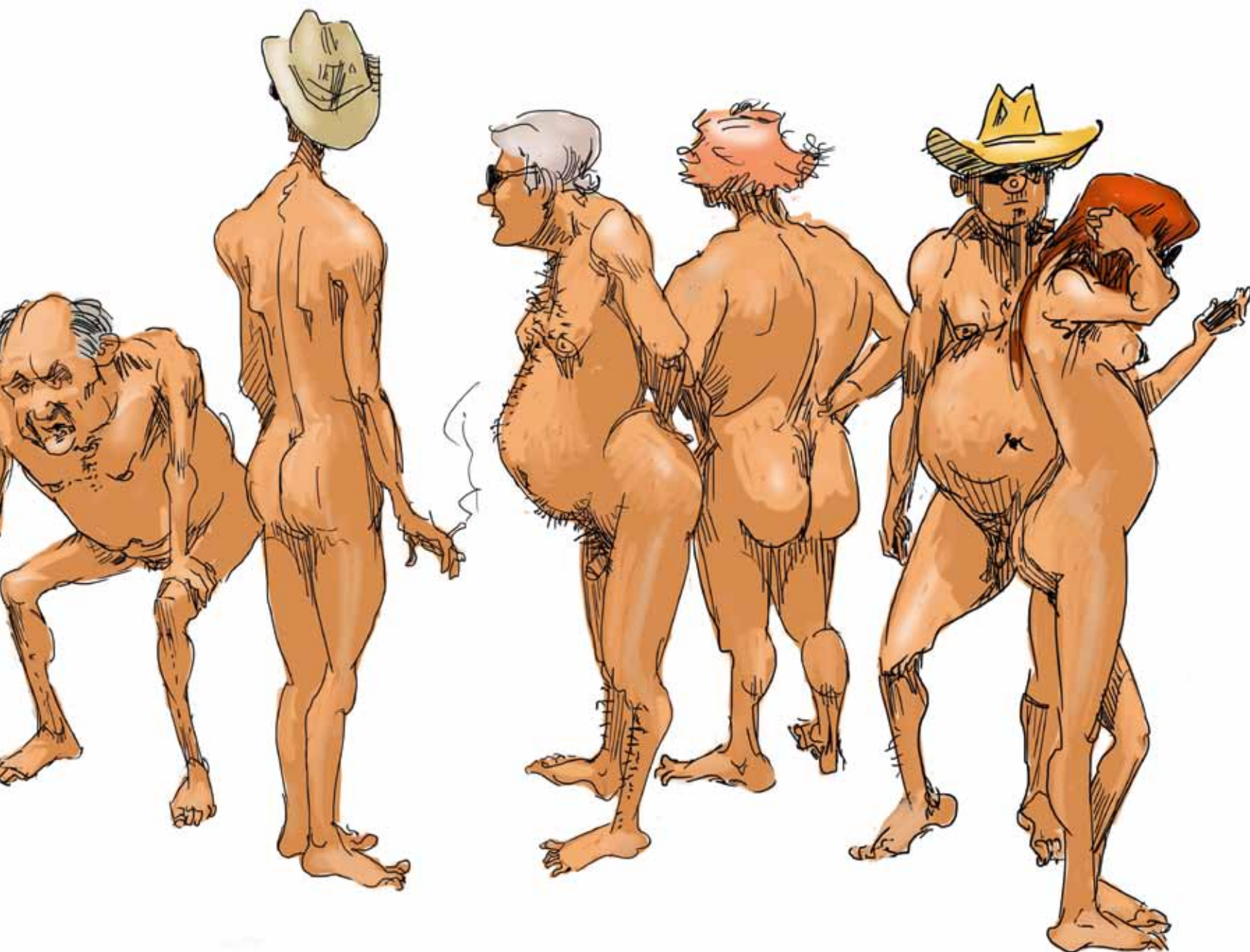


by **Andrei Pleșu** illustration **Riber Hansson**

# TOLERANCE AND THE INTOLERABLE



**A FEW YEARS AGO** at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, I heard an Indian jurist's lecture on human rights. He approached the theme, unsurprisingly, from the viewpoint of Hindu tradition. Overall, his interest was in tying the concept of rights to that of obligations, and in defining *dharma*, a concept alien to the conventions of European culture. Individual duty is determined in the Hindu context not by the demands of others, of institutions, or of immanent laws, but on the basis of *dharma*, a cosmic order in which every entity must take part if it is not to invalidate itself. While listening to the lecture, I remembered an earlier colloquium on the same theme, this one organized by the Arab countries. The colloquium ended with the assertion that one cannot speak of human rights without constantly invoking "the rights of Allah". Europeans present at both lectures were clearly taken by surprise and avoided any reaction. They were familiar with what we may call the *vulgata* of human rights, but they knew little or nothing about other civilizations and cultures. What they

