ON THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION OF PLURALISM AND TOLERANCE

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1. A philosopher's responsibility

There is no lack of praise for pluralism and tolerance.[1] That a society is pluralistic in character and that its laws secure the rights of minorities is usually recognized as a sign of maturity and civilization. In individuals, tolerance is seen as a virtue and a sign of education. In general, tolerance and pluralism are seen as steps towards a more humane world.

However justified the praise might be, praise alone is not sufficient. Some groups implicitly or explicitly fight tolerance. The extreme right in Western Europe is a case at hand. It justifies its intolerance towards the political left, towards immigrants, and often also towards those who do not live according to the traditional western values, by referring to a supposedly high-spirited goal: safeguarding the western culture.

A different, and less easily dismissed, threat towards tolerance derives from the confrontation of the western culture with other cultures. The decolonization period (and the fight against neo-colonialism) extended, at a factual level, pluralism and tolerance towards other cultures — the intra-cultural was upgraded to something inter-cultural; 'primitive' cultures were upgraded to 'other' cultures. But some forms of pluralism and tolerance, considered as common attainments in the west, do not agree with some of these other cultures. Do tolerance and pluralism compel us to respect the relevant cultural traits, or do they require us to fight them? Remark that the problem does not only pertain to cultures in

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[1] Some prefer the term "toleration". I shall not pay any attention to this terminological matter.

the so-called third world, but also, for example, to the cultural identity of minorities in the first world.

An often unnoticed but not less important threat towards pluralism and tolerance is the soap culture that originated in the USA and is spreading over the whole world through TV-channels. Its extremes are found in programs for youngsters. This threat is radically different from the former two. Rather than fighting pluralism and tolerance, it professes them. But in doing so, it reduces them to unproblematic banalities. It identifies the morally wrong with the legally forbidden (which it implicitly sees as static). It reduces culture to the intersection of the views of all 'good citizens'. Within these limits, it deems all differences between individuals and groups as factual, just as the colour of your skin is a factual matter, and hence not an object of intellectual discussion. Glorifying an unproblematic shared superficiality, it reduces pluralism and tolerance to absolutely obvious inanities.

Praising tolerance and pluralism is not an answer to such threats — and neither are conceptual analyses or historical studies by themselves. We need to provide a justification for them. More precisely, we need a justification that does not itself depend on views for which we recognize tolerable alternatives. Here lies an important responsibility of philosophers.

In the present paper, I propose an epistemological justification. The strength of such a justification is that it disconnects tolerance and pluralism from their ideological reliance. Of course, epistemologists disagree. But at least they agree on criteria for settling their disagreements, mainly insights from the sciences and from the history of science. This does not entail that all epistemological disagreements are settled (or even that they will be settled at any point in time). But the factual import in settling them is that high that philosophers stopped ascribing the disagreements to differences in primary options that would be beyond discussion.

An epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism can at best be partial. It can at best establish a minimal version of tolerance and pluralism. The justification of richer and more elaborate versions belongs to the domain of ethics or, as I shall explain, of world-views. Still, the epistemological justification will impose requirements on all world-views. It thus reduces the number of world-views that deserve to be elaborated and that, after being elaborated, may be criticized and confronted to each other. In this sense, the epistemological move is the initial one.

In section 2, I discuss rationality and justification. I shall show that intolerance and the fight against pluralism was compatible with, or even justifiable from, the traditional concept of rationality; whereas the new view on rationality requires both pluralism and tolerance. Next, I shall consider several forms of tolerance and pluralism, and argue that only one specific form is acceptable (section 3). Thus prepared, I come to the problem of the limits of tolerance and pluralism (section 4). In the conclusion (section 5), I offer an argument against the alleged opposition between tolerance and liberty.

2. Rationality and justification

The traditional mainstream view on rationality, both in our culture and in its philosophy, sees justification as absolute and foundationalist. A justification is required to start from unquestionable premises — many philosophers saw it as their main task to find these — and proceeds in terms of a flawless method — deduction, the old inductive method, etc. The view is found in the three great mediterranean religions — the religions of the book. Being monotheistic, they ground their truth on the highest and unquestionable authority, God, who directly or indirectly reveals himself to humans. It also is found in western philosophy, or at least in the traditional mainstream philosophy. Whatever vast differences there might be between Plato, Aristotle, the Continental Rationalists, the British Empiricists, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and the Vienna Circle — to name just a few — they all are after knowledge that is justifiable in an absolute way, they all take it for granted that knowledge is either foundational or impossible.

