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## Should I Accept What I Tolerate? <sup>1</sup>

Chenithung L Ngullie  
PhD Research Scholar  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Hyderabad

### Abstract

‘Tolerance’ or ‘toleration’ involves objection to something as unpleasant or wrong, but acceptance of that objected item in the form of non-interference or non-prevention. There seems to be a conceptual paradox looming in the definition of how one can accept what one objects to. This probable paradox is, however, done away with by toleration scholars by introducing the idea of triumphing reasons of acceptance over the initial reasons of objection. This paper focuses on the nature of acceptance in tolerance, which is carried out from a moral standpoint. The moral stance of an individual's inherent moral worth, as propounded by many moral philosophers, is presumed and taken as the driving principle throughout the study. It is argued that acceptance in tolerance happens only at the ontological level (ontological acceptance), i.e. the intrinsic personhood of the individual, and that there is no acceptance whatsoever of the experiential components, i.e. the actions and beliefs of the individual (experiential acceptance); they are simply tolerated. Consequently, tolerance is justified not by the content of the item being objected to, but by the inherent intrinsic worth of the person whose actions or beliefs are in question.

**Keywords:** *Tolerance, objection, acceptance, intrinsic worth, ontological acceptance, experiential acceptance.*

### Introduction

‘Tolerance’ or ‘toleration’<sup>2</sup> is the act of refraining from preventing something one objects to, even though one finds it unpleasant or, in a strong sense, false or wrong. The concept of tolerance, especially in its philosophical or conceptual analysis, has often been seen as a

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<sup>2</sup>I use the terms ‘tolerance’ and ‘toleration’ interchangeably.

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paradoxical concept (See Horton, 1994; Königs, 2022; Tskhadaia, 2021). The paradoxical nature of tolerance results from the necessary negative assessment towards a particular item (i.e., what is to be tolerated). By definition, toleration makes sense only when one negatively objects to an item; it is brought about only when one displays negative (disapproval, disagreement, etc.) judgment. It follows that toleration, in the strict sense, cannot be called upon in matters we endorse, welcome, or find attractive (Mendus, 1988). Preston King writes that an objection "...is the initial element which enters into any case of tolerance" (King, 2013, p. 44). However, the objection towards an item is immediately followed by its acceptance in the form of non-interference or refrainment towards the objected-to item. By doing so, one engages in the act of tolerance.

The apparent tension lies in the semantic and conceptual difficulty of making sense of the supposed suggestion of tolerance to accept what one objects to. How can it be logical to accept what one objects to? The suggestion appears to be paradoxical. This semantic and conceptual difficulty is elevated because toleration demands that the reasons of objection are legitimate and reasonable (Horton, 1996, p. 34). If such is the case, why should one accept what one reasonably objects to? Despite its glaring conceptual difficulty, this confusion has been studied widely, and theorists and scholars of tolerance have managed to resolve this seemingly glaring paradox comprehensively. The widely accepted solution to the problem is the idea of superseding the reasons of objection with the reasons of acceptance. For example, I may object to someone talking negatively about me. However, I show some form of acceptance in the form of non-interference due to the reasons of encouraging the right to free speech (principled reason), or to avoid unnecessary conflict in society (pragmatic reason).

The objective of this paper is not to offer a different solution to the same problem but rather to examine the nature or the kind of acceptance, which is seen as present in some form or level while exhibiting tolerance. It is to be kept in mind that I study the nature of 'acceptance'

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only in the context of the act of tolerance. What is found to be unacceptable in tolerance does not necessarily imply universal application in other courses of action. However, as I will argue later, what is ‘accepted’ in tolerance is considered inalienable and demands universality. To examine this nature of acceptance in tolerance, the study adopts the moral stance of regarding and recognising the inherent<sup>3</sup> moral worth of an individual, as propounded by many moral philosophers. From such a stance, then, it is argued that acceptance in tolerance is found to be only at the ontological level, i.e. the intrinsic moral personhood of the individual, and that there is no acceptance whatsoever of the other experiential components involved in tolerance, i.e. the actions and beliefs of the individual. The implicit argument is that the ontological acceptance of the inherent moral worth of persons is prior to the considerations of the wrongfulness of their actions or beliefs, and it must be weighed in for any moral course of action involving the other. It is important to note that toleration is primarily a subject of human relations, and the following discussion will also be in the context of person-to-person relations.