had just learned from the Indian professor did not fit with their accustomed concept at all. The Europeans present had different opinions born of a philosophy in which metaphysics in the traditional sense and theology no longer have any weight. But their natural impulse to discuss the problem was hindered by several principles that in recent decades have come to be viewed as inviolable: respect for the right to difference, and tolerance toward other people's opinions.

The following thoughts originate in my desire to understand this suspension of dialogue and to draw attention to the crisis of the concept of tolerance. Tolerance has become a commonplace of civilized behavior and, like every commonplace, has come to be accepted blindly and indiscriminately.

It seems that, although we live in a world of globalization in which spatial and cultural distances are shrinking palpably, this does not rule out ignorance about the intellectual and social foundations of the other; on the contrary, it increases the irrational aspect of this ignorance. One can reach Bangkok

relatively quickly, one can maintain political or trade relations with Bangkok, and one can do all of this without epistemologically leaving the picturesque scenery of the tourist's world. Paradoxically, globalization is inversely proportionate with general knowledge. The easier it is to encounter each other, the less we know each other.

**A SECOND REMARK IS** that ignorance does not preclude cordiality. One can have good relations with other people while knowing nothing about their cultural background. At first glance, this seems a gain for civilization: communication is possible even in the absence of knowledge. But can there be genuine communication under such conditions? Or is it simply "etiquette", a pleasant surface choreography? Basically, we are experiencing a substantial change in the concept of "tolerance". The term no longer denotes the *acceptance* of "being different" or holding a different opinion, but simply a friendly and well-intentioned *ignoring* of the other opinion,



the elimination of difference *as difference*. The results of this are (A) I need not understand you to accept you, and (B) I need not discuss your views with you before assuming you are in the right. In other words, I agree – in principle – with what I don't understand, and I agree in principle with what I may not agree with. You have a right to your opinion; I respect your opinion. I have a right to my opinion and expect that it be respected. Dialectic is unnecessary. This mutual tolerance ends in a universal, peaceful, confidently smiling silence – a silence in which dialogue can only be an undesirable disturbance.

**UNDER THESE CONDITIONS**, the effects of tolerance are more than questionable. It curtails our pleasure in knowledge and in genuine understanding of difference, and it undermines the desire for debate. Why bother, when the result must consist in a mutual affirmation of each other's right anyway? In a world governed by such rules, Socrates would have been unemployed. There is no truth to be found, and no chain of proof is needed. All that is asked of us is that we *politely* respect our interlocutor's convictions.

This unquestioned call for tolerance challenges several categories that were still operational until yesterday: error, guilt, the relation of norm and exception, the principles of education, the technique of disputation, and, in general, the risky problem of the unacceptable and the intolerable. Tolerance is transformed from a pure necessity for living together well ("*Lapanage de l'humanité*", the condition of humanity, said Voltaire; "To forbear each other's foolishness is the first law of nature") into a neutral disposition, a kind of logical and axiological anesthesia, the symptom of

a cheerful inner paralysis. Being tolerant seems to mean giving up one's *sense of orientation*. Please don't condemn my concern prematurely. I'm not calling for intolerance and the cruelty of the geometrical mind. I do not want to re-establish black-and-white judgments, nor the normative sclerosis of dichotomies and the unrealistic monotony of "either/or". All I want to do is point out that there is an urgent necessity to add the discriminative faculty to tolerance, to avoid confounding respect for difference with the dissolving ethic of "anything goes".

It is generally agreed that the modern debate on tolerance begins with John Locke at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But in reality, a concept is probably already in crisis if it becomes a topic of controversy and one feels a need to justify it theoretically and assert it publicly. (Compare for example the contemporary overuse of the "European problem".)

