each claim to have identified a standard under which all such judgments are properly united.

Adam Smith's project in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*¹ (TMS) belongs to a different country entirely. Smith's moral theory does not aim to give an account of the metaphysical grounding of moral properties—that is, to describe the features in virtue of which right actions and good things *really are* right or good. His goal, instead, was to characterize and explain the beliefs and practices that people in fact regard as moral in way that captures how they really experience them. The subtitle of TMS describes its project as providing an “Analysis of the Principles by which Men naturally judge concerning the Conduct and Character, first of their Neighbours, and afterwards of themselves.” Smith's goal is to explain our “natural judgments”

¹ All in-text citations without a listed author refer to this work, Smith (2004).

about acts and character traits. In keeping with this aim, his account of morality does not make any metaphysical claims about what it really is, at the deepest level, for an action to be right or wrong, or a thing good or bad. It instead takes morality as an empirically given feature of human thought and practice, influenced by the particular histories of communities and the social conditions they face, and seeks to describe its character and the psychological processes on which it depends. Smith thought that, by analyzing the nature and origins of morality in human minds and societies in this way, he might be able to “say something about which features of morality appeared to be universal to humanity and which ones appeared more or less historically variable,” reflecting a view of moral philosophy as “central to a new science of human nature” associated with his friend David Hume (Haakonssen 2004, vi-vii).

By taking the moral judgments of ordinary people as the primary subject matter of ethics, Smith’s way of doing moral philosophy reflects what Samuel Fleischacker calls “an unusually strong commitment to the soundness of the ordinary human being’s judgments, and a concern to fend off attempts, by philosophers and policy-makers, to replace those judgments with the supposedly better “systems” invented by intellectuals” (Fleischacker 2017, 1). This commitment is nowhere more evident than in Smith’s famous passage on the “man of system.” His description of this figure appears in Part VI of TMS, “On the Virtues.” This Part, introduced in the last edition of TMS to appear in Smith’s lifetime, “presents the virtues of prudence, benevolence and self-command by way of a series of elegant character portraits” (Fleischacker 2017, 2). These portraits, often novelistic in their detail and psychological acuity, serve to illustrate these virtues as they might appear in the conduct, motivations, and habits of someone who exemplified them. The description of the Man of System² comes in Section II of Part VI, concerning “the character of the individual so far as it can affect the happiness of other people”

² The capitalization is mine, not Smith’s.

(which Fleischacker covers with the notion of benevolence). As we will see, Smith's characterization of this figure is far from an endorsement of his moral character, suggesting that it is best read as a description of a kind of vice.

The Man of System is the arch-reformer: a man whose commitment to his vision of the ideal society is so unwavering that he takes no one's opposition to it as grounds for adjusting how he conceives of or intends to implement that vision. He is "apt to be very wise in his own conceit; and is often so enamoured with the supposed beauty of his own ideal plan of government, that he cannot suffer the smallest deviation from any part of it" (275). Smith vividly illustrates this figure's zeal for control in his much-commented-on chessboard metaphor. The Man of System

seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the hand impresses upon them; but that, in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it. (275)

The Man of System fails to appreciate that the elements he wants to organize according to his artificial social ideal are persons with the capacity to develop and freely pursue their own plans. His attachment to a rigid conception of the ideal social order blinds him to this important fact and places him under the delusion that it is irrelevant to his reformist project.

This paper interprets Smith's description of this character as an illustration of the vice of intolerance. I offer an account of tolerance that locates its value in its role as a necessary condition for our seeking and achieving the respect of our equals and for maintaining a free

society. The badness of intolerance, and therefore of the moral character of the Man of System, lies in the fact that it threatens our enjoyment those goods. Section I offers further exposition of Smith's passage and introduces the notion of tolerance I use in this paper. Section II sharpens our understanding of that notion, identifying tolerance as the attitude a person holds toward other members of her society when she sees them as entitled to shape the character of that society by living their lives according to their own plans, values, and practices, free from coercive interference. Section III canvasses Smith's view on the importance to us of becoming deserving objects of the respect of our equals, and Section IV explains why intolerance, when widely held in a society, undermines the ability of its members to pursue that very important good. Section V highlights a relationship between tolerance and freedom, arguing that tolerance constitutes the necessary attitudinal basis for respecting others' entitlement to lead their lives as they choose, which is essential to a free society.

