

The Erosion of Tolerance and the Resistance of the Intolerable

Paul Ricœur

Tolerance is the fruit of an asceticism in the exercise of power. It is a virtue. An individual virtue, and a collective virtue. It would in fact be a mistake to believe that it only takes on meaning with a form of power, that of the State. Intolerance has its first impulse in the power that each of us has of imposing our beliefs, our convictions, our manner of leading our lives on others, from the moment that each believes only these to be valid, only these to be legitimate. For each of us, to act is to exercise a power over ... This initial asymmetry of action makes it such that every act has an agent and a receiver, a passive agent. But if intolerance is armed with a power over ..., it is justified in the eyes of the one exercising it by the alleged legitimacy of the belief, of the conviction. This presumption of legitimacy results from the *disapproval* of opposed or simply different beliefs, convictions, ways of life. Two elements are therefore necessary to intolerance: the disapproval of the opposed beliefs and convictions of others, and the power of preventing them from leading their life as they see fit. It is here that lies the double reason for the propensity towards intolerance in the human heart. We could think that intolerance only rages when, on the one hand, the power to prevent sits in the hands of the public force, using the secular arm, and when, on the other hand, the disapproval takes the form of a public condemnation by a State partisan professing a particular vision of good. In this respect the religious wars of Europe would constitute the lasting paradigm of intolerance, the Church – or the Churches – offering the *unction* of truth to the States and the State furnishing the *sanction* of the secular arm to a given Church. In accordance with this ancient paradigm, the residual religious fanaticisms of old Europe would today find

themselves relayed by the fundamentalist fanaticisms coming principally from Islam. It is also against this version of intolerance that the discourse of tolerance constituted itself in the Western world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But if the power of the State, joint until a recent past to ecclesiastical power, is alone in giving a public dimension to reprobation and an historical efficiency to the power of prevention that individual will lacks, public force ultimately only operates through the individual passions that serve as relays in the direction of the most intimate dispositions of the human heart. Even the tyrant needs a sophist to extort the belief by persuasion, flattery or intimidation. It is in the last instance within the individual, even driven by fear, that the destiny of intolerance plays itself out. To reduce the discontinuity between the individual and the institution, it is legitimate to underline the role of what Michael Walzer calls in *Spheres of Justice* "shared understandings": it is true that we can always find intermediary communities of allegiance, conviction and power between the individual level and the state level. It is even at this privileged intermediary level that the education of passions which we will discuss later on can be exercised In the same way, to return to the period of Enlightenment, it is as much to the individuals called out of the voluntary state of minority (Kant) to the States invited to lift the censorship and also to the enlightened part of the public that the Encyclopedists' plea in favor of tolerance addresses itself. From this moment it is in a double – or even triple – sense that tolerance is a virtue. The ultimate reason is that power is a general anthropological structure which lets itself be discerned at all levels in which one's power (*puissance*) to act is susceptible to affecting the other's power (*puissance*) to act and to diminishing it (Spinoza).

Tolerance, as announced at the start, is the fruit of an asceticism of power. It consists indeed in a renunciation, the renunciation, on behalf of who may have the power, of imposing on others his manner of believing, of acting, in short of leading his life as he sees fit. To renounce is always difficult and costly. This renunciation consists of an asceticism of which the stages can be punctuated as follows:

- 1 – I endure against my will that which I disapprove, but that which I don't have the power (*puissance*) to prevent;

- 2 – I disapprove of your manner of living, but I make an effort to understand it without though adhering to it;
- 3 – I disapprove of your manner of living, but I respect in it your liberty to live as you please and I recognize your right to manifest it publicly;
- 4 – I neither approve nor disapprove of the reasons for which you live differently than I do: but perhaps these reasons express a relation to good that escapes me because of the finitude of human understanding;
- 5 – I approve of all ways of life, as long as they do not manifestly harm third parties; in short I leave be all types of life because they are expressions of human plurality and diversity. *Vive la différence!*

A few remarks on the phases and transitions of this asceticism.

It is not indeed about a simple, but a double asceticism: admittedly a visible asceticism of the power to prevent; but – an affectively and intellectually more concealed and more costly asceticism – that of the conviction as directed towards others under the figure of approval and of disapproval.