Against the backdrop of brutal conflicts between the various religious denominations and factions, which were incapable of living together, Locke suggested a philosophical justification of tolerance. In this context, tolerance was an antidote to the practice of persecution. Thus we should not forget that tolerance, in the European sense, was originally established with strictly *religious* connotations. (In this sense, incidentally, John Locke, the theoretician of tolerance and an outstanding proponent of the separation between civil and religious life, is not modern enough to accept tolerance toward atheists; their lack of spiritual engagement made them seem to him antisocial beings.) Extrapolating it to other fields is a difficult endeavor requiring nuance and reformulation.

But there is a self-evident component of tolerance that is part of the behavioral heritage of the human species and did not have to wait until the beginnings of the modern age to find expression. I refer primarily to *tolerance toward oneself*, which I think has an ancient tradition. Man has probably behaved in a "Christian" manner toward himself since long before the appearance of Christianity. We know our own sins all too well, we know unutterable and unavowable things about ourselves, and we often do not approve of what we ourselves do. But all in all, we regard ourselves with a great deal of sympathy – we *understand* ourselves, we *endure* ourselves, and we *forgive* ourselves. What prevails is the feeling that we are basically decent people, "good guys", righteous persons. At least, we are not as bad as we would seem and, most importantly perhaps, we are not as bad as others are.

For this reason I am tempted to assert that "Love thy neighbor as thyself" does not mean "Love others as much as you love yourself", but rather "Love others with the same forbearance with which you love yourself" and "Be just as tolerant of others' weaknesses as you are of your own." An inconsequential but telling example of the tolerance we have toward ourselves is the forbearance we usually exercise toward our own habits and idiosyncrasies. No matter how ridiculous or compulsive they may be, our idiosyncrasies are part of ourselves to such a degree that we never really consider reforming them.

**TOLERANCE ALSO SEEMS** absolutely natural when we practice it toward those close to us. Love always expresses itself, sometimes irrationally, in tolerance: we are lenient towards our children, members of our family, and some friends. We accept slip-ups and deviations from them that would appear unacceptable to us *in others*.

Basically, life within small communities is a genuine school of tolerance. In larger communities, one can isolate oneself, creating clubs based on affinities, and thus avoid contact with everything disconcerting or bothersome. But in a family, one has to accommodate the peculiarities of each member, like a fate that, in the given situation, cannot be escaped. Marriage, for example, demands a tolerant spirit to the point of sacrifice. One must come to an agreement and accustom oneself to the way one's spouse rolls up the toothpaste tube (or doesn't), to eating habits, to rhythms and idiosyncrasies that are completely alien.

But tolerance is an ordinary experience even outside of one's relationship to oneself or to people one is close to. In everyday life, what we could call the weak variant of tolerance, leniency, is widespread. You know that something is going on that is against the rules, you don't approve of it, but you overlook it. You act as if you did not perceive the offense. For example, you know that some pupils at school smoke in the bathrooms during the breaks. You know that the cleaning woman in your office filches your bonbons, that your buddy smokes your cigarettes. But you decide that it is not worth

attributing importance to such trifles. Leniency is thus the tendency to tolerate what appears *inessential*. The little sins that we – like everyone – commit or have committed in another phase of life have to be treated with leniency, covered up, forgotten. Leniency is the tolerance of grandparents who observe – without interfering – their grandchildren's pranks from the corner of their amused eyes.

Another, stronger form of tolerance is also common, if not banal: *complicity*, silent approval. You can no longer overlook the violation of the rule, but after pragmatic calculation you decide to allow it. We – at least we in Eastern Europe – know that "baksheesh" is a very unhealthy matter. We do not approve of it, but we practice it – whether out of weakness or out of strategic opportunism. We prefer to acquiesce in a bad habit than to accept the adverse effects of correcting it. It seems more profitable to stimulate prompt service or to reward the granting of favors than to give futile and senseless lessons on correctness. One lacks the courage to intervene with moralization, one decides, in accordance with the principle of the lesser evil, to take part in the transgression. The French expression for a brothel – *maison de tolérance* – is also to be understood in this sense ("Tolérance?" exclaimed a French writer, "*Mais il y a des maisons pour cela!*"). The civil decision to license a brothel, the house of tolerance, has the purpose of neutralizing a potential source of uncontrolled disorder by setting up a territory of controlled disorder, a disorder permitted as long as some rules are respected. In canon law, this is called *permissio comparativa* and is to be preferred over unconditional permission, *approbatio*.