I. What's Wrong with the Man of System?

Smith describes the Man of System in contrast to "whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence" (274). The appearance of these opposing figures in Smith's chapter on the virtues, paired with the use of obviously approving language in relation to the one and clearly disapproving language with respect to the other, suggests an interpretation of their descriptions as a characterization of a certain kind of virtue and its corresponding vice. Since these descriptions belong to the section of the chapter dealing with "the character of the individual, so far as it can affect the happiness of other people" (255), the virtue they pick out must be a distinctly social one, by which I mean a character trait whose value lies in the way that possessing it affects other people. To identify this virtue (and, more to the point of this paper, its corresponding vice), we ought to look for the central feature with respect to which these

opposing figures differ from one another. Any satisfactory account of the virtue of the Man of Humanity and Benevolence and the vice of the Man of System will capture that difference. Such an account must also capture the severity of our negative moral evaluation of the latter. For most of us, we are intuitively morally repelled by the Man of System. A good description of this figure's central vice, then, will account for the importance we attach to our judgment of the badness of his character. It will capture the fact that we judge his moral failure to be significant.

The focus of the contrasts Smith draws between the Man of System and the Man of Humanity and Benevolence is on a difference in their responsiveness to others' interests in formulating and pursuing their visions of the ideal society. While the Man of Humanity and Benevolence "will accommodate, as well as he can, his public arrangements to the confirmed habits and prejudices of the people," the Man of System "goes on to establish [his ideal plan of government] completely and in all its parts, without any regard either to the great interests, or to the strong prejudices which may oppose it" (275). When the Man of Humanity and Benevolence cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavour to establish the best that the people can bear," whereas the Man of System recognizes no such limit on the imposition of his idea of what makes a society good: he insists "upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require" (275-6). In each of these passages, Smith describes his characters according to a way in which they see the relationship between their political ideals and the people who would be affected by the realization of those ideals. The Man of System sees his vision of perfection as so important that the value of achieving it overrides any objections others might raise against it. The Man of Humanity and Benevolence, by contrast, sees their objections as important considerations in constructing and seeking to bring about his social ideal. While he too has an idea of what the best

society would look like, he does not take his word to be the only one that counts in determining the character of his society. Others' interests matter to him, and he tries to accommodate them in the formulation and execution of his plans for social reform. This, as I see it, is the central contrast our account of the vice of the Man of System must capture.

Smith's choice of words might prompt us to identify the chief moral failing of the Man of System as pride. He describes this figure as "very wise in his own conceit," and as possessing the "highest degree of arrogance"—descriptions clearly pointing to the objectionably high estimation of self-worth (especially in relation to others, seen as of lower status) that we associate with pridefulness. But this diagnosis does not fully capture what distinguishes the Man of System from the Man of Humanity and Benevolence. I identified that difference in a willingness on the part of the Man of Humanity and Benevolence to adjust his social and political aims to accommodate the interests of those who would be affected by their achievement. Certainly, pride could interfere with that willingness. If someone took her worth to be so much greater than others' that in any conflict between their interests and her ideal vision of society, the latter would win out, then we would have a case in which pride provided the attitudinal basis for ignoring their interests in the way that is characteristic of the Man of System. Indeed, Smith seems to think that something like this contributes to the Man of System's discounting of others' objections to his plans:

[T]o insist upon establishing, and upon establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which [an ideal of social perfection] may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. It is to erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong. It is to fancy himself the only wise and worthy man in the

commonwealth, and that his fellow-citizens should accommodate themselves to him and not he to them. (276)

A gulf between how one sees his worth or status and the worth or status of others—in this case, a gap between his assessment of his own practical judgment and that of others—is clearly at the root of the intransigence of the Man of System. So, pride must be at play in whatever vice is central to his character.

But that vice cannot be *mere* pride. I said that the key difference between the Man of System and the Man of Humanity and Benevolence lies in a difference in their sensitivity to the interests of others. Identifying the vice of the Man of System as pride is unsatisfying because one can be prideful in ways that do not bring about the insensitivity to others' concerns that is distinctive of the Man of System. A person might, for instance, be prideful as an athlete, unreasonably regarding herself as better at some sport than she in fact is and refusing to take responsibility for her failures on the field or court, while nevertheless having a healthy regard for the importance of other people's interests in her social and political beliefs. Pride alone does not seem to capture what is essential to the badness of the character of the Man of System. If that badness is explained by pride, then it must be a certain *kind* of pride rather than the entire body of attitudes of superiority that we typically include under that notion.

II. What is Tolerance?

I argue that the central defect in the character of the Man of System is an attitude that unduly ignores, or at least heavily discounts, the interests of those whose values, practices, and beliefs, are at odds with his own. I call this attitude *intolerance*. The intolerant person does not see others as entitled to lead their lives according to their individual conceptions of the good when those conceptions conflict with his own. Intolerance is related to pride because it expresses

the belief that the intolerant person is superior to others in an important way. However, it is not identical with pride because, as I have already said, one can be prideful without going wrong in the way that the intolerant person goes wrong. A prideful person's unwarranted high estimation of herself need not lead her to conceive of those whose values, beliefs, or practices disagree with her own as inferior to her in such a way that they are not entitled to live their lives in accord with those interests.