The renunciation of power, but not yet of disapproval, begins at the very first threshold. It is the minimal sense that dictionaries inform. Thus the *Robert* states under title n° 1: "Tolerance: fact of tolerating something, of not prohibiting or requiring whilst one could. The liberty that results from this abstention." It is justly from such an abstention that things began to move in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the occasion of the religious wars in Europe: the peace of Westphalie, in Germany, partially broke down the monopoly of ecclesiastical power when enacting: *cujus regio, ejus religio*; the Edit de Nantes, in France, brings about a split, alas provisional, in the sacrosanct principle: one faith, one law, one king; for a time, two Christian confessions find a place, according to certain draconian restrictive conditions, within one same public space. But it is certainly against their will, and under the sign of a mutual disapproval, that the two confessions and their members endure one another without being able to prevent each other from existing. A third party arbitrator forced them to cohabit.

The mutation of disapproval begins with the second stage. It consists in an internal schism – or even in a rift – between the adhesion to one's own conviction and the effort of imagination and sympathy by which we try hard to understand a manner of thinking, acting and living, finally a conception of good other than our very own. This schism has as its seat the individual, this same one that the philosophers of the Enlightenment invite to think of in and of himself. It is a generally isolated individual who, in advance of the majority current of the society of his time, sweeps up little militant communities as the ecumenical attempts have testified to, in the midst of the religious wars, following an Erasmus, a Mélanchton, a Leibniz. More generally, we can attribute to a situation of permanent confrontation, at the heart of the Western world, the destiny of a rifted belief between the critical tradition coming from Greece and the tradition of faith inherited from Judaism and from Christianity. It is on this destiny that the institutional conquest of tolerance detaches itself: the secular State will one day be able to abstain from recognizing and subsidizing any cult, because civil society will have been worked in the confrontation between criticism and conviction.

The decisive step is only however taken at the third stage; it is the product of an attempt to surmount the intimate rift that breaks down belief. This step is not yet taken, at least explicitly, even at the time of the Enlightenment: the religious beliefs criticized by the Encyclopedists are held as superstitions attributed to ignorance, to stupidity, to hypocrisy and relegated to the irrational part of the human soul. In fact, a true pluralism of beliefs and of ways of leading life – finally: visions of good – is very difficult to assume in a non-skeptical way, that is, without the loss of some deep-rootedness in a conviction. It is from here that we will pick up again later on, with the help of the intolerable. But first let us dig further and derive the benefit of this new step. It is taken in favor of the disjunction between truth and justice. It is not in the name of truth as it appears to me – the medieval's apparent good – that one accepts (and not just simply endures) the other, but in the name of his equal right to mine to live his life as he sees fit. Here is a veritable asceticism of power, to the extent that, as it has been said above, one's power is power over the other. On this ini-

tial asymmetry between acting and being acted upon, at the heart of human interaction, comes about one's propensity to submit the will of the other to one's own. The recognition of an equal right to exert one's power of existing and acting amounts to a surpassing of the asymmetry by reciprocity. It is the spiritual movement that Hegel describes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* under the title of the "Dialectic of Master and Slave." The initial inequality of these two emblematic figures is dialectically surmounted by that which the philosopher designates "recognition." This is no less about the equal power of thinking placed under the new figure of the stoic, proceeding from the exchange of positions between Epictetus the slave and Marcus Aurelius the emperor. Further on we will point out the pitfalls of this symbolic equalization that the contemporary destiny of tolerance has not failed to repeat. But the inestimable acquisition owed to this equalization must first be noted. Of the equal right of the other to mine to express his power (*puissance*) to act derives the entire list of fundamental liberties. It starts with the liberty of opinion, the concrete expression of thinking for oneself; it continues with the liberty of expression and the other public liberties (association, education, publication, demonstration etc.); it culminates in the liberty to actively participate in the constitution of political power. In democratic societies tolerance is effective to the extent that public liberties are themselves protected and promoted by a State that itself professes no particular conception of good. But tolerance does not cease to be a virtue for all that, to the extent that it rests on the forever reiterated vow of each citizen to hold as equal to his own the right of others to accede to fundamental liberties. In this respect, tolerance is no less a virtue of non-state institutions, such as associations, societies of thought, religious institutions. It is even to these that is particularly entrusted the most difficult to exercise asceticisms of power. And this of course because of the past: but the Gordian knot between the unction conferred to political power by the leading authorities of the dominant confession and the sanction conferred by the secular arm to the demonstrations of ecclesiastical power is today, generally-speaking, cut in the West. But there is a more fundamental reason to expect more from religious confessions than any other association of thought; this reason is due to the natural

propensity of an institution of salvation to impose on everything it holds, from the bottom of its conviction, like their supreme good. Where there is supreme – in religion and in politics – there is subjugation in the air. For a religious community, whichever one, it is by a permanent work on oneself, from each of its members as well as from its authorities, that can be set down, willingly and kindheartedly, a limit, not of truth, but of justice, to the public expression of the conviction shared by the ecclesiastical community. It is even by this intimate asceticism of his conviction that the religious man can contribute to the progress of tolerance on all of the other fronts where his convictions are in competition.