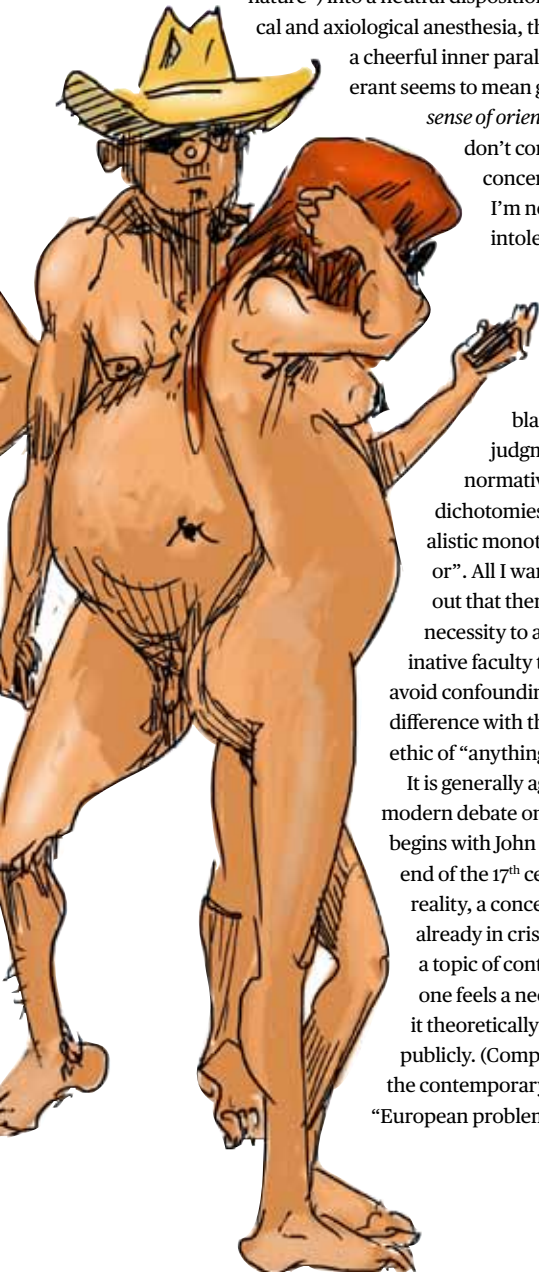
**FINALLY, ON ANOTHER LEVEL**, we sometimes have to do with a dismal species of tolerance: *resignation*. One sees the violation of a rule and one rejects it internally, but one endures it as something unavoidable. As a rule, one chooses resignation either because one does not believe the situation can be changed (hence there is no sense in trying to change it), or because, for one reason or another, one wants to keep up appearances.

In the first case, tolerance has a tinge of *discouragement* and lies close to the boundary of cowardice. The person who is terrorized by a dictatorship is slow to react not because he is tolerant of the dictatorship, but because he is intimidated by its inventory of repressive methods. In the second case, tolerance is subsumed in the rhetoric of *sanctimony* and *hypocrisy*: A husband or wife who knows about his or her spouse's betrayal accepts the situation in order to maintain conventions and thus appears to practice tolerance. But in truth he or she has merely resigned, for the sake of his or her own or the partner's image.

The situations I have enumerated thus far prove that there is an atemporal practice and problem of tolerance that is indeed, as Voltaire said, "a condition of humanity". Even where external conditions have drastically narrowed the spectrum of its manifestation, tolerance remains the minimum prerequisite for living together, the internal hygiene of a functioning group. The fact that today people speak much more and more significantly about this topic than before indicates, not a new field of reflection, but rather a deviating expansion of the concept, a change of context that brings its definition to the verge of explosion.