According to T.M. Scanlon, tolerance is the attitude held by a person who would affirm that "all members of society are equally entitled to be taken into account in defining what our society is and equally entitled to participate in determining what it will become in the future" (Scanlon 190). Because the "nature and direction" of a society is determined by the values, attitudes, practices, and beliefs of its members (however these may be influenced the exercise of political power), tolerance requires that each of us recognize each other's right to lead her life according to whatever values, attitudes, practices, and beliefs she chooses to adopt—so long as she does not interfere with others' entitlement to do the same—and, in so doing, influence the character of the society to which she belongs. Tolerance demands not only that we not interfere with our neighbors' right to vote or speak freely on political matters; it requires that we respect their entitlement to live their lives according to whatever conception of the good they choose without coercive interference. The "nature" or "definition" of a tolerant society is determined by whatever pattern the interactions among its members takes when each of them pursues her plans in accordance with this respect for others, and the tolerant person does not see herself as entitled to coercively impose some other definition on it. What tolerance does *not* require is that our recognition of our neighbors' entitlement to contribute to the definition of our society be motivated by approval of their conception of the good. We may strongly disapprove of the

values, lifestyles, and beliefs of people we tolerate. We may loath their vision of the nature and direction of our society. Tolerance permits these disagreements: it only requires that, deep though they may be, they occur against a backdrop of mutual respect. This respect is captured by the requirement that we not take our disapproval of our neighbor's values and beliefs as grounds for preventing him from living his life according to them, expressing them to those who will listen, and persuading others to voluntarily subscribe to them.

It seems to me that what is wrong with the moral character of the Man of System is a failure to adopt this attitude toward others. Recall the “definitional” part of Scanlon’s account of tolerance: a tolerant person sees all other members of her society as equally entitled to contribute to defining the nature and direction of that society. The central difference between the Man of Humanity and Benevolence and the Man of System is best captured in terms of this understanding of tolerance. When we describe it in those terms, we see that we are characterizing the Man of System as intolerant, and that this description succeeds in capturing what I identified as the central contrast Smith draws between his two characters. According to this description, the Man of System is unresponsive to others’ objections to his plans because he sees himself, and only himself, as entitled to determine the nature and direction of his society. Smith says as much when he points out that, by claiming his as the only vision of the social good that deserves to be realized, the Man of System “erect[s] his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong” (276). Because he takes himself to be the only person whose judgment is suited to decide how society ought to be, he will not adjust his plans in the slightest to accommodate others’ objections to his plans. The Man of Humanity and Benevolence, on this account, is willing to recognize others’ rights to live their lives in ways that conflict with his idea of social perfection because he does not take himself to have an exclusive right—grounded in the superiority of his

judgment or otherwise—to determine the character of society. Intolerance thus provides a satisfying account of the attitudinal basis of the way of seeing others that constitutes the key difference between the Man of System and the the Man of Humanity and Benevolence. It therefore does the explanatory work we want it to do with respect to the central contrast Smith draws between these two figures.

I have not yet said anything about whether it also explains our judgment of the severity of moral badness of the Man of System. The task of the next two sections is to argue that it does. My argument does not aim to identify the psychological basis of our intuitive moral revulsion at this figure. Instead, I attempt to bring out two important reasons we have to place a high value on tolerance, and claim that, for those reasons, intolerance is a serious moral failing. Intolerance threatens our ability to pursue and achieve the respect of our equals and undermines the conditions necessary to maintaining a free society.

III. The Respect of Our Equals

Smith identifies the earned respect of one's equals as a very important good in every person's life. He even suggests that “the desire of becoming the proper objects of this respect, of deserving and obtaining this credit and rank among our equals” may be “the strongest of all our desires” (249). The importance to each of us of becoming the kind of person who deservedly receives respect from others is evident in the major role that ideal plays in shaping the goals we adopt and the projects we pursue. Smith points to two ways in which it plays this “shaping” role. First, desire for high status among our peers provides a large part of the motivation we have to seek the “advantages of fortune.” One important reason we have to acquire wealth or seek positions of social esteem is given by the way having these things affects how we think others have reason to see us. If we have these goods, then we can regard ourselves as worthier objects

of their admiration and, we hope, actually receive that admiration. Second, the ideal contributes to defining our conception of the kind of “character and conduct” we ought to develop and provides us with strong reason to develop it according to that conception. Here, it is important to note Smith’s care in describing what we want as not only *obtaining* “credit and rank among our equals,” but also *deserving* it. Character is a stable and enduring feature of persons. Were we only concerned with receiving admiration from others, our concern could not motivate us to want to cultivate a certain kind of character. At most, it could bring about a desire to *appear* to others as though we had the stable and enduring features we expected them to admire. But for Smith, our concern with others’ respect is not primarily a concern with appearances. It is a desire to actually develop the virtues we expect to earn the esteem of our fellows. Hence Smith’s remark in that “man wants not only to be loved, but to be lovely” (132).