If the third stage doesn't go past, at the level of truth, a polemical version of tolerance, the fourth stage orients it towards cooperation, in the mode of what we can call conflictual consensus. It seems to me that, with this new stage, we cross a critical threshold where tolerance, all the while appearing to attain its culminating point, has perhaps already swung over towards something else which we will say later. And we will see further on how the intolerable can act as a recourse figure against the slippage that begins with this stage and consumes itself with the next. Where is situated the critical threshold in question?

I neither approve nor disapprove: this is a subtle mutation no longer of the propensity to constrain, but of the legitimizing motivation ordinarily professed upon the said propensity. In other words, the displacement no longer affects the power but the conviction itself and its demanding of truth. What is indeed a conviction without a "holding-as-true," at least at the time professed, whether it be within the internal forum or in the public space? It is nonetheless about a schism of the presumption of truth. We can understand, if not the necessity, at least the plausibility of this new step, if we consider the unbearable character of the anterior schism between truth and justice (in the same way that the passage of the second to third stage was motivated by the concern of getting past the schism between conviction and comprehensive sympathy). And what if, saying to myself, my conviction was not equal to the Truth (with a capital T)? After all, I don't have the truth; I only hope (and I remind myself here of my master Gabriel Marcel) to be in truth. All human understanding (I would add in my heart) is

limited, and so also that within which ineluctably expresses my conviction. Is this not itself the destiny *par excellence* of a conviction which touches the Absolute by some side? "I am who I am," says the God of Exodus, escaping thus the capture of literary genres in which his relation to men let itself be inscribed: stories, legislations, prophecies, hymns, words of wisdom, etc. And if I add that it is in a circular relation that a religious community recognizes itself as founded in Writings of which it has in exchange delimited the code and transmitted through the centuries the major historical interpretations, must I not conclude that this founding word in regards to my community is both supreme (in the sense that it is subordinated to nothing at all that is superior in its own meaning space) and inexhaustible, in the sense that a gap deepens between the origin of its donation and the history of its reception and its transmission. If it is indeed as such, must I not have to admit that there is also *some* truth other than for me? If I am capable of this step, I will have converted tolerance from the passive to the active, from the enduring to the accepting. I will have simply let the other be.

We will have noticed that I have written this entire paragraph in the first person, in a different manner from the preceding paragraphs, where the I still let itself be converted (and even had to be converted) into whomever or into each of us. The asceticism now proposed is only practicable by the individual, in the kierkegaardian sense, that is anti-hegelian. It is the rare asceticism of a few sages of planetary religions. An entire culture would only have access to it thanks to a radiance from person to person, from small communities to small communities. And this, in a radically anti-sectarian climate.

This is when I turn back over the road that has been taken. Can a well ordered society, to borrow from John Rawls's expression, massively, or even by a majority, propose itself to surpass the third stage where truth and justice remain separated? Is not wisdom about joining the public virtues of stage three with the private virtues of stage four, at the risk of seeing the highest wisdom take refuge in an incommunicable elitism? And let an abyss dig itself between wisdom and citizenship?

The same scruple finds reinforcement in the spectacle that gives, at the level of collective consciousness, the contemporary

destiny of tolerance. If the sages of stage four mustn't move away from the citizens of stage three, it is because the curve of tolerance has already swayed itself beyond its summit within society that some call post-modern, so of Western society posterior to the Enlightenment. Everything is happening, in fact, as if tolerance describes a vast historical curve first ascending, then today descending, starting from the level of intolerance then culminating somewhere between stage three where justice and truth remain juxtaposed, and stage four, where the idea of truth explodes to put itself in conformity with what justice has already premonitioned, and as if tolerance pursues its course beyond its culminating point. But to go where?

I've outlined, under the title of stage five, the profile of a profession, implicit or explicit, of indifference. This stage, the one we have attained today, is the one in which we approve of everything, because everything is the same, because everything is equal. It is of such a mutation that Antoine Garapon refers to here: for him, the model of tolerance arising from the resolution of religious wars has exhausted its resources, because today there are no longer professions of faith to reconcile and first to constrain to cohabit. In the absence of common reference points, the two common residual concerns, that of public security in the face of new forms of danger, and that of public health in the face of threats made to the body, project to the forefront the arbitration of the judiciary institution with its accepted procedures and the protection of the medical institution. Arbitration and protection: the new figures of tolerance. But it is no longer about accomplishment, but substitution. In the same way, the attacks of post-modernist writers against the rationality of the Enlightenment and against "modernism" come to comfort, most involuntarily, the break down from the inside of the patient structure that, as we underlined it in commenting the third stage, has brought to its pinnacle the profession of Human Rights, become today ideologically obsolete. Admittedly, everyone is fighting for Human Rights; but the work of asceticism, as much of conviction as of power, as much at the level of the individual as that of the institutions, has ceased to be pertinent; it has become unreadable, nonsensical. It therefore becomes troubling to ask oneself what secret