**BEFORE ATTEMPTING** to describe this development, I would like to briefly systematize the cases listed above:

1. Tolerance is an *epiphenomenon of communal life*. At least two different persons are required before the problem of tolerance can be posed in proper terms. The psychologization of the concept, the discourse of tolerant or intolerant



“dispositions”, of “mildness of temperament” (Calvin spoke of *mansuetudo animi*), and the definition of tolerance as an autonomous virtue, as a value “in itself”, and thus with absolute legitimacy – all of these are irrelevant, inconsequential speculations as long as there is no opportunity for a direct experiment, a social test. For Robinson Crusoe, for example, living alone on the island, the question of tolerance does not arise. I mention this merely to preclude the enthusiastic (and utopian) chatter about tolerance in general and to discourage the prattle about its angelic, altruistic magnanimity. An absolute “We have to be tolerant” means nothing. The problem is: Under what circumstances, at what moment, to what degree, and toward whom or what are we tolerant?

2. Tolerance is at issue only when one of two opposing sides can *exercise power*. In other words: only he who has the means to be intolerant can be tolerant. Tolerance is the rational decision of a coercive power to limit its coercive function and not to abuse its own power. From the viewpoint of power, tolerance is the self-imposed limitation of the right to intervene. Note that genuine power, power that has a broad basis of legitimization, is generally much more tolerant than arbitrary, illegitimate power imposed by its own authority. Dictatorships are intolerant because they feel threatened by the variety of their subjects. All variegated, colorful life threatens compulsive uniformity. Legislative inflexibility and a surfeit of regulations are symptoms of a weak organism with a limited “range of tolerance”. Strong systems, by contrast, afford themselves a much more generous margin of permissiveness. Tolerance is thus the expression of a strong political organism, a guarantee of the health of the social body. Laxity, the abandonment of standards, anarchy, value confusion, feeble institutions, and disintegrating relativism are not signs of increased tolerance, however, but symptoms of degeneration. Genuine tolerance is the antipode of weakness. One cannot be tolerant on behalf of a colorless facelessness, one cannot permit otherness when one has no identity oneself. One cannot permit *everything* simply because one does not believe in *anything*.

In brief, one cannot efficiently serve pluralism by resorting to an anemic facelessness. Tolerance is the attention that the majority grants to each minority, the understanding that the strong show for the weak, and the wisdom of the norm not to enforce itself by power and coercion. In a world where the principle of equality had won final victory, the ethic of tolerance would be obsolete, just as it would be in a world of universally accepted freedom of religion. Tolerance is the virtue of the stronger party in living together with a counterpart that is disadvantaged in one way or another. Without this structural separation, there can be no real tolerance, but only a kindhearted exchange of politenesses. It is a sign of a certain social pathology when a minority declares itself “tolerant” of a majority, when the exception tolerates the rule. As if the rabbit would declare itself tolerant of the elephant.

3. From the viewpoint of society, tolerance is the acceptable solution of a *disagreement*. I choose non-discriminatory behavior in relation to a situation that I could oppose with arguments. Mere agreement with the other cannot be termed tolerance; it is merely a form of consensus. The word “tolerance” is used accurately and fittingly only if the tolerated object retains a negative connotation. For instance, the expression “I am tolerant toward beautiful women” is absurd, unless it comes from a misogynist for whom beautiful women is a damnable category. You cannot be tolerant toward an idea or fact that you affirm and accept unconditionally. You cannot tolerate what you are in complete harmony with. There must be a mental reservation, a difference of opinion, a determination of *critical* difference between the one tolerating

## “YOU KNOW THAT SOMETHING IS GOING ON THAT IS AGAINST THE RULES, YOU DON’T APPROVE OF IT, BUT YOU OVERLOOK IT.”

and the tolerated object. Tolerance is the tendency – or the decision – to accept things that, by your own criteria, would be defined as unacceptable. Tolerance is shaking hands with what actually disconcerts and even exasperates.