### Objection and Acceptance: The Tension

The tension between objection and acceptance was well articulated by D. D. Raphael. He puts the seemingly apparent paradox in these words,

“To disapprove of something is to judge it to be wrong. Such a judgment does not express a purely subjective preference. It claims universality; it claims to be the view of any rational agent. The context of the judgement, that something is wrong, implies that something may be properly prevented. However, if your disapproval is reasonably grounded, why should you go against it at all? Why should you tolerate?<sup>4</sup>” (Raphael, 1988, p. 139)

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<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘intrinsic’ and ‘inherent’ are used interchangeably.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars use the term acceptance as synonymous to tolerance, because the act of acceptance by default is the act of tolerance. Hence, reasons for acceptance are considered to be reasons for tolerance. Once you accept what you

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Preston King proposed ‘objection’ and ‘acceptance’ as significant tolerance components (King, 2013, pp. 44–54). He writes, "...tolerance features a predominant objection to an item conjoined with some form of free acceptance of that item" (King, 1998, p. 51). King also addressed the conceptual difficulty of the terms ‘objection’ and ‘acceptance’ (although only at the semantic level). He accepts that, in abstraction, without any consideration of feelings or inclinations, there is no reason for a person to accept what is being objected to. However, he says that objection (dislike, disapproval, etc.) does not happen in a vacuum. They arise in response to a particular way of feeling about the item objected to or from a specific form of commitment (King, 2013, p. 52). Therefore, he explains that other considerations "...that stand outside...cut across the objection, thereby producing the item’s acceptance" (King, 2013, p. 52). Thus, we find both the elements of objection and acceptance without being paradoxical.

This tension, however, becomes more pressing when one regards tolerance as a moral virtue, especially in cases involving moral judgements. Let me point out here that many scholars have debated the scope of tolerance. Scholars like Peter Nicholson limit the discussion of tolerance to only moral judgements (Nicholson, 2010). In this case, judgements of personal taste or preference, like flavours of ice cream, someone’s bad sense of humour, etc., cannot be cases of tolerance. However, others like Mary Warnock challenge Nicholson’s view and extend the scope of tolerance to non-moral cases of mere dislikes (Warnock, 1987). For this study, the case of the former will be considered, and cases of the latter will be ignored. However, the conclusion of the arguments of this study would be reasonable enough to justify tolerance involving the latter cases as well. Now, when the case of the former is considered, the pressing tension is how it would be morally right to allow (or accept) something considered morally wrong. Again, scholars have

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object, you have tolerated that item. I, personally, do not associate both the terms together. One can never accept what one objects to. Hence, what is tolerated is not necessarily accepted. In that sense, the act of non-interference or refrainment would not be counted as acceptance, unlike King who considers them as forms of acceptance.

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also dealt with tensions related to this form. In such cases, similar to the solution provided earlier, the moral reasons for objection are overwhelmed by a higher order of moral reasons, leading to their acceptance. Saladin Meckled-Garcia calls the reasons for objection first-order and acceptance reasons as second-order reasons. The second-order reasons cut across the first-order reasons and justify withholding or refraining from interfering. Perhaps, it is appropriate to quote an example given by Meckled-Garcia here. He writes,

I may have a moral reason to repress views and practices that involve animal cruelty. How can I also have a moral reason not to repress these views and their associated practices, if I see them as so bad as to morally require repression? ... I may consider these views to be part of a ... freely chosen ways of life. Repression of any of these may set a bad example in a society where I would prefer to encourage people to make free choices in their way of life. I consider membership of the latter group an important, and sufficient, second-order reason not to act on my first-order reason to prevent animal cruelty. (Meckled-Garcia, 2003, p. 80)

To summarise and put it in general terms, and as adopted by many theorists of the concept, other external reasons of higher order are invoked, which triumph over the reasons for the initial objection, leading to the acceptance of the objected item, resulting in the act of tolerance. It is crucial to note that the reasons for objection are not nullified but rather overwhelmed by the reasons for acceptance. I may have a reason to object to my neighbour's loud music because it disturbs my peace. However, I refrain from acting on my objection because I respect the right of autonomy of every individual to pursue their happiness. Here, the reason for respecting the other person's independence triumphs over my reason of objection. This does not mean that my reasons for objection are now rendered powerless; they still hold their potency, and I can continue objecting to the same act of my neighbour for the same reason.

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With the tension already addressed by many scholars, I will not venture into the same route. This study's focus will be on unveiling the nature and the kind of acceptance involved in tolerance. In the next section, I will lay out the framework adopted throughout this study, from which the concept of tolerance is studied and justified, and the question of acceptance is tackled. It is to be noted that this particular framework is adopted not to claim exclusivity, but only to achieve the paper's objective through its lens.

