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THE PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDS OF TOLERANCE[1]

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As any other subject, a philosophical definition of the principle of tolerance shows temporal and historical origins. We all know that in modern times philosophy stood for tolerance against those religious struggles which bathed Europe in blood for a long time. After that, the same principle was extended to oppose political intolerance and absolutism. In recent times, it has finally acquired the general meaning that today involves all aspects of our social life, turning into a moral rule and a symbol of the civil human society. Thus, tolerance becomes a universal habit, an absolute practical virtue, released from any historical contingency. It does not only enforce full respect for all religious beliefs and freedom of expression for all philosophical and political ideas, but also claims the acknowledgement of personal and public life styles that prove to be eccentric or alien to traditional and common standards. To such a great extent, the principle of tolerance bespeaks the true essence of the ideal democratic society. But in practice this principle should naturally imply some exceptions and in the first place the definite banishment of those who neither partially nor fully believe in tolerance or apply it.

After this broad description, we can make some preliminary remarks. Turning into a generalized habit and a universal moral rule, tolerance has disregarded its historical origins and particularly its role, that of a powerful and successful instrument in the political and cultural struggle. As a result, what starts fading is the immediate unquestionable evidence of the personal and social benefits carried by tolerance. It is easy to praise tolerance and its good offices, when we think of Bruno's stake or

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Galilei's trial. It is less and less simple, when we consider the decay of our metropolitan life style or the perverse anomaly affecting our mass media system of information or even the environmental ravaging carried out in the name of mere economic interests. More than ever, tolerance needs nowadays some powerful conclusive rational justification. It does not belong to a single political or cultural party we can identify with on the basis of our emotions or interests; it is a principle claiming for universal legitimation, that is a legitimation for all times and for all men.

What I would like to point out on this occasion is neither that tolerance should involve those practical exceptions which allow each of us to enjoy his own freedom with the utmost respect for his fellowmen's nor that it should exclude the intolerant on the basis of a conception of consistency that is the ground for the existence of the principle itself. What I wish to debate today is exactly the rational foundation of its absolute and unconditional validity, which we often appeal to and argue about, when we regard tolerance as a universally accepted and therefore absolute moral habit and not as an empirical regulating principle. I will not only consider the formal or substantial consistency of the rational arguments we tend to put forward when we provide the principle of tolerance with a universal ground (this is the case of our appeal to dialogue and the universal society of communication, to the ability of supporting our needs and desires with universally binding reasons). What I would like to examine first is whether a rational foundation of the principle of tolerance may include, in fact and in principle, an ineluctable element of intolerance. Raising such suspicion does not imply any legitimation of intolerance, but promotes a deeper analysis of the principle itself, which eventually engages in self-criticism and self-restriction, corroborating its power and extending its legitimation. No other religious, moral or political principle can be so powerful. In other words, rationally grounded tolerance can point out and criticize its own limits, while proposing itself as a successful instrument against intolerance (even rational and democratic intolerance) and providing a deeper understanding of what is really at stake.

No one can deny that such limits exist. I will point out only few of them. The habit of tolerance implies the existence of a "criticizing" subject, that is able to keep at a safe distance from the so-called "values" or, better, raise doubts and questions about social behaviours handed down from the authority of tradition. The assumption that the existence

of a criticizing subject can be most advantageous is anyway unlikely to be well-grounded from a rational point of view, as such a ground originally implies the existence of a criticizing subject. What I mean is that, assuming itself, it ends in a tautology. Nor can we assert that a criticizing subject, capable of some rational reasoning on values, represents a possibility implicitly included in any conceivable human being. According to this assumption, any man could potentially embody a criticizing subject, and this embodiment would represent the final accomplishment of the universal human nature. Similarly, we could state (and it has been stated) that any religion includes all Christian universal principles; such an assumption may produce – as it has in fact produced – a deep misunderstanding of habits and beliefs that belong to other religious practices along with clearly intolerant attitudes. Our past cannot be read in the light of our present; present categories cannot be employed to construe remote life styles, though it is apparently impossible not to. Our historical consciousness, which belongs to our rational consciousness, effectively prevents us from doing it.