**ALL OF THESE REMARKS** lead to the conclusion that tolerance is a suitable and advisable behavior, but only because the world is imperfect. Tolerance has its place primarily in the environment of differences that are difficult to resolve, of political and social inequalities, of tension between good and evil. Tolerance demands that discernment show flexibility and that judgment refrain from imposing penalties. Not *excluding* that which does not *include* oneself; allowing the other to be different and even, within limits, to err; accommodating the unsystematizable diversity of opinions, convictions, and customs; not replacing conviction with coercion and extortion – these are the demands of tolerance, this is its virtue in the unfortunately impure ambience of everyday public life. In Paradise, tolerance has neither sense nor value. It is a transitory virtue, a transitional maneuver adapted to the promiscuity of the world. Under the conditions of an existence marked by traps, temptations, and provocations, tolerance aims in a way to rescue the decency of humanity. In an ideal world, tolerance would be unnecessary – a world in which evil was tamed, power equally distributed, and differences harmonized. Until the improbable moment when this comes to pass, we are, so to speak, condemned to tolerance. We must cultivate tolerance lucidly, level-headedly, and without idolatry, and we must keep a watchful eye on the latent pathology of its functioning. For tolerance can certainly have murky abysses, suspicious motivations, and deforming effects. Let us look more closely at some of these aspects. There are forms of tolerance that, despite attractive packaging, contain a poisonous core. For example, there is the tolerance born of ambition. From the perspective of an exaggerated self-assessment, tolerance becomes a form of condescension and patronization, the arrogant marginalization of the tolerated object: I move on such lofty heights that I don’t deign even to perceive difference. I refuse to lower myself to deal with everything that contradicts me or disturbs my serenity.

Under certain circumstances, arrogance decides to behave tolerantly out of a kind of strategic consideration: I tolerate in order to defuse, I swallow and assimilate what resists me, and I thereby integrate resistance in the system, in the overpowering image of the system. In the 1966 anthology *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Herbert Marcuse defined this kind of tolerance as a “mechanism of integration” and classified it as “repressive tolerance”. But condescending tolerance is not the only blameworthy form; there is also tolerance “from below” – tolerance as the expression of submissive humility, as enduring an offense, or as a sign of weak character or convictions. One can also be “tolerant” out of opportunism or pure indifference. The atheist who declares himself “tolerant” in religious questions is a fraud: in reality, the whole field of the

religious is indifferent to him, so that “tolerance” costs him nothing.

A lax practice of tolerance and the demagogic exaggeration of tolerance bring with them the risk of anarchic developments. Karl Popper rightly remarked in his book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* that “unlimited tolerance leads to the disappearance of tolerance”. In other words, we have to reserve “the right not to tolerate the intolerant”. Popper’s wording is extremely circumspect. He speaks of the *intolerant* person, but seems unconcerned with the category of the unacceptable, the *intolerable*. But tolerance is dangerous precisely when it minimizes, evades, or simply negates the problem of the intolerable.

**WHAT CAN WE SAY** about this problem? Are there objective limits to tolerance? In the applied sciences, things are simple and revealingly obvious and clear. Technicians use the term “range of tolerance” to indicate the limits within which certain deviations are allowed without impairing a given whole. The range of tolerance designates the degree of precision with which a component must be produced, for example. Machines can “tolerate” a certain approximation in the diameter of a pipe or the weight of a coin, but there is a limit beyond which the piece is rejected. The same is true of the human body: up to a certain limit, it can withstand physical pain or toxic substances, but beyond this limit, the physiological balance collapses. No system, whether mechanical or biological, can survive conditions that exceed its range of tolerance. No whole can tolerate principles or situations that undermine its *raison d’être*. For example, a judicious constitution cannot contain an article giving every citizen the right to violate the constitution.

Another illustration of the intolerable is *error*. The decision to show “understanding” for someone who maintains that two and two equal five cannot be regarded as tolerance. Tolerance is equally inappropriate in the legal system. One cannot plead, in the name of tolerance, not to penalize a proven crime. Reduced sentences, pardons and amnesty operate on completely different principles, and are on a completely different semantic level from tolerance.

In child-raising, too, unlimited tolerance is not a particularly auspicious solution. Of course, brutal methods and narrow-minded didacticism without any understanding or patience are out of the question. But the theory of “identification” with the person one wants to bring up, the tendency to find a justifying and excusing diagnosis for all his inadequacies inhibits and blocks the modeling impulse. Quite simply, you cannot bring up a child whom you “understand completely” by programmatically putting yourself “in his place”. The place of the pedagogue must be unmistakably delimited from that of the pupil, even if the pedagogue also has something to learn while he teaches.