### **The Intrinsic Worth of the Individual: The Moral Framework**

Now, one could have many reasons for objections, provided they are reasonable objections and do not spring from irrational prejudices. For example, one cannot be said to object to another person's race, as it is not an item of objection. The same principle of reasonability binds the reasons for acceptance. Reasons for acceptance can stem from the particular type of framework or approach one takes to justifying tolerance. For instance, a liberal stance will accept and justify tolerance based on the liberal reasons dictated by the law: objectionable items are accepted or tolerated because the law prohibits prevention and gives every individual equal status and right to pursue their interest. By taking a religious stance, one accepts and tolerates by following the teachings of spiritual teachers and the instructions of the holy texts. Similarly, from an epistemological stance, one accepts and tolerates by reasons of scepticism (giving the other the benefit of the doubt). This paper will employ a moral framework to address the tension between objection and acceptance in tolerance.

By taking a moral stance, one believes in the moral ideal that it is proper to regard the 'other' as an equal moral agent. This moral framework, therefore, presumes that each individual has an intrinsic moral worth prior to our judgements of others' actions or beliefs. I consider this inherent moral worth, the central principle of any moral theory, universal, and no one has the right to demean this value in others. Many moral thinkers and writers like Immanuel Kant, Bernard Williams, John Rawls, David Gauthier, Immanuel Levinas, Rousseau and many more

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have written on the intrinsic worth of a person, albeit from different philosophical lenses. Writers like Rawls, Gauthier, and Rousseau established the individual's inherent worth through the political or contractarian lens. To remind ourselves of this moral principle, let me briefly refer to the works of Kant and Levinas, among many others, simply because these two provided a distinct ethical theory of the 'other'. Here, the employment of these two thinkers is only instrumental and does not prescribe the employment of these theories alone for discussions of tolerance and acceptance. In order to avoid possible confusion, I will keep the discussion of these two moral theories brief.

In Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, and further writings like *The Critique of Practical Reason* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, we see his moral theory revolving around his idea of the self-governing (autonomous) reason that each person possesses. This autonomy, Kant argued, provides the ground for viewing each individual as equally worthy and deserving of equal respect. Kant's moral theory is that of practical rationality, commonly labelled as "Categorical Imperative", which, in summary, prescribes that we ought to act in such a way that we treat humanity, whether in ourselves or others, as an end in itself but never as a means only. This theory, therefore, heavily grounds the idea of equal respect for persons.

Levinas was more generous towards the inherent worth of the other and argued that every individual possesses an 'infinite responsibility' towards the other, which prevents one from disrespecting or demeaning the other (Levinas, 1998, p. 74). Venusa Tinyi precisely presents Levinas' argument that the individual self is a product of the "action and decision of others" and that "we owe everything that we have and are" to others (Tinyi, 2023, p. 104). This radical view of the 'other' from Levinas has its foundation in theology. For Levinas, the other is an embodiment of God, which commands the self not to engage in derogatory acts towards the other (Levinas, 1998, p. 57). In other words, the other demands/are deemed to have equal respect and dignity.

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As noted at the end of the first section of this paper, toleration is a concept concerning human relations. Any discussions of tolerance involve one or more of the ‘other’. Drawing from the moral principle discussed above, one cannot begin any course of assessment or consideration involving the other by judging their actions or beliefs. One needs to recognise and regard the intrinsic worth of the individual as prior and antecedent to any considerations of the ‘other’. In other words, one should not begin any moral assessment of others with judgments of their actions or beliefs, but rather by first recognising and regarding their intrinsic worth.

### What is Accepted in Tolerance?

Before answering, I must make the proper distinction of acceptance involved in tolerance. The looming question is what is it that one ‘accepts’ while exhibiting tolerance? Is it the actions and ideologies being objected to? Is it the circumstance in which one is called to show tolerance? Is it the person whose actions or ideologies one is objecting to? These questions hint towards a much more complicated answer. This section will be dedicated to answering these questions.