connivance, and this one much involuntary as well, can exist between the ultimate asceticism of stage four and the fall into indifference in stage five? A troubling relation like everything that renders secretly complicit the authentic and the inauthentic. Indeed nothing resembles more the sentence: "There is also truth other than for me," than the sentence: "Differences are indifferent." Did not Hegel anticipate this descent that transmutes the same into its other when he made the figure of the skeptic follow that of the Stoic. If the slave and the emperor are similar insofar as they "think," then everything that distinguishes them, that is all the historical differences, are insignificant, in-different. How then stay on the crest? How prevent the admission of truth of the other from feeding the arguments of indifference, that is if it argues? How retribute to tolerance the historical flesh that the evocation of some far away common fundamental seems to have evaporated ?

It is here that unexpectedly arises the question of the intolerable as the ultimate refuge from a thought and a wanted tolerance.

The intolerable is what we would not want to tolerate, even though we could or even we should. In this sense, the intolerable is the polar opposite of intolerance, this behavior of reprobation and of prevention that tolerance wanted to surmount. The intolerable is only problematic against the background of an acquired or a being acquired tolerance. That which renders it problematic is claiming to place a limit on tolerance. It is in fact on the same line of disapproval as tolerance. But while this latter abstains itself, the intolerable enjoins to suspend abstention. This is why it is only wholly pertinent in a culture educated by and for tolerance. It is for this precise reason that we can expect a reawakening effect from it in a culture without precise reference points in which tolerance has already swerved into indifference.

But to justify this expectation upon which we will return to finish, one has to have answered a number of prior questions: at what do we recognize the intolerable? What is typically intolerable? In the name of what do we denounce the intolerable?

One has to start with the first question because, as we shall see this instant, one risks getting lost in the dispersion with the answer of the second . The intolerable is recognized at the passion that detects it, that is to say indignation, an eminently reactive

passion. It is in this capacity that it breaks with the dominant apathy of a society ready to accept everything as equally insignificant. Indignation is foremost a scream: It's intolerable! Indignation is a moral anger, an attesting and contesting figure of virtue.

But if indignation lets itself be recognized, by its sweeping reactive character, through the diversity of its manifestations which would call for a subtle phenomenology, it is harder to find it a common object. The occasions to be indignant present themselves in dispersed order: what is there in common between the disgust sparked by the crime of a pedophile, the horror that continue to inspire the stories of deportation and extermination camps, the contempt ignited by vicious attacks of rampaging slander directed against an honest man, the revolt against the manifestations of racism, against the disguised returns of slavery, against the extreme inequalities, against the politics of exclusion? It seems that we are condemned to proceeding inductively: but with what seat in sight? The figures of evil, if indeed about wrongs, that indignation denounces, without being capable of designating the good of which they are the reverse side, are not these figures by nature dispersed? If good is ultimately one, is not evil principally legion? Let us try nonetheless.

It is easy to discern a certain number of "indignant" behaviors: those that *harm* the exercise of tolerance itself. Tolerance, as it is said here, is a reflexive virtue in wait of reciprocity. This is equivalent to saying that the first intolerable is intolerance itself. Surprising statement which seems to bring everybody back to the starting point. This is not however truly the case. Intolerance, whether it be religious like at the long period of religious wars in Europe, or today in diverse parts of the world, or whether it be political and cultural, like with dictatorships where a directing class attributes to itself the policing of standards, intolerance has *become* intolerable only compared to a state of culture in which the third stage described above finds itself affected by a significant number of political regimes sustained by enlightened public opinions.

