On different philosophical approaches to tolerance

an extract from the article

Malik: Thinking about Karl Popper and Open Society

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In Chapter 7 of The Open Society and Its Enemies, Popper scrutinizes the well-known idea of Plato’s Republic that „the wise shall lead and rule, and the ignorant shall follow.”¹ And his final conclusion is that Plato’s political programme eventually propagates the controlling over leadership by autocratic institutional instruments. He deals with three inner contradictions in the notes to this chapter: the paradoxes of democracy, freedom, and tolerance. To refer to the text 562b-565e of The Republic, he gives definitions as follows:

“The so-called paradox of freedom is the argument that freedom [...] must lead to very great restraint, since it makes the bully free to enslave the meek. [...] the paradox of tolerance: unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. [...] the paradox of democracy, or more precisely, of majority-rule; i.e. the possibility that the majority may decide that a tyrant should rule.”²

These are three related questions from different angles, which can be described, in John Rawls’s words, as the problem that „the basic liberties can be restricted only for the sake of liberty.”³ But is it not problematic to put restrictions into open society? Does not imply Popper’s critical rationalism that we should tolerate those who do not agree with us even if this is about great issues such as freedom, democracy, and tolerance?

Before presenting Popper’s reply, take two famous, alternative conceptions to this challenge. The first is the repressive tolerance by Herbert Marcuse.⁴ According to him, regimes of power always tolerate all the ideas, attitudes and movements, which leave its foundations and legitimacy intact, and they do not argue them. It struggles, however, against those who argues its foundations of existence or urges the opportunity of changes. Thus, in democracy, a thesis can be proposed that there is no democracy for the enemies of democracy. For this reason, tolerance proves to be “the instrument of oppression” even in a liberal democracy. And whether liberals do not prove Marcuse’s repressive tolerance by demanding obedience not only from their followers but also their opponents? And they require that opponents’ critics accommodate to their own language and reasoning [the politically correct ideal of free speech].

Rawls, perhaps in part reflecting to Marcuse’s critics, propagates to tolerate intolerance attitude in his book The Theory of Justice, but he assigns a duty to state in the spirit of justice.⁵ He divides the original problem into three questions, and he presents them in the relation of tolerant and intolerant sects: 1) whether an intolerant sect has any title to

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¹ Popper (1971), Vol. 1, pp. 120.
² Ibid. pp. 265.
⁵ Rawls (1999), pp. 190-194.
complain, if it is not tolerated? 2) Under what conditions tolerant sects have a right not to tolerate those which are intolerant? 3) When they have the right not to tolerate them, and for what ends it should be exercised? It is already difficult to answer the first question because, according to Rawls, anybody has the title to complain, and we cannot ignore even intolerants to do this. And in fact, if constitution is strong, we have no reason to refuse the freedom of intolerants. If state bans the sect of intolerants, it would be injustice, because it would violate equal rights. However, tolerates have rights to take actions against intolerance, “when they sincerely and with reason believe that intolerance is necessary for their own security. [...] Justice does not require that men must stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence.” Rawls’s reply to this third question is very similar to that of Popper, but Rawls is more permissive than Popper as a result of the difference between their conceptions of tolerance.

In the spirit of justice, autocratic discrimination could be a very reason to take actions against intolerant sec. If a person, e.g. the notorious Nebraskan neo-Nazi, Gary Lauck, cannot bear a people of certain origin in his fellowship, we must tolerate it. If Lauck encourages the political leaders of Nebraska or the US to make a law against immigrants, we must again tolerate it, supposing the commissioner is not the notorious neo-Nazi himself. Here there are the borderlines of tolerance in Rawls’s conception. The same Lauck, who has a title to present his intolerant opinions by the right of free speech, has no title to register a business company that is willing to accomplish his views, or he has no title to accredit a college that is ready to educate his ideas. It is the state (Nebraska or the Federal State) that would commit an autocratic discrimination, which undermines the ideal of justice. But emphasize the fact that in the presented cases discrimination is committed by the state (either Nebraska or the Federal State) and not by Lauck. That is the reason why state must stand up to the initiatives of Lauck to stave off the offense of civic rights entitled to anyone.

As for Popper, his approach of tolerance is somewhere between Marcuse and Rawls. From Popper’s perspective, rationality is an attitude that accepts critics. You cannot choose rationality in a rational manner, for accepting certain argues and evidence, we have a rationalist attitude aforehand. To choose rationality is therefore a moral choice, and the precondition of rationalist attitude is to admit that

“I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth. It is an attitude which does not lightly give up hope that[...] even where people demands and their interest clash, it is often possible to argue about the various demands and proposals, and to reach – perhaps by arbitration – a compromise which, because of its equality, is acceptable to most, if not to all. In short, rationalist attitude, or, as I may perhaps label it, the ‘attitude of reasonableness’ is very similar to [...] the belief that in search for truth we need cooperation, ant that, with help of argument, we can in time attain something like objectivity.”

Some decades later Rawls speaks about similar preconditions in The Theory of Justice, and he reaches a concept of social contract. Both Popper and Rawls strongly believe in rational attitude and in that to choose rationality means a moral choice, too; this is an ethics that enables the opportunity of critics and interpersonality. Historians such as Plato, Hegel or Marx are all collectivists. “As opposed to this, the position presented here does not assume the existence of collectives [...] in speaking of a ‘social’ theory of reason (or of scientific

method), I mean more precisely that the theory is an interpersonal one, and never that is a collectivist theory.”8 This ethics requires tolerating other people and refusing violence. This ethics refuses autocratic attitude.

“The position here adopted is very different from the popular, originally Platonic, view of reason as a kind of ‘faculty’ [...] admittedly, intellectual gifts may be different, and they may contribute to reasonableness; but they need not. Clever men may be very unreasonable; they may cling to their prejudices and may not expect to hear anything worthwhile from others. [...] authoritarianism and rationalism in our sense cannot be reconciled, since argument, which includes criticism, and the art of listening to criticism is the basis of reasonableness.”9

Popper emphasizes the attitude of reasonableness. And the presumption of this behaviour is cooperation, that to practice and to endure critics. This is the gist of Popperian tolerance we should keep up against those who break the rules.

"You cannot have a rational discussion with a man who prefers shooting you to being convinced by you. In other words, there are limits to the attitude of reasonableness. It is the same with tolerance. You must not, without qualification, accept the principle of tolerating all those who are intolerant; if you do, you will destroy not only yourself, but also the attitude of tolerance.”10

Rational attitude is always ready to cooperate, always ready to learn from errors and mistakes, but expects the other person to do the same. That is to say, rational people must resist hostile behaviour and unfairness. Popper never lets Lauck propagate his opinions, because it would undermine the ideal of rational attitude and open society.

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9 Ibid. pp. 226.