To the extent that one considers some view, whether moral or descriptive, methodological or ideological, as justifiable, it is justifiable in an absolute way, and hence beyond doubt. People holding dissenting views are simply wrong. If they are wrong in important matters, they should be stopped from acting on their views, or even from thinking on their views. As tolerance is accompanied by feelings going from respect to compassion, it is difficult to justify tolerance with respect to beliefs that are unjust, immoral, against human rights, against the divine law, or

demonstrably wrong, and that are at the same time *important*.[2] For this reason, the traditional mainstream view on rationality runs counter to tolerance and pluralism.[3]

That we reject foundationalism today is mainly a consequence of the evolution of the (modern) sciences (which need not itself be completely independent of broader cultural movements). It seems useful to recall the three major stages of this evolution in order to show how deep the changes were. In the seventeenth century, the advent of the modern sciences ruined the older conception of knowledge, which was based on the explication and interpretation of authorities. A central feature of the new conception was the idea of progress. Where there is a tendency, from the late nineteenth century on, to isolate the (physical) sciences from other domains of knowledge, nothing similar was the case in the seventeenth century. The new conception of knowledge was soon viewed as relevant to all domains of human knowledge, as is clearly illustrated by the Enlightenment. It is against this background that the evolution of the sciences should be understood.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the general scientific conception was that absolute certainties were available with respect to each of the following domains: observation, theories, and the scientific method. The latter, the so-called old inductive method, was conceived as a generative method: it led from reliable observations to true theories — whence the belief in certainties at the level of theories. In this period, progress is conceived as cumulative. By (experimentally) studying new domains, and by applying the scientific method to the resulting obser-

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[2] There is a slight simplification here. On some views, some important matters cannot be settled rationally. An extreme case is where the traditional view on rationality is adopted but its applicability is restricted to empirically testable (descriptive) statements. In such a case, "important" receives a somewhat restricted meaning and is usually qualified, as where emotionally important is opposed to cognitively important.

[3] This by no means entails that past defenders of tolerance were irrational or that they were historically unimportant. Often their defense relied on pragmatical arguments, or was motivated (in part) as a defense of their own freedom against those in power, or was inspired by the conviction that the matter of disagreement, for example religious beliefs, could not be settled rationally. But sometimes the underlying conviction was that the matter, although important and decidable in principle, could not be conclusively settled in their days. Such convictions were an important step towards the present conception of rationality.

vations, new justified theories would be gained.

In the early nineteenth century, the old conception of science was shattered. This extremely fascinating story is told in Laudan [1980]. Remark that the change is not caused by a mere shift in philosophical insights, but first and foremost by the actual evolution of some sciences and by the observation that the old inductive method (on several occasions) failed to result in true theories. The effect is that the old inductive method is replaced by the hypothetico-deductive method — or, if you prefer to phrase it that way, that the latter is recognized as the true method of the sciences. Where absolute certainty is still claimed for the scientific method (as now conceived), theories are seen as *fallible*. Absolute certainties are retained in observational matters, but their restriction to sensations suggests that problems are to arise soon. As a result of the evolution, a new conception of progress is required; Peirce's self-correction[4] (which involves a convergence towards correct and complete theories) will provide the way out.

Today, we live in a third period. Its origins should be located about the time of Kuhn's [1962] and the causes of the change are again mainly insights from certain sciences, for example psychology, and insights from the history of the sciences. In the present period, all claims on (non-contextual) absolute certainty are abandoned. With respect to observations, the reason is the theory-ladenness of observation. With respect to methods, the reasons are the multiplicity of independent criteria[5] and the interference of factual matters in the justification of methods.[6] With respect to theories, the reasons are the same as in the second period. In the light of this situation, progress can neither be cumulative nor self-corrective. The only feasible remaining concept of progress is a relative one: the progressive choice is the one that agrees with our present best

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[4] See Laudan's [1973] for a very instructive story on this one.

[5] See, e.g., Laudan [1977]. Laudan claims that, on his account, the assessment of a theory can be expressed by a single number. As such a number will always be the result of some arbitrary combination, this claim is rather pointless.

[6] See for example Laudan [1984] and my [1992a] and [1992b].

insights[7] — provided we recall our history, there is nothing arbitrary about this.