The desire for the deserved respect of our equals, then, not only supplies much of the reason we have to seek external goods like power and wealth; it shapes our idea of the kind of persons we ought to become. If this desire is so important to us, then we have good reason to want to live under social conditions in which everyone has a good chance of fulfilling it, or at least of pursuing it without undue hindrance. I argue that tolerance is a very important social virtue because it is a necessary element in any set of conditions satisfying this goal. The chief moral failing of the man of system is his deficiency in this virtue.

IV. The Value of Tolerance

The value of tolerance as a social virtue lies in the relation it bears to a certain conception of one’s fellow members in a society. When we tolerate each other, we can see each other as equals. When we do not tolerate each other, this relationship is undermined. Intolerance precludes, or at least severely hinders, recognizing one another as equals. I argue that laying the

necessary foundation of this kind recognition is, so to speak, what tolerance is good for. There might be many reasons to want to stand this relation with others. There might, for instance, be some kind of intrinsic value in living among people who mutually recognize one another's equality. Or perhaps this relation is important because it expresses some deep moral fact about the nature of persons and how they should relate to one another. I will sideline these considerations to isolate a different reason we have to care very much about standing in this relation with others and argue that this reason is sufficient to explain the severity of our negative moral evaluation of the man of system. That reason is given by the importance to us of becoming the proper objects of the esteem of our equals, highlighted in Smith's discussion of prudence. Without tolerance, we cannot stand in the relation of equality with others in which we must stand if we are to be able to pursue this good. This is what explains the severity of the man of system's intolerance.

Smith twice emphasizes that the respect we care so deeply about is the respect of our *equals*. To see how intolerance interferes with pursuing that respect, I need to say something about the kind of equality that is relevant to this case. I will not attempt to offer a constitutive definition of it. Instead, I will highlight two attitudes that, when possessed by either the giver or recipient of some expression of praise or esteem, are clearly at odds with the ideal of respect sought and offered among equals. The first attitude I will call "parentalist." A parentalist expression of admiration or approval is one that treats the recipient of praise in the way a parent treats her child when she commends him for obeying rules she has instituted for his own good. This kind of praise expresses a gap between the authority of the judgment of its giver and receiver: the recipient is only praiseworthy insofar as he aligns his own judgment with the judgment of an authority. In the case of parentalism, the relevant authority has the best interests

of the person she praises in mind. But this does not save parentalist admiration from failing to satisfy the requirements of respect among equals. Receiving it, even deservedly, cannot fulfill what Smith calls “perhaps the strongest of all our desires.”

I call the second attitude “instrumentalist.” Like parentalist praise, instrumentalist praise presupposes that the judgment of the person giving it ought to override the judgment of its recipient in determining how the latter acts. But the right model for instrumentalist praise is the relationship between a master and a slave rather than a parent and child. When someone adopts an instrumentalist attitude, she sees others as appropriate objects of her praise only when they contribute to the achievement of some project of her own. That is, she sees others as deserving of admiration only when, and just because, they serve as a means to an end she values. Receiving instrumentalist admiration is even further from the ideal of becoming the object of deserved esteem of one’s equals than is parentalist praise. The key difference between these attitudes is that parentalism requires concern for the interests of the person one judges to be praiseworthy while instrumentalism places no constraints on the admirer’s motivations with respect to the admired. The former, at least, cannot express that the interests of the admired are irrelevant. But both attitudes involve a kind of condescension, in the form of an expression of the superiority of both the admirer’s judgment and her claim to direct the choices of the admired, that is clearly inconsistent with seeking and achieving the kind of respect Smith thinks matters very much to us.