But not all of the intolerable lets itself be reduced to the resistance of intolerance to the maintaining of acquisitions and to the ulterior progresses of tolerance in the world or in ourselves. Perhaps one has to concentrate then on one word: *harm*. We will have

remarked that it is the only clause in the definition of tolerance at the fifth stage that has not been commented upon: "I approve of all ways of life *as long as they do not manifestly harm third parties.*" To harm is the negative flip side of assistance, help, benevolence, voluntary action, all of which are susceptible to augmenting the power (*puissance*) of existing of the other (to remain within the spinozist vocabulary here privileged). Do no harm, minimal ethic. Prevent harm, minimal politic. Dispersed figures of harm, but parented by all the harms gathered by indignation. The negative of the object "harm," faced with the negative of the feeling "indignation." In this respect, in the same way that Jonas speaks of a heuristic of fear – in a sense finally closer than it appears to our theme of indignation – there would be a heuristic of indignation, last bastion of a common morality in ruins. And if we follow for a moment Jonas's lead, on the road that joins the "principle-responsibility" to this privileged guarantor who would be the fragile, would there not be some sense in saying that the heuristic of indignation alerts moral vigilance to the immense front of the fragile, that is of vulnerability to harms? Harm then: wrong done to the power (*puissance*) of existing of the other, prevention done to his growth. In this instant arises for a second time under our gaze the abject figure of the pedophile assassin. Rejoining him are the tormentors, the enslaving clandestine entrepreneurs, all of the exploiters of a vulnerability that, without coming down to it, concentrates itself in that of childhood. In this movement of expansion from the home of mistreated childhood, the thematic of the fragile intersects, as Jonas had proposed, this other fragile that constitutes the democratic State itself, to the extent that, deprived of transcendental legitimacy, it rests – at least at first approximation – only on the will to live together of the greatest number in the just institutions protective of fundamental liberties. The child and the State: polar opposite figures of the fragile.

If then it were possible to recognize in indignation, an eminently reactive feeling, a positive motivation, it would be the responsibility with regard to the fragile in its multiple forms, deploying itself on the horizon of the planetary environment. This attempt at restituting to indignation the obverse of which it is the reverse brings us to the threshold of the last question asked above:

in the name of what denounce the intolerable? John Rawls, questioning the moral depth upon which his principles of justice are supposed to furnish a rational argument, of the contractual and procedural type, speaks of “carefully weighed convictions” and seeks to establish a sort of “reflective equilibrium” between these and his meaningful argument. It is a “reflective equilibrium” of another kind that I would propose, between the virtuous anger of indignation and a return to the forgotten roots of our culture. If indignation must be able to block the moral indifference in which tolerance is sinking, it is to the extent that it rings like an alarm. It shouldn’t be said, in fact, that democracy lies on a void; it expresses rather an over-full, that which overflows from the forgotten roots of our culture. The culture of the West, for its part, results from the conflictual but finally fertile encounter between the greco-roman and the judeo-christian heritages, the successive Renaissances, the Reform, the Enlightenment, the national and socialist movements of the nineteenth century, etc. It would then be a complimentary task, on the side of a plea for tolerance, where the primary accent remains on the abstention of prohibiting and preventing, to draw from the resources of indignation, themselves excited by the intolerable, so as to extract from them the energy of a moral re-founding of democracy. This re-founding could only be multiple and proceed by crossed heritages. If indignation didn’t result in such a work on oneself, at the end of which our multiple traditions would recognize themselves as cofounders of a same will to live together, these would risk arming the arm of a righter-of-wrongs who, on the pretext of limiting the abuses of tolerance, would reinvent intolerance behind virtuous guises.

It is particularly when indignation invites repressive behaviors, entering into open conflict with one or another of public liberties, at the forefront of which the liberty of expression places itself, that the restrictions imposed as such risk being perceived as intolerable by the most free of spirits. In this respect, Monique Canto-Sperber, confronted with the same problem as I am in this volume, pleads for the spirit of “level-headedness” (*pondération*). Level-headedness is indeed in my eyes a major expression of practical wisdom in the tradition of tragic and aristotelian *phronesis* and of the prudence of the scholastics. Level-headedness, as its name

indicates, weighs the for and against of an unlimited tolerance which risks letting wrong be done to the most fragile in the name of liberty and risks a return to intolerance under the cover of moral order. A major expression of this level-headedness would be to renounce reconstituting a moral consensus that cannot exist in a pluralist society; wisdom is to be content with fragile compromises, in line with what Rawls calls "consentment by cross-checking," itself corrected by what he names "recognition of reasonable disagreements." A second expression would be to not constrain to a premature or forced conclusion of disputed questions, such as abortion (justly decriminalized, but not yet out of its uncertain status of least harm) or euthanasia and in a general way the problems posed by the relation of private and public morality to life and to death. The important thing in this respect is that the conflict be held as pertinent by all the implicated protagonists. The vehemence of a settled discussion would attest with force to a consciousness awoken from its indifference by the vigor of indignation. But the advice of wisdom remains. One has to also put limits on indignation and its fury. "Nothing too much" proclaimed the wisdom of the Greeks.