Speaking more generally, it is rationally inadmissible to assume the consequence of a practice (like the Socratic questioning, the Cartesian doubting or the logical formal thinking) as thoroughly independent of the former and let it more or less unconsciously act upon other practices. Each practice has its own contingent grounds, its own material conditions and factually pregnant meanings. Wiping off the original tie with contingency involves a superstitious assessment of consequences along with an unjustified extension of their validity. For this reason, an appeal to rational grounding may not be considered as rationally grounded or subject to rational grounding, even when it aims at a conclusive identification of the values we can universally share. It would be like debating dialectically on Gospel parables or Koran sentences according to Plato's definition of a dialectical debate as provided in his *Sophist*. What we are concerned with is not the difference between reason and faith or philosophy and religion – which is stated on the basis of philosophical rationality – but differences characterizing practices of speech within irreducible contexts of meaning. Their reduction is arbitrary, a coercion and a symptom of intolerance.

Intolerance clearly emerges when we reflect upon what a subject is required to do to take part in a tolerant rational debate. This requirement implies that a subject can and is expected to assume and practise a Socratic consciousness, in other words, he is expected to exercise critical

detachment and adopt objective and formal standards in the consideration of the meaning of his own statements. As long as a human subject is ready to do so, what comes to be rationally established – if there is anything that may be permanently established in this way – cannot be ethically remarkable any more. What was fundamental has already occurred. The subject has already been fully assimilated into a contingent practice and therefore annihilated in his own contingent difference. Demanding that he should reason and argue in a Socratic way is an act of mere compulsion on him. As a matter of fact, he is not able to do it, and when he can, it is only because he has been forced to learn our habit of speech, our practice of truth, our critical consciousness, in general our culture and values, definitely remarkable, yet extremely different from his own.

We are used to legitimating our rational attitude by showing its universal nature. As our culture is in fact widely universal, and anybody can in principle learn and command it (the same happens to the language of mathematics or more generally to the practice of scientific evidence), rationality becomes the only objective positively free of any contingent reasons and therefore safe from any idiosyncrasies or superstitious intolerance. We seem to ignore in this case that the universal nature characterizing our rational thinking originally belongs to the practice that has produced it. It is so to say its own distinctive feature or peculiarity and nothing congenital in man as such. Regarding it as innate is mere superstition and implies an intolerant attitude towards those who do not share our universalistic rational consciousness. These are generally judged as not human, or just partially, implicitly or potentially human. What this attitude definitely removes is that the universal is the peculiarity of a contingent practice and not the substance of human mind, soul or nature.

Such critical consideration appears to be fully manifest to those who now start to understand how the practice of rational thinking is the direct though not exclusive consequence of the practice of alphabetical writing as it grew in Greece, originating literature, philosophy, history and more extensively the scientific spirit. A man of the oral tradition possesses neither the fundamental instruments to understand the point of view expressed by a critical consciousness, nor its basic vocabulary. There is nothing to him like "reality", "language", "mind", and so on. As Peirce pointed out, his method to fix beliefs or establish standards of truth is different to such an extent that our consideration of tolerance may appear

strange and incomprehensible to him, if not disparaging or even sacrilegious. For this reason, when we aver that our reason is universal, as shown by the fact that anybody can come to understand it and share its basic nature, we talk nonsense and forget that anybody can do it, but only *after* acquiring particular habits and practices of life and speech, like the habit of reading and writing as we do (which remains the fundamental pedagogic commitment connected to any process of civilization as we understand it). Thinking in this way is as meaningful as asserting that Australian natives' animistic beliefs are universal, and it can be proved by the fact that any European man will end up with sharing all of them, in case he moves to a native tribe as a baby.

Practices influence each other and make chains. A Greek illiterate of the fifth century may still find unintelligible that an imaginary goddess invites a young initiate to express his judgement on her demonstrations on the basis of his own reasons: such speaking may sound extravagant and obscure to him. Besides, the Socratic question sounded as puzzling to most people; nobody understood what Socrates meant when he asked what virtue, pity or courage were as such. There is nothing like this "such" in the mind of those who do not know how to materialize on a conventional base and abstract the human voice from the ideal signs of the alphabet, putting together a vocabulary of separate information, abstract meanings and decontextualized realities, which are definitely detached from daily speaking within circumstantial practices of life. That a mathematical formula expresses the meaning of a natural phenomenon and not its syllogistic comprehension, detailing its context and final objectives, may sound as pointless as the fact that the truth of the universe is based on the use of a tube provided with lenses focusing on the sky. But, making chains, practices gradually conform subjects to common beliefs, and what once was regarded as extravagant now becomes object of peaceful belief in truth. The risk of intolerance creeps in right now, even into the best and most valuable intents and purposes, even into those who profess tolerance as their highest moral value and intellectual creed.

