

Toleration in Conflict

Past and Present

The concept of toleration plays a central role in pluralistic societies. It designates a stance which permits conflicts over beliefs and practices to persist while at the same time defusing them, because it is based on reasons for coexistence in conflict – that is, in continuing dissension. A critical examination of the concept makes clear, however, that its content and evaluation are profoundly contested matters and thus that the concept itself stands in conflict. For some, toleration was and is an expression of mutual respect in spite of far-reaching differences, but for others, it is a condescending, potentially repressive attitude and practice. Rainer Forst analyses these conflicts by reconstructing the philosophical and political discourse of toleration since antiquity. He demonstrates the diversity of the justifications and practices of toleration from the Stoics and early Christians to the present day and develops a systematic theory which he tests in discussions of contemporary conflicts over toleration.

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Rainer Forst
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RAINER FORST

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For Sophie and Jonathan

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Preface

‘The problem of tolerance, my dear Engineer, is rather too large for you to tackle.’ During work on the present book these words, which Thomas Mann’s Settembrini hurled at Hans Castorp, occasionally rang in my ears. This was not only because the matter in dispute between the two characters is important for the problem of toleration, for Castorp had taken the liberty of criticising as intolerant Settembrini’s plans for an enlightened world government of freethinkers who would ‘strike out’ metaphysics and God in order finally to overcome intolerance. Nor was it because engineers actually have an easier time with tolerance than do philosophers, for engineers use the concept in the sense of the permissible deviation from predefined norms compatible with the function of a technical system. In engineering, in contrast with philosophy, not only are these reference norms fixed but even the inaccuracies of measuring instruments, which necessitate a ‘dimensional tolerance’, are regarded as measurable. No, the main reason was because, as I increasingly immersed myself in the topic, the goal I had set myself – namely, to write a systematic treatise on toleration against the background of a history of the arguments offered for it and of practices of toleration which would help us to orient ourselves in our present-day conflicts – at times seemed to recede ever further into the distance. At a certain point, however, after having explored the (virtually boundless) expanse of the historical and contemporary discourse concerning toleration, I got the impression that I could present a reconstruction of this discourse and a freestanding theoretical proposal – which I do here in the hope that the result may to some extent measure up to the problem.

Without the assistance of a whole series of persons, it would not have been possible for me either to begin or to complete this project, for which reason I would like to express my sincere gratitude to them here without wanting

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to make them responsible for the result as well. In the first place, I would like to thank Axel Honneth for a more than ten-year rewarding and productive collaboration in Berlin, New York and Frankfurt. The countless discussions that we conducted during this time, also in the relevant research seminars, enriched and shaped my thinking in decisive ways. To Jürgen Habermas, who showed unflinching support and interest in this project and offered me valuable advice, I am grateful for remaining a conversation partner for me from the time of my studies and my doctorate. Over the years, Charles Larmore has helped me with numerous comments and, importantly, critical queries on a whole series of my writings.

During the years of work on this book, I was able to present and discuss my ideas on many occasions. I received valuable suggestions from so many colleagues and friends on these occasions that it is impossible to do justice to them in detail here. I would like to thank expressly those who took the time to send me written comments or who in constructive conversations helped me to clarify my ideas – although some of them will think that I may not have done so sufficiently: Joel Anderson, Richard J. Bernstein, Bert van den Brink, Dario Castiglione, Ingrid Creppell, Richard Dees, Günter Frankenberg, Elisabetta Galeotti, Stefan Gosepath, Klaus Günther, Rahel Jaeggi, Otto Kallscheuer, the late Andreas Kuhlmann, Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, Catriona McKinnon, Stephen Macedo, Donald Moon, Glen Newey, Peter Niesen, Werner Plumpe, Henry Richardson, Thomas M. Schmidt, Marcus Willaschek and Melissa Williams. Martin Saar undertook to subject the entire work to a critical reading and to provide comments on it, for which I am deeply grateful to him.

My most profound debt of gratitude is to Mechthild Gross-Forst, not only for the first critical reading but also for her never-flagging support and encouragement, without which I would not have been able to manage this project. My work on it coincided with the first five years in the lives of our children, Sophie and Jonathan, who time and again had to allow their father to go to his office so that he could work on ‘his book’ – even though there were so many other books, even ones with pictures, from which he could have read to them during that time. I dedicate this book to them in the hope that one day they will say that it was worth it.

Addendum to the English edition

It is a source of great joy for me to be able to present my book to English-speaking readers in translation, something the author of an (originally)

eight-hundred-page work can scarcely dare to hope for. It makes me all the more happy because not only the history of English and American political theory and practice but also contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy plays a major role in this book. My English-speaking colleagues, with whom I have been discussing these issues over many years, can now assess the work as a whole (and examine more closely whether the errors lie where they suspected). Since the present publication is an abridged version, I'm tempted to say that anything they could still find wanting is covered in the longer version; but I will resist this temptation. The book contains everything essential. I have also refrained from addressing important recent contributions on the past and present of toleration which have appeared since the German publication (2003) in order not to extend the treatise once again.

The credit for making the improbability, and also in a certain sense the impossibility, of a translation of this book overflowing with historical references possible is due to a series of people. In the first place I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my outstanding translator Ciaran Cronin. Himself a proven political philosopher, he has worked over several years to produce an English version which leaves nothing to be desired. I cannot thank him enough for this. In addition, Erin Cooper provided indispensable assistance in the search for innumerable English references and also offered many helpful comments.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Cambridge University Press for taking the risk of publishing this hefty tome in English. That this risk was taken is due in the first instance to Jim Tully who supported this undertaking unstintingly from the beginning and who, together with Quentin Skinner, Jennifer Pitts and David Armitage, to whom I am also extremely grateful, adopted the book into the prestigious series 'Ideas in Context' – even though its particular methodological approach, in connecting the history of ideas, the analysis of political practice and past and present political philosophy, is a quite uncommon one, not least in its attempt to encompass two thousand years of a history of ourselves. As I conceive it, arguments which arose in specific contexts migrate into others and become transformed, but in the process acquire and preserve a distinctive systematic force that reaches into our contemporary world. This idea of a 'critical history of argumentation' also involves a risk if it is viewed purely from the perspective of the history of ideas or from a systematic perspective alone. However, we will not get very far in political theory if we fail to explore productive connections between these perspectives, an approach which I am confident is true to the spirit of

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the series. In this connection, thanks are also due to two anonymous readers for the Press who made a number of helpful suggestions for producing an English version.

On the part of Cambridge University Press, special thanks are due to Richard Fisher for persisting with and promoting this demanding undertaking. Elizabeth Friend-Smith, Lucy Rhymer, Joanna Breeze and Frances Brown have made outstanding contributions to its realisation, for which I am very grateful. That this publisher appreciates its authors above all else is something I have experienced throughout the entire process – up to the realisation of the cover whose image, Paul Klee’s painting *Carpet of memory*, reflects the artist’s impressions of his travels through Tunisia in 1914. This book also weaves such a carpet extending across cultures and eras and I hope that it is useful in opening up new paths of reflection. Were it also to be judged beautiful, that would be high praise indeed.