During this evolution, foundationalism (and, in a sense, a dogmatic attitude) are gradually given up. Remark that the (independent) evolution in the foundation of logic and mathematics led to a similar outcome. It brought us from a mainstream foundational view in terms of intuitive certainties (the basis) and deduction (the absolutely reliable method) to the present view. According to the latter, logic and mathematics concern 'arbitrary' formal systems, and all classical systems are affected by the so-called limitative theorems of Church, Gödel, Löb, Tarski, etc. Remark also that the evolution of our views on the empirical sciences is matched by the evolution in the ideological and political domains.[8]

Our present non-foundational view on rationality gives a radically different meaning to tolerance and pluralism and provides a radically different justification for them. I cannot elaborate at length on this view — or rather on these views, for general agreement was not reached. Nevertheless, the following characterization seems safe.

A decision is justified *for* an individual or group (at the time the decision is taken) in as far as it fulfils two requirements. The first requirement is that the decision is in agreement with the knowledge system of the individual or group. This knowledge system should be understood in the broadest sense; it contains not only descriptive statements, but also statements on methods, values, etc. The second requirement imposes criteria for the knowledge system: it should be the result of a critical examination, it should have been extended with relevant information, its subsystems should have been compared with alternatives, and it should be the result of a justified improvement. This form of justification is always a matter of degree. Indeed, the criteria for the knowledge system cannot in practice be met for all subsystems of a knowledge system, and cannot always be met completely even for a single such subsystem. This

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[7] The idea that science proceeds by solving problems (a pragmatic and epistemic criterion), and not by approaching the truth (a semantic and ontic criterion) is implicit in Kuhn [1962] and is the kernel of Laudan [1977]. Some consequences for the debate on convergent epistemological realism are argued in Laudan's famous [1981]. That intentional realism can nevertheless be upheld is argued in Batens & Meheus [1996].

[8] The Enlightenment and the ideology of the French Revolution have a cumulative view on societal progress, Marx and other nineteenth century thinkers a self-corrective view.

entails that one has to make a number of choices. Which subsystems of the knowledge system will be critically examined? Which information will be sought? Etc. Such choices can themselves be justified, for example in view of the importance or of the urgency of the problem, in view of the chances on attaining a justified improvement, and the like. Apart from being a matter of degree, this type of justification is always provisional. New information may be obtained, new insights may be gained, new feasible alternatives may be discovered, etc.

Let me briefly answer a possible objection. Some people will consider this view on justification as too subjective. Relevant information might be available in the society to which the individual or group belongs. However, if the information is seen as both important and relevant, then the person or group should have included it in his or her or its knowledge system. Unless, of course, other problems were seen as more important or more urgent. What I am arguing is that justification *for* some individual or group is a pragmatic matter, and cannot be defined independently of the knowledge system of that person or group and of its history. A sensible but clearly different matter is whether a decision is justified with respect to the knowledge and insights available in the society someone belongs to; or whether a past decision is justified in view of our present knowledge and insights.

In order to reach a justified knowledge system (and hence to meet the criteria from the second requirement), one should apply a number of criteria that relate to the *internal* structure of knowledge system. Space prevents me from elaborating on these here, but they do not reduce to forms of consistency. Other criteria are *external*. Among them are the gathering of relevant information and the comparison with available alternatives.

A crucial external criterion is the confrontation between individuals and groups that have opposed views. This does not merely concern the comparison, performed by an individual or group, of subsystems of his, her, or its knowledge system with alternatives from other knowledge systems. The confrontation also requires that our knowledge system is criticized by individuals and groups that hold opposed views, and that we face this criticism and, where necessary, change our knowledge system accordingly.

The reason why this procedure is crucial is nearly obvious. Any minimally elaborated knowledge system incorporates a set of arguments

on the justification of its elements (subsystems). This will have the effect that the structure of our knowledge system will incorporate protective mechanisms with respect to alternatives as well as with respect to new information. That we try to be critical about our own views might somewhat circumvent these mechanisms, but can hardly neutralize them. For example, the protective mechanisms will be embodied in statements about the relevance of some sets and types of information with respect to some problem. Dismissing such statements would ruin our problem solving capacities. Moreover, such statements are of a rather theoretical nature, whereas the problems that are judged urgent and important will usually be of a practical nature and more directly pertaining to the world. This makes it plausible that we are not well equipped for criticizing the protective mechanisms of our knowledge system — and psychological results confirm this claim.

The upshot is that we *need* others, and more precisely others that disagree with us in important matters, in order to discover the weaknesses in our knowledge system and in order to improve it.