As all of us, these people are indeed subject to practices; this means that as subjects they represent the effects and the consequences produced by the practices themselves. They are *subject to the practice* of tolerance, to its recent and remote contingencies, and not *subjects of that practice;* while practising it, they cannot get free of those idiosyncrasies or partialities that characterize the practice of tolerance or any other. Practising

tolerance involves some peculiar narrow-mindedness as well. To be meaningful and effective, such practice requires that subjects should comply with it by turning to numberless different practices it assumes, assimilates and adjusts to its own targets: for instance, subjects endowing a universal expression like "mankind" with a meaning, subjects familiar with modern scientific evidence and demonstration, whose culture originated in the practice of books, as they came to be conceived in the western world (the truthfulness of words printed in today's books is not the one of those drawn on some illuminated manuscripts, which monks used to learn by heart in the Medieval monasteries of Europe). Each of these practices has come to full accomplishment by rejecting alternative world meanings or translating into their own psychology habits of life and knowledge arisen within different contexts and with different truth values (chisels shaping greek alphabetical letters in celebration of a god's statue in archaic times could not foresee that the evolution of that practice would ever determine the birth of the modern logical mind and Aristotle's Metaphysics). Exercising a practice involves the belief in the validity of its objects – what necessarily prevents from trusting unfamiliar or conflicting objects. A Copernican man cannot simultaneously believe in the validity of the Ptolemaic system, even when he may understand its motivations and historical justifications. In the same way, a tolerant good will cannot abandon its own critical convictions, rationalistic habits and historical consciousness: they are all necessary to him, if he wants to take up the habit of tolerance. Yet, they remain in fact and in principle unintelligible to beliefs that share different origins and objectives. From this point of view, they cannot help being somehow intolerant: the man we are talking about is welcome in the principle of tolerance, as he already shares the same critical and rationalistic beliefs and therefore comes to understand and command them very easily.

As I have already pointed out in the beginning, this does not mean that tolerance is a bad principle or that it should be disregarded in favour of something better (we could not say what). Each practice shows the intolerance of its own restriction; the practice of tolerance at least enjoys the possibility to recognize its own intolerance, consistently radicalizing and pursuing its ideal. As long as it poses itself as a universal habit, uniformly binding, this practice will always impose some other practices, which properly characterize the Weltanschauung of the western culture, its knowledges and truths, its individual and social values. All this is not

anyway innocent: it implies violence, the more elusive and effective, the more hidden and disguised by unconscious ideologies, superstitions and idiosyncrasies. We are not talking about violence consciously *exercised by the subject*; this is violence *exercised on the subject* by practices that feed him and lay him under a spell that is difficult to undo. We should not therefore conceive tolerance as the relativistic and nihilistic acceptance of all opinions: this is often expressed in words but more often disputed by practice as uncomfortable or impossible. Nor does it imply any moralistic softening of the meaning of life and its passions, as someone unfortunately presumes. Such considerations are good for the reckless chattering dispensed by the media and the cheap intellectualistic culture supporting it. We should believe in the human kind that is born from a tolerant reflection, the one that can put itself in question and produce a subject that does not fall prey to the superstition of his practices. This is the fight against superstition advocated by Spinoza, who was one of the brightest supporters of tolerance. It is an opportunity that our culture may seize without renouncing its own practices and principles or falling into the superstitious dream of surrendering to exotic or strange cultures. Since our culture embodies it as its practical justification, this opportunity proves to be contingently exemplary to all cultures, not to turn them into the tolerant expression of contents imbued with some generic nihilism that makes all cats grey in the night, but to let them perceive the space of freedom within their own practices, which they love and pursue as true events of the human. In so doing, they will preserve them and simultaneously direct them to the ideal of wisdom.

Tolerance of contents is not tolerant and does not embody any true wisdom. On the contrary, it bespeaks mere moralistic nihilism, which easily changes into uncontrolled violence. Only the acknowledgement of the intolerance marking those contents – whatever they are – may involve genuine tolerance, letting the event of all contents free to be different. If we train to such difference, we will not abolish it, we will consciously assume it within a different vision.

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