As the topic of tolerance became more and more “politically correct” and fashionable in the wake of postmodern relativism, its contours began to blur. At the beginning of the 1980s, the “paradox of tolerance” began to be mentioned with increasing frequency. The paradox arose, first, from the question, “How should the tolerant spirit respond to intolerance?”, and second, from the difficulty of finding a precise argumentation for the claim that “it is good to tolerate what is not good”. But to what extent is the tolerant spirit obliged to behave permissively toward the intolerant person and the intolerable? And how can acceptance of the unacceptable be rationally justified? Isn’t the fact that you declare yourself tolerant an insult – as Goethe said – to the thing tolerated? Should tolerance develop towards an encouraging agreement, toward esteem and respect? Shouldn’t the exception



finally be regarded, not as a transgression of the norm, but rather as a norm-shaping transgression? Starting from this kind of question, a *tolerated* reality begins gradually expanding and striving for legitimacy by questioning the legitimacy of the *tolerating* authority. In other words, the exception becomes tolerant of the rule, and the rule takes on a guilty attitude, even an inferiority complex, toward the exception. The exception becomes militant and self-satisfied, almost discriminatory and intolerant.

All this confusion is the result of the way we define and relate to “difference”. We have noted that tolerance can exist only where there is difference. The difference wants to be accepted and have a right to its identity; it wants validity, which would be normal in a pluralistic world that is prepared to give difference its due.

**BUT THE MATTER IS** much trickier than it appears at first glance. For difference, on the one hand, wants to be recognized and confirmed *as difference*, while at the same time it strives for a status of *non-difference*, integrated, along with all other differences, in normality. What is tolerated as *different* does not always want to be considered different, a specimen of a peculiar category. Consequently, it does not like to be treated *differently* from others (even if this difference is positive, a surplus of benevolence). Its discourse has two components that, in a way, contradict each other: (A) Respect me as I am, no matter how much I differ from you. Let me be different! (B) I am basically your equal and don’t want the status of a tolerated exception. The difference that separates us is incidental when we consider the humanity that unites us. So don’t constantly remind me that I am different! Accordingly: (A) Accept and bear responsibility for the difference, and (B) behave as if the difference did not exist. To unite the two demands (A) and (B) in a single, coherent mode of behavior, a great deal of social benevolence, psychological sensitivity, and metaphysical perspicacity is required. If one emphasizes the difference, one will be suspected of a latent discriminatory spirit. If one emphasizes equality, one will be suspected of minimizing the difference. Whatever one does, one is caught in a vicious circle that provokes general disapproval. One takes precautionary measures, but these can turn into as many mistakes. It resembles the cases of “sexism” that I myself experienced at several universities in the United States: If you let a woman into a building before you, you are labeled a “macho”; if you don’t, you have no manners.

Another example is the development of a disadvantaged community’s relations with a privileged community. In the first years after the fall of the communist regime in Romania, numerous donations arrived in the country for handicapped children. It proved extremely difficult to explain to healthy, but equally impoverished children in nearby children’s homes why the wonderful presents from abroad did not come their way too – especially because the healthy institutionalized children, in their childish innocence, did not see a big difference between themselves and the others.

The contemporary tribulations of tolerance make it hard to discern who tolerates whom; one no longer knows who is the victim of whom. The one tolerated yesterday becomes today’s tolerant one, or invents a new kind of intolerance. The fear of making a mistake leads to complicated forms of self-censorship, to baroque forms of hypocrisy, and to unprecedented social anxieties. The problem of tolerance is developing unimagined and unexpected nuances. A passionate discussion of this theme can be found in Thomas Nagel’s *Mortal Questions* (1979). The author notes that the fear of slipping into a condemnable *negative* discrimination gives rise to a natural tendency to practice a *positive* discrimination. Among equally

## “THE NEED FOR EQUALITY ENDS IN A CRISIS OF THE NEED FOR FREE COMPETITION AND FREE CHOICE.”

qualified candidates for a particular position, the choice is generally for the disadvantaged, black, or female candidate. The question now arises whether this decision is just or not. Nagel’s opinion is that this is a just decision whose goal is to correct an earlier, “traditional”, clearly unjust system.