This point cannot be sufficiently stressed. It should also be stressed that it does not obtain within a foundational model of justification. If an absolute justification is available for some view, then we have nothing to gain from confronting people that hold a different view. They are simply wrong. In the absence of foundational justification, the matter becomes radically different. Indeed, in the absence of a foundation, we cannot even be certain that our present views are the ones that we *really* (want to) prefer. Even if they could be optimally justified, the contemporary view on rationality would still entail that they are only justified with respect to the present state of our knowledge system. It follows that our present views can only be justifiedly considered our own, that we can only sensibly subscribe to them, to the extent that we have examined them critically, that we have compared them with alternatives, that we have confronted them with all available relevant information, and that we have confronted different knowledge systems. The latter point is essential, as I argued before, and it requires that we make our knowledge system to a target of criticism for strong opponents, that we face this criticism, and that we adapt our views where necessary. Put in a sloganlike way: my views can only be my views in as far as I have confronted them to the criticism of individuals or groups holding opposed views. Here lies the epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism.

Before leaving the matter, let me stress in a different way the extent to which the consequences of the present view on rationality are radically different from those of the foundational view. Where a justified view is judged *important*, foundational rationality rules out disagreement; it *opposes* pluralism in this connection; and it opposes tolerance with respect to those that disagree with this view — I explained this at the outset of this section. The present conception of rationality has a drastically different effect: where a justified view is judged important, it *requires* pluralism and tolerance.[9]

3. Which pluralism and tolerance?

As holds for all philosophically relevant concepts, especially where they are ideologically significant, the concepts of tolerance and pluralism tend to suffer from an ambiguity that obfuscates any sensible discussion of them. Their relation to rationality, as explained in the last paragraph of the previous section, is just one of the causes of this ambiguity. The situation is even more complicated when we consider concepts that play an ideological role in national and international politics, as is the case for tolerance and pluralism. In the present section I shall consider several forms of tolerance and pluralism, as they factually materialize in societies or, at a larger scale, in the relations between societies. It will turn out that the epistemological justification from section 2 applies to one specific form of them.

Form one: pluralism without tolerance. This obtains in societies in which opposed views (on more or less important matters) are present and in which some group is in power and considers its own views as unequivocally superior to any alternative that occurs in the society. Basically, this is the ideology of authoritarian and oppressive regimes and of imperialistic and oppressive countries. It belonged to the world-view of most

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[9] A number of scholars, among then Simon, Marschak, and Cherniak, have developed weakened or minimal concepts of rationality. Although their proposals are clearly in the right direction, they fail to realize that the contemporary view on rationality does not in the first place demand the weakening of the foundationalists criteria, but rather their *replacement* by criteria and requirements that are wholly beyond the scope of foundational rationality. The need for tolerance and pluralism is one of them.

European countries, definitely up to the decolonization period. It was part
of the implicit ideology of the former Soviet Union, and still is very
much alive in the foreign policy of the USA. Christianity and Islam have,
in different instances, to different extents, and in different periods, been
looking at the world from this point of view.

This form of pluralism rules out any intellectual contacts between the
view of those in power and its opponents. Sometimes the opponents are
oppressed. Sometimes those in power attempt to change the opponents'
views by force or by propaganda. In still other cases, an external authori-
ty prevents oppression or 'reconversion' attempts, but this hardly changes
the intentions of the intolerant. For example, the UNO often tries to
function as such an external authority (by condemnations, economic
sanctions, or by missions of Blue Caskets).

This form of pluralism usually induces a strange spell. Frequently,
those not in power tend to (partially) adopt the same view, no doubt
because it facilitates survival, and see humanity as composed of different
groups each of which 'has its place' — the occurrence of the phenomenon
in prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps is an extreme and appalling
example.

Three attitudes are possible on the side of those in power. In the
simpler case, they tend to spread their views, thus aiming at the end of
the pluralism. But usually those in power need the oppressed, for ex-
ample for economic reasons. In such cases, a morbid contradiction arises.
On the one hand, the oppressed should be converted to the allegedly
correct view. On the other hand, the oppression would no longer be
justified if the oppressed were converted. This is exemplified in the
foreign policy of countries that combine an allegedly superior ideology
with a tendency to imperialism (including colonialism) with respect to
other countries. The ideology 'justifies' the imperialism: the oppressed
are wrong in not sharing it, and in this sense inferior; but if the ideology
were spread, the imperialism could not be upheld.

