The Last Word: Beyond Toleration

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We live in a society that is wracked by moral differences — from abortion and civil disobedience to sex and welfare issues. Such pressing issues offer so many options, qualifications and restatements, that we often do not even know how to begin to deal with them. And when we ourselves manage to work through to a conclusion we can abide, we find ourselves confronted by the problem of the other: how are we to regard those who disagree with us on such moral issues?

We seemingly have just a few choices open to us: they, the others, are just different, expressing an alternative moral perspective, or deficient, lacking something that is needed to acknowledge the truth. If deficient, these others may be either ignorant, not yet informed of the truth; or stupid, mentally incapable of recognizing the truth; or deranged, emotionally incapable of recognizing the truth; or perverted, unwilling to acknowledge the truth; or evil, willing to reject the truth. Given these options either we are forced into embracing a form of ethical relativism, where we take moral differences merely to represent a different style of life; or we are forced into viewing those who differ from us as inferior — in knowledge, psychic capacity, or in morality.

Most of us tend to gravitate toward an uncomfortable toleration of others. Our toleration is uncomfortable because there are many views we don't believe we should tolerate. For instance, I do not believe we should tolerate male supremacy, white supremacy, homophobia, systematic neglect of the poor and oppressed, limited nuclear war, our current Central America “bring back Vietnam” policy, and so on. Such points of view should not be respected, should be ridiculed, and exist to be rejected. But I do want to tolerate, in some sense, those who advocate views different from my own on abortion, euthanasia, civil disobedience, human and animal liberation, and the like. But how can we — how can I — make this distinction? Isn't toleration in itself inconsistent? If we really believe our moral views, and if we have come to them in a reasoned fashion, then how can we take such a laissez-faire attitude toward those who disagree with us on these matters? Just as we don't allow people to get away with incorrect views on science or geography — Rome, not Naples, is the capital of Italy — so we should not allow them to get away with “wrong” views on civil disobedience or abortion.

Yet to follow through the logic of this understanding of moral differences soon leads us to an unacceptable state of affairs: almost every one is our inferior or even enemy. We disagree on moral matters with almost everyone. But the idea that these others are just different from us is unacceptable. Otherwise, we seem forced into a situation of moral chaos, where anything goes. Yet in most of the situations we confront, these others are neither ignorant — they know the pertinent moral data — nor unable — what they don't know they can learn rather readily. Hence these others are not stupid or deranged. So what follows is that those who disagree with us are either perverted or evil. Hence, most of the people in the world are either perverted or evil! Surely there is something wrong somewhere: the problem is to determine where. There are a number of options open to us, all of which have complications. Let me mention, briefly, two. One way out is to refine the notion of relativism by allowing that those with whom we disagree are merely different but by also insisting that there are boundaries to these differences. Not everything goes. This restrained view of relativism would allow for a divergence within our moral view, but only up to a point. For example, we — I — would want to forbid apartheid as a legitimate moral position and yet at the same time allow for substantial differences on such issues as abortion, euthanasia, and civil disobedience. The problem, of course, is to make coherent sense of such a view. How can a perspective be both absolutistic and relativistic? How could the distinction between what is absolutely condemned and what leaves room for real divergence be consistently drawn?

The other way out is to widen or expand the ideas of ignorance or stupidity so as to include us as well. Following this alternative, we would distinguish between moral matters about which we know — e.g., that racism or sexism is wrong — and other moral concerns about which we are not clear — e.g., that civil disobedience or abortion is at times permissible. But once again, how do we make this distinction? How is it that we can know certain moral claims and not know others? How, for example, can we claim to know that racism is wrong and not know that certain cases of abortion are wrong? To reply by a metaphor, for example, that we see through a glass darkly, doesn't help. For how is it that we know that we see through a glass darkly on certain issues and not on others? And what does it — could it — mean to say that we see moral matters darkly? Or is it also that we see this, that we see through a glass darkly, darkly?

I do believe that the difficulties of one of these views can be satisfactorily addressed. But it takes a long story. It involves in particular a careful analysis of our notions of morality and knowledge. For instance, is it possible to have knowledge which allows for disagreement? We might be inclined to say that we can have inductive knowledge which turns out false: we may be willing to say that we know that something which occurs less than once out of a million times will not happen this time. On this basis we fly on planes and drive cars without fearing (too much) for our lives. It is possible, then, to have moral knowledge which allows for legitimate disagreement among moral agents, where the agent who disagrees can yet be said to have knowledge.

What we see in such questions as these is one of the central problems of our day and of our country. Without a satisfactory reply to such questions it becomes very difficult to see how our democracy can have a theoretical basis. For democracy is that one's fellow citizens deserve respect — not just in the sense of being given a vote, but also in the sense of being guaranteed such “rights” as a chance to be competitive and a way of making one's views known. Yet how can one respect those who differ from one's deepest beliefs? Must they not instead be ridiculed, hounded, and silenced?

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