It seems to me that expressions of admiration from an intolerant person, at least when directed toward those aspects of ourselves and our lives that are most important to us, can at best reflect a parentalist attitude and, at worst, veer into instrumentalism. Because the intolerant person sees himself as having a stronger claim to directing our lives when our plans and values

conflict with his conception of the good, his praise, insofar as it concerns our deepest moral, religious, and even political values and beliefs, is contingent on the alignment of those values and beliefs with his vision of social or individual perfection. Those kinds of values and beliefs are usually the most important elements in our conceptions of our individual identities and life plans. So, when we live among intolerant people, the most important parts of how we conceive of ourselves and our lives are disqualified as objects of esteem beyond the admiration they might garner for contributing to someone else's social ideal. Since that kind of admiration expresses a conviction on the part of the admirer that his judgment ought to determine how the admired live their lives in very important respects, it is only consistent with parental or instrumentalist attitudes. So, living among intolerant people prevents us from pursuing and earning the deserved respects of our equals. When those around us are intolerant, we are blocked from standing in the relation with them in which we must stand in order to achieve, or even seek, this very important good. This gives us good reason to judge intolerance to be a serious moral failing and tolerance to be an important virtue. It is a *social* virtue because its value depends on the relation it puts us in with others and the goods those others (and we ourselves) are enabled to enjoy when we stand in that relation.

V. Tolerance and Freedom

I said that a tolerant society is one in which each member is entitled to contribute to the definition and direction of that society by pursuing her own plans according to her own conception of the good, including by enlisting others to voluntarily join in her projects and values. This description also captures a central part of what it is for a society to be free. The understanding of freedom I have in mind is one that holds that a person is free just in case she is not coercively prevented from acting according to her own plans and values, as long as these do

not involve coercively preventing others from doing the same. Freedom, on this view, is understood as the absence of coercion. Coercion is a tricky notion, but F.A. Hayek's formulation seems to fit our ordinary usage of the word well enough to suffice for our purposes: "Coercion occurs when one man's actions are made to serve another man's will, not for his own but for the other's purpose" (Hayek 1960, 133) Whenever we are forced by another person to serve their goals by doing something we would not have otherwise done, we are coerced. The concept of forcing is difficult, too, but it at least includes the threat and employment of physical violence, including its legal use by agents of the state.

Of course, it could be that a full account of freedom must involve more than this requirement. It has been suggested that a Smithian understanding of freedom must include, in addition to non-coercion, freedom from severe material want (Schmidtz 2016). More generally, it is plausible that the kind of freedom covered by bare non-coercion requires the presence of certain basic external goods to have any value to the persons who enjoy it. "Real" freedom, then, would require more than the satisfaction of the negative condition of non-coercion, and in fact coercion might sometimes be necessary to supply those goods to those who do not have enough. But any plausible understanding of freedom must at least include a strong presumption against coercion. If most members of a society could reasonably expect that their plans would normally be thwarted and their actions made to serve another's will, it would be absurd to call that society free. A commitment to non-coercion, or at least a requirement of its presumption, is a necessary condition on a society's counting as free.

The relationship between tolerance and the free society may already be clear. The attitude of tolerance is necessary, at least for those who are in a position to coercively frustrate others' plans, to produce and maintain conditions in which everyone is able to live her life as she

chooses in accordance with the understanding of freedom I have suggested. It is obvious that, for a society to maintain conditions in which each member is free to live as she chooses, each member must see each other as *entitled* to this freedom. Tolerance is defined as the virtue a person has when she sees other members of her society in this way. So, tolerance is necessary to maintaining a stably free society. Intolerance poses a threat to that freedom. The intolerance of the Man of System is bad not only because, if too many people had it, we would not be able to pursue and achieve the esteem of our equals. It is also bad because, in the hands of even one person with significant coercive power over others, it can undermine freedom. If you do not see me as entitled to pursue my own plans according to my own values, and it is within your power to force me to act against my will, you will coerce me into contributing to your aims instead of my own. This danger is especially evident in the case of intolerance among agents of the state. Since state power includes significant power to coerce, and perhaps always involves coercion in its employment (see Gaus 2001, 11), we ought to take seriously Smith's warning that "of all political speculators, sovereign princes are by far the most dangerous" (276). When a political actor in a high office is intolerant, she is in a strong position to threaten freedom by imposing her aims on those whom she fails to tolerate. Tolerance is an especially important virtue among agents of the state in a free society. It must be widely held by the members of any society that hopes to maintain freedom.

In this paper, I have given two reasons for considering tolerance an important virtue. It is valuable because it allows us to see ourselves as potential objects of each other's earned respect as equals, and because it is essential to maintaining conditions in which all of us are free to live the lives we choose. On my view, what distinguishes the Man of System from his counterpart, the Man of Humanity and Benevolence, is his deficit in this virtue. We have good reason, then,

to follow Smith in condemning this figure for his bad moral character. His vice threatens our achievement of goods that matter very much to us and even our freedom to pursue them.

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