The third attitude defines the opponent in such a way that he cannot
be 'converted'. The opponent is inferior because of properties he or she
cannot even change. This attitude is the basis for the oppression of minor-
ities (women, homosexuals, children, ...) and for racist ideologies. The
present extreme right in Europe is clearly racist. Claiming to stand for
the integrity of the European culture (or the French culture, etc.), it
professes the goal to return immigrants (as defined by their descendence)

to their so-called countries of origin in order to allow them to live according to their own culture. By tying culture to descendance, it forbids immigrants to become Europeans because in doing so they would betray their own culture.[10]

Form two: pluralism combined with passive tolerance. Here opposed views are combined with the absolute absence of intellectual contacts between them. There are two variants. According to the first, passive tolerance is justified by the fact that the oppositions would be unimportant, or by the fact that they are personal and hence beyond the scope of public discussion — whence they then tend to become unimportant. This is typical for the soap-culture. As I explained in section 2, this variant constitutes a severe threat to tolerance and pluralism. It also constitutes a threat to philosophy as well as to ideology, and to human dignity. It opposes people's motivation for anything but the common and superficial. It reduces human freedom to something not worth wanting. It prevents any progress caused by ideas and their criticism.

On the second variant, each opposing view considers itself as correct and superior to the others, but leaves the others alone for pragmatic reasons. More often than not, this leads to a form of segregation: people are born and (possibly) baptized in their ideological group, visit schools and join organisations of the group, marry in the group, die in hospitals of the group, and are buried within the group. In the sixties, the Dutch society was criticized (by some of its members) to be an extreme example of this segregation. We find the same type of segregation in some human sciences.

Form three: pluralism combined with active tolerance. Here there are intellectual fights between the different groups. The fights should be real in that the parties learn from each other. This seems obvious, but is not frequently the case. Many academic discussions reduce to a one-man-up show. And although *form three* is the ideal of western democracy, democracies rarely meet its standards. Many parliamentary debates are closer to either rituals or boxing games than to anything like an intellectual interaction, and are inconsequential with respect to the subsequent vote. In meetings where the discussions have an effect, people are often se-

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[10] The extreme right fails to see that the European culture is the result of the interaction between those living in Europe, whatever their origin, and of many outside influences. It wants to preserve the present stage of a tradition that owes its value to its past changes.

duced to influence the outcome, by any means, rather than aiming at a common best solution for the problem under discussion. As we shall see in section 4, this may be the effect of the fact that they do not consider their peers as (sufficiently) rational.

An important requirement for this form of tolerance and pluralism is that the different parties are given the opportunity, or rather are incited, to live up to their views. We can only learn from strong alternatives, and only alternatives that endured the test of being lived make a chance to be strong. Little can be learned from oppressed views or from views that are merely the result of contemplation. A full-grown active tolerance presupposes that the different parties have the liberty to act according to their convictions. (I return on the relation between tolerance and liberty in section 5).

It will be obvious to the reader that the epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism pertains to *form three* (and, more precisely, to its full-grown variant). *Form one* is simply a sort of authoritarianism or imperialism. It may be better than a situation in which there is not even pluralism in that it may allow for the possibility of future tolerance. But it is worse than the absence of pluralism if, as is usually the case, the existing oppressed views function as a cheap — see the preceding paragraph — justification for the view of those in power. The second variant of *form two* has the advantage (over the first variant and over *form one*) that the different groups do not try to 'convert' each other's members by force or propaganda. This provides each of the groups with the opportunity to improve their knowledge systems by means of internal criticism and by means of some external criteria (such as gathering information). Of course, a crippled justification is better than no justification at all. Nevertheless, the resulting justification is awfully crippled — remember the essential role of criticism from strong opponents as described in section 2. The full-grown variant of active pluralism is a prerequisite for such criticism.

While I am preparing the final version of this paper, the Kabila troops are conquering Zaire. A Belgian politician declared on TV that Zaire needs someone to restore order; only thereafter, there might be room for democracy (or rather, for a 'démocratie à l'Africaine'). I fear that this representative is representative for many. His statement is highly significant, both for common views on the relation between Europe and Africa and for common views on the capabilities and benefits of active

tolerance.

4. On the limits of pluralism and tolerance

Any treatment of tolerance and pluralism is spurious if it neglects to deal with their limits. To keep this paper within the required number of pages, I shall cope with the problem in a somewhat meandering way.

The problem of the limits of tolerance has two aspects. For any individual or group, the problem is to decide with which groups one should have intellectual fights. I argued that we should confront our knowledge system with that of others in order to learn from them. Clearly, this only makes sense if something is to be learned from the other's knowledge system. The latter presupposes that the other has elaborated his or her knowledge system in a rational way. We should not engage in intellectual discussion with fanatics, fantasts, fools, and other people that refuse the challenge of intellectual confrontation. Remark that, ultimately, *we* decide, on the basis of our knowledge system, whom we accept as a partner for intellectual confrontation.[11]