Yet positive discrimination taken to its extreme points up the problem of the right relationship between equality and freedom. The need for equality ends in a crisis of the need for free competition and free choice. Also, how far can the rule of positive discrimination go? Nowadays, racist and sexist injustice are minimal and under control in the civilized countries. But new dilemmas and new predicaments can appear on the horizon at any time. Perhaps we would spontaneously prefer the better looking of two equal candidates for the same TV position and, to avoid negative discrimination, would *rationaly* have to choose the one who is not so good-looking. We would have to take care not to advantage the slender over the fat, the blonde over the dark-haired, and the tall over the short. But what should we do when we have to choose between an intelligent candidate and one who is not so intelligent? Or between a talented and an untalented actor? One could assume that, in our perfidious way, we would tend to prefer intelligence and talent. But shouldn’t we have scruples and ask ourselves why the less intelligent and less talented should be blamed for being the way they are? Shouldn’t we prefer them, thus correcting the injustice done them at birth? Nagel concedes that proceeding further in this direction leads to the boundary of moral utopianism. We will never find the perfect dosage of regulative constraint that does not hinder individual freedom or the right to make a decision by personal criteria and in harmony with a way of living and working that is not, in Habermas’s words, “colonized” by an abstract jurisprudence.

**WE ARE MOVING ON UNCERTAIN**, dangerous terrain paved with prejudices, vulnerabilities, and mistrust. Every radicalism can lead to suffering, but every permissive frivolity can lead to confusion and disorder. We simply have no solutions. So let’s not act as if we had. All we can say is that the reasons for our tolerance are more numerous and weighty than the arguments for intolerance. We can be tolerant in the name of reason and decide that every individual has the right to his own opinion and that this principle of law is the original rationality of our specific structure. But we can also be tolerant in the name of the uncertainty of our shaky reason and decide that we have no access to universal truth and thus no access to absolute certainty, and that, consequently, we cannot claim to be right all the time. We can believe the Stoics that man stands above truth and that it would thus be unwise to limit him geometrically with abstract judgments. Or we can be relativists like John Milton (*Areopagitica*, a *Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*, 1644) and note that, on an immanent level, there is no chemically pure evil or chemically pure good and that we thus lack criteria for categorical and radical distancing and separation (“In moral evil much good can be mixed”). We can say with John Stuart Mill that toler-

ance is the necessary derivative of freedom, or claim with John Rawls that it is the logical correlate of equality.

An extremely important and far too little noted source of tolerance is *humor*. To view the spectacle of the world without doggedness, to be able to enjoy the colorful charm of the real, to be able to distinguish between the very few things that must be taken seriously and the numerous things that need not be taken so seriously, and above all not to take oneself too seriously, with all one’s pompous opinions, pre-fabricated certainties, and more or less hypocritical claims and demands – all of this together would certainly be a very thorough motivation for a spirit of tolerance.

**A STIMULATING BACKGROUND** for tolerance, along with humor, is genuine faith or – to use a more encompassing term – the *sense of transcendence*. Intolerance is the opposite: an exaggeration of immanence, a kind of short-sightedness that monumentalizes differences perceived in the undetermined development of the horizontal and that is unable to gain elevation to view things from the vantage point of a calm timelessness, rather than from the perspective of clamorous everyday life. Tolerance imitates or anticipates the sovereign justice of God, “for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). Divine “justice” is termed *anoché* in the Greek text. The prefix *aná* indicates the rising direction. Tolerance is the aura of one who rises above differences. *Anoché* also means reserve, tranquility and calm, the *suspension of judgment*, the tendency to cease fire, giving the other a chance. When I think about it, the biblical terminology of tolerance – whether *anoché*, *hypomoné* (see Luke 8:15; 1st Corinthians 13:7), *makrothymia* (which in the Old Testament designates God’s ability to dominate His wrath at human sins), or the Latin derivations (*patientia*, *sustinentia*, *sufferentia*) adopted in the works of the Church Fathers – leaves little space for innovation by later speculations. Modern tolerance is the worldly version of an ascetic virtue: *patience*, the ability to avoid prematurely classifying unclassifiable people and uncomfortable situations, the ability to understandingly endure difference, hindrance, and hostility, and the refusal to institute oneself as a judging authority. Avva Theodotos, a rather obscure monk in fourth-century Egypt, summed up the entire spectrum of tolerance (which presupposes the identification and acceptance of deviation from the norm) in the laconic sentence: “He who said ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’ also said ‘Thou shalt not judge others’.”

How Christianity, with such a heritage, could itself become intolerant and why some manifestations of Islam, whose body of texts on tolerance is even more extensive than the Christian one, became fanatical and merciless – that is another story. To tell it here and now would go beyond your tolerance. ✘

Note: This lecture was delivered at the Romanian Institute of Culture, Stockholm, in May 2012.