The second aspect relates to those in power or sharing power (as is the case for the citizens of a democratic society). Which ways of life may or should be tolerated? (Remark that this aspect pertains to actions, not to ideas.) This problem is rather different from the former one. Here the question is not whether we consider the other as rational, but whether he or she transgresses moral borders that we consider to be conclusive. Some negationists for example (who deny the systematical extermination of Jews in nazi concentration camps) may be rational people, misled by lack of information or by concentrating on the wrong kind of questions. There is no reason why an intellectual confrontation with such a person should be avoided. But it is a different question whether this person should be allowed to propagate his or her views, for example in pam-

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[11] This is an instance of the general feature that any justification ultimately relies on our knowledge system. For example, we cannot modify our knowledge system in view of observations, unless *we* consider them reliable. Precisely because this is so, our knowledge system should contain *criteria* for judging observations and these criteria should (in order to avoid plain circularity) be independent of the question whether the observations contradict some parts of our knowledge system.

phlets that 'demonstrate' that the holocaust is a myth, generated by a Jewish conspiracy in favour of the state of Israel. To consider an example of the reverse: I may be justified in refusing intellectual confrontation with christian fundamentalists (that sometimes come to my door with the aim to convert me to their creed), even if there is no reason to forbid these people to live in agreement with their creed.

Both aspects of the limits of tolerance are ultimately decided by *our* knowledge system. There is a clear danger for an easy solution: that we tolerate those that we consider harmless. For this reason, it is extremely important that we are especially critical with respect to the parts of our knowledge systems that define our limits of tolerance. Those parts too should be justified, and the justification should itself be examined critically. Remark that there is an ultimate challenge here. All human beings are thrown into this world equipped with similar senses and with similar intellectual capacities. And they presumably all have similar basic needs. The challenge then is to explain why some of them would be irrational, and why some consider it rationally justified to transgress moral borders that others claim to be conclusive. Moreover, the challenge is to defend this conception of rationality in view of the purported irrationality of some humans and in view of the deep disagreements between groups that attempt to be rational. I cannot meet these challenges here, even if it is not extremely difficult to do so. The only point I want to make here is that the borders of our tolerance are not taken lightly on the present conception of rationality.

To impose no limits to tolerance is not a viable alternative. Some should be excluded from intellectual confrontation and some should be stopped acting on their convictions. Actually, it is not too difficult to cope with the first aspect. Usually, I shall be able to argue that my decisions in that connection are not too consequential (for the justification of my knowledge system). I only can confront my knowledge system with a restricted number of alternatives. And there is no reason why engaging (as an atheist) in an intellectual discussion with a theologian would be any less rewarding or important than engaging in an intellectual discussion with a christian fundamentalist.

The second aspect, however, is harder. Limits in this connection are equally unavoidable. For example, the position of women in some Islamic or some third-world countries is far beyond anything I consider morally acceptable. The problem is not only an intercultural one, and it does not

only concern my limits of tolerance. Catholics have been (and sometimes are) fighting divorce, abortion, and euthanasia. As I require tolerance here (within certain borders), I have to argue with them on their specific limits of tolerance — and I cannot argue that there are no such limits, or that any person or group that claims to be rational should be allowed to act on his, her or its views.

The major difficulty is that single criteria seem never conclusive, and that most criteria seem to apply also to cases that are difficult to evaluate. Let us consider an example that will bring up little disagreement. While I am writing, Belgium is still deeply confused by the sexual abuse of young children. Young girls (and some boys) were captured, locked in, raped, and eventually killed. The sexual abuse was captured on video tapes, which presumably have been sold. Some of the girls may have been brought to sex parties. No one will defend the moral integrity of individual kidnappers. But some people defend the position that there is nothing wrong with bringing children to sex parties, provided they consent. Painful as the discussion might be, it seems unavoidable.

The captured children were locked in and were told that their parents refused to pay the required ransom. Their kidnappers showed — or faked, I doubt whether they knew themselves — compassion and understanding. Being totally dependent on their kidnappers, some children developed a kind of affection for them, and in a sense started trusting them and relying on them, their only human contacts. I obviously did not see the video tapes, but, for all I know, the children consented by the time they were sexually abused. If they have been brought to sex parties, there is little doubt they consented to be abused.

Most European countries have a law that makes children under a certain age incapable of consenting to sexual intercourse. Such a law merely introduces a presumption, and many such presumptions are fought by the Children's Rights Movement, age not being a moral category. More importantly, given the circumstances, the consent of the abused children should be considered as not genuine. In this extreme case, this provides a sensible solution to the problem. This was exploitation, if ever there was. But many cases are less extreme and nevertheless rather similar. What about children that, 'prepared' by their parents, consent to sexual intercourse? What if they are 'prepared' by the economic situation (as in South-East Asia)? What if children are 'prepared' by their parents to refuse medical help? What about the many persons (from Eastern

Europe, Africa, or Asia) that are (sometimes sexually, but more often only) economically exploited in Western Europe? What about the exploitation of European women in their home countries? What about the consenting prisoner in the nazi concentration camp?

It is time to end this long digression. It intended to show that some acts are clearly not tolerable, but that these differ only gradually from cases that are much more difficult to decide; and that general criteria, such as consent, are difficult to handle (from a moral point of view, even . if not from a legal point of view). As a result, the epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism cannot by itself justify clearcut limits of tolerance. For this reason, I shall proceed in two steps — remember that I am still discussing the *second* aspect of the limits of tolerance.

The epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism requires that we fight those that want to make intellectual confrontation impossible and those that want to prevent others from autonomously forming their ideas and living accordingly. This, it seems to me, is the only correct rendering of the principle that one should not be tolerant with respect to the intolerant.[12] Two remarks should be added. The first is that even this criterion can only be applied in view of a knowledge system: the intention of others can only be derived in view of an interpretation of their actions (including their verbal actions). I stress this, even if it seems to weaken my position. It is important for the new conception of rationality that its pragmatic character is never forgotten.

My second remark is that the above criterion does not enable us to justify that we are not tolerant with respect to actions transgressing moral borders that we deem conclusive. The only possible solution for this problem lies in the articulation of integrated world-views. A world-view is an integrated subsystem of a knowledge system, containing not only descriptive statements in the strict sense, but also values (and possibly norms). The function of a world-view is to provide us with the basic guidelines for experiencing the world, understanding it, and acting in it. For rational persons and groups, it is crucial that their world-view is in agreement with (and to a certain extent derived from) the best available

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[12] The present formulation does not entail that such persons should be excluded from intellectual confrontation. Indeed, the criterion that is relevant in that connection does not refer to any actions or intentions, but only to the structure of the justification of a knowledge system and of its relevant elements.

knowledge at the time. In this sense world-views are heavily dependent on the sciences. Also, the world-view (as any other subsystem of the knowledge system) of rational persons and groups will always be hypothetical: new information and new insights may force them to revise it. Finally, it is essential that a multiplicity of world-views is articulated, because only this will provide us with a means to confront them and hence to arrive at world-views that are strong with respect to their justification. During the last years of his life, Leo Apostel formulated his world-views program and was the main instigator of the (in many senses pluralistic) world-views group.[13] The program can best be studied from Apostel & Van der Veken [1991], which is very briefly summarized in the first chapter of The Worldviews Group's [1995], and to some extent also from Apostel [1994].

Some will claim that any human being unavoidably has a world-view, and this is certainly correct. However, more often than not, such world-views are implicit, drastically incomplete, largely incoherent, and not in agreement with our present best insights, especially as deriving from the sciences. Apostel's program aims at the articulation of world-views that escape those flaws and that, by being explicit, can be confronted with each other. (From now on, "world-view" always refers to the explicit variant.)

Once world-views are available, we can again recur to the epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism in order to decide about the limits of tolerance. As my argumentation will be somewhat subtle, let us proceed in steps.

A first central point is that the presence of world-views will make the discussion on moral theories possible. Let us be honest: at present we have a large number of ethical systems, systems that concern the justification of moral values and norms, but we did not produce a single articulated and embracing moral system that is minimally justified. Ethics, as a philosophical discipline, survives because of the importance of the problems it concerns, but its situation is far from satisfactory — as if one were to study scientific methodology in the absence of scientific theories. One of the central reasons, apart from a lack of money for such

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[13] These initiatives were an outcome of some of Apostel's earlier papers, as his [1963] and [1965], and of his causal ontology and connected epistemology — see his [1974], [1981], and [1985], Apostel & Van Dooren [1985], and Batens & Christiaens [1999].

projects, is that our present reliable knowledge (mainly the sciences) do not provide us with direct ways to assess moral theories. Precisely in this respect, world-views provide a way out. Given a world-view and the fundamental values that belong to it, scientific knowledge may be used to articulate, criticise, assess, and justifiedly modify moral theories. At the same time this world-view may be criticized, not in the least by confronting it with alternatives.

Suppose that we judge, on the basis of our world-view and our connected moral theory, that some group should not be allowed to live according to its convictions. In the present circumstances, there is not much we can do about this situation. If the basic moral values of that group are radically different from ours and if the same holds for the principles for assessing the correctness of moral statements, then no common basis for the discussion will be available. Ultimately, the decision is the responsibility of those in power. As explained in the previous paragraph, world-views provide a way out in that they provide us with the possibility for a debate on moral differences.[14]

In view of this possibility, we may impose a requirement on the limits we set for tolerance: that we engage in a debate with those we want to prevent from living up to their convictions. We may consider our refusal to be tolerant as justified if they either refuse the debate or do not react rationally to it, for example if they cannot answer our criticism but nevertheless refuse to modify their knowledge system accordingly.

The relation with the epistemological justification of tolerance and pluralism should be obvious: the absence of tolerance is only justified on the present criterion if the opponent refuses to act in such a way that we can learn from the confrontation with his or her knowledge system — compare with the beginning of the present section. The importance of

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[14] If people with opposed convictions share a sufficient number of methodological tenets, a debate between them is possible already in present circumstances. Also, and more interestingly, such a debate is possible if a party is able to produce arguments that are correct according to the internal logic of the opponent. Reaching such arguments is greatly facilitated by world-views. If the parties know each other's world-views, they will not only be able to criticize the latter, but will also gain insight in the argumentative structure of their opponent's knowledge system. Summarizing: world-views are sufficient but not necessary for such a debate. If I am correct that humans need world-views in order to organize their lives — a point I cannot argue here — then the importance of world-views for making those debates possible is apparent.

world-views is that their presence makes the criterion into something workable. Weaponed with a justified world-view and a justified moral theory, we shall be able to rebut the opponent's criticism (or to modify our knowledge system if it proves unjustified), and to criticize the intended behaviour of the opponent. If the latter has a justified world-view and a justified moral theory, and it survives our criticism, then the above criterion requires that we be tolerant with respect to the opponent.

The criterion seems highly attractive in that it seems to capture the intuition behind the justified refusal of tolerance: if we deem it justified to stop a person from acting on his or her convictions, we are convinced that these convictions cannot be rationally upheld. But in the present situation (in the absence of world-views), a rational discussion on the justification of moral principles is hardly possible. Also, where intolerance was fought and finally eradicated in our past history, it seems to me that the above criterion would have presented a simple way out (if it had been possible to apply it).

And yet, I do not dare to claim that the criterion is final. Even if justified world-views and moral theories will have been articulated, it might still be possible that we shall feel the moral obligation to refuse tolerance in cases where it is required by the above criterion. I obviously hope, but cannot prove, that this will not be the case. But even if it were the case, and hence a further challenge would remain, the above criterion will nevertheless constitute a valuable step forward.

5. In conclusion

We have seen that tolerance involves two different aspects: to intellectually confront one's opponents and to let them live up to their standards. I have presented an epistemological justification for both. We also have seen that the question of the limits of tolerance constitutes a hard problem, especially with respect to the second aspect of tolerance, and that it cannot be solved by relying on the epistemological justification of tolerance alone.

As I mentioned in section 1, the epistemological justification warrants only a minimal version of tolerance. And we found the same to apply to the limits of tolerance. Once world-views have been articulated, richer arguments may be developed. If, for example, someone highly values

humanity, tolerance with respect to some positions (or with respect to those that hold them) may be justified in view of their promise for the development of rationally justified convictions in the future. But even if my epistemological justification is weak (and is not immune for future corrections), it has the advantage to apply (at present) to all knowledge systems, independent of the world-views they contain.

Let me end with a remark on the relation between tolerance and liberty. It is sometimes said that tolerance presupposes disapproval or even condemnation, whereas liberty does not. It is worth pointing out that the distinction, which relies on the traditional conception of rationality, cannot be upheld in view of the present conception.

Precisely because the present conception of rationality requires that we confront our convictions, and especially the most important ones, with viable and strong alternatives, it requires disagreements in important matters. This requires that we develop conflicting attitudes (in different dimensions). To the extent that I judge some conviction important, I should further the development of robust and strongly opposed alternatives. Only in the presence of such alternatives, I shall be able to improve my convictions by confronting them with the alternatives. At the same time, and precisely because I consider some conviction important, I shall disapprove of the alternatives, I shall believe them to be incorrect, wrong, or false. And my approval of the fact that alternatives are developed should neither diminish nor be diminished by my disapproval of the alternatives. There is nothing schizophrenic about this opposition, and the opposition is by no means typical for the problem of tolerance.[15] So, unless we want to restrict liberty to futile issues, we recognize liberty where we appeal for tolerance, and liberty does not exclude disapproval.

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[15] See Batens & Meheus [1996] for a similar opposition with respect to scientific realism.

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