Analogous to Ian Carter’s utilisation of Stephen Darwall’s two kinds of respect<sup>5</sup> (see Carter, 2013; for a closer look at the two different kinds of respect, see Darwall, 1977) to address the compatibility, or otherwise, of toleration and respect, I also identify acceptance playing out in tolerance to be on two different levels, or of two different kinds. The argument follows that

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<sup>5</sup> Darwall explained that respect can be of two kinds: *recognition respect*, where one takes a general attitude or disposition of consideration or recognition towards something. The law, social institutions and persons can be objects of this kind of respect. He writes, “to have recognition respect for persons is to give proper weight to the fact that they are persons” (Darwall, 1977, p. 39). The other he calls *appraisal respect*, which involves positive appraisal of the specific qualities or features. For example, one may have an appraisal respect for someone’s exceptional talent in music. However, it is quite possible that one may have an *appraisal respect* towards someone without *recognition respect*, or vice versa.

Carter employed this differentiation into his discussion of toleration and respect, and argued that these two concepts are compatible only as long as the ‘respect’ in toleration is meant *recognition respect*, and not *appraisal respect*.



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acceptance in tolerance happens only in one of these two levels or kinds and never in the other. Let me present a closer look at these two kinds of acceptance.

1. *Ontological Acceptance*: This involves accepting the other person with inherent worth and recognition of the same, which cannot and ought not to be invalidated by any means. This inherent worth must be weighed in for every deliberation involving the other. Therefore, every individual's ontological status is not an item of objection, and hence, not of tolerance. It calls for full acceptance and recognition of the individual's moral worth, and there is no room for objection.
2. *Experiential Acceptance*: On the contrary, this involves agreement or acceptance of the content of the other person's actions or beliefs. These experiential components of the person are the subject of objection and called into question by the act of tolerance. Therefore, by objecting to them as wrong or false, they are not accepted but tolerated. This act of tolerating what is objected to springs from the moral acceptance of the other individual as equal and deserving of regard.

For example, a Christian tolerates the Muslim doctrine of the Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet. In that case, it does not mean that the Christian has accepted (experiential acceptance) that doctrine in any imaginable or unimaginable way. The Christian objects to it so strongly that she would rather die than proclaim or affirm it. By tolerating, the Christian accepts the right of the Muslim to exist and be recognised as a rational moral agent (ontological acceptance). In other words, the Christian *tolerates* the Muslim's doctrine because the Christian *accepts* the individual's worth and moral autonomy. The same principle and justification work for the Muslim tolerating the Christians' belief in the Trinity, and so forth for all religious traditions.

Perhaps, one could ask why someone's actions or beliefs cannot be accepted in any way. I do not claim generality that the contents of a person's actions or beliefs can never be objects of

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acceptance. They can be. However, in the discourse of tolerance, once I accept them, I cease to be tolerant. The whole point of this paper is to clarify the role of acceptance in tolerance, which, by definition, involves objection. The person's actions or beliefs are objected to, not their personhood. By common reason, what is being objected to can never be accepted. It becomes contradictory. Therefore, even though they are objected to as wrong or false, they are tolerated but never accepted; this act of tolerance is then justified by accepting and recognising the other person's individual worth and moral autonomy.

We are now better positioned to answer the question: What sort of acceptance is involved in tolerance? To give a straightforward answer to the question, the intrinsic worth and dignity of the person are accepted and nothing else. In other words, there is only *ontological acceptance* in tolerance and never *experiential acceptance*. Thus, when one engages in the act of tolerance, it is the actions, ideologies, or beliefs of the other person that are objected to and tolerated. It is crucial to note here that the actions or beliefs tolerated are not in any way accepted, because they are deemed wrong and false – they are tolerated, *not* accepted. Referring to Meckled-Garcia's example again, one has moral reasons to object to animal-killing practices. However, the reasons for encouraging free choices of life reflect the recognition and acceptance of the other as autonomous moral agents, which makes it possible to tolerate what is rightly objected to. Again, the objection towards animal killing or cruelty still holds its validity, which will be so in every case. The act of animal-killing is never accepted, but only tolerated.

King, however, used the term 'acceptance' in a different sense. He used it as a toleration component: a necessary action step following the act of objection. Hence, according to him, non-interference or refraining from preventing what is being objected to is a form of 'acceptance'. He summarises the acceptance component of tolerance in this way: "When we tolerate an  $x$ , we accept it in the sense either that we associate with it or do not interfere with it in some limited sphere, in some limited degree" (King, 2013, p. 52). King, therefore, is concerned with the

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general need for action tolerance demands in the face of objection. His concern is more about meeting the procedural and practical demands. Thus, acceptance for him is contextual and one can ‘accept’ the objected-to item in a particular context but choose not to accept it (intolerance) in another context. To cite his example,

“If we are said to tolerate a doctrine, perhaps Huguenotism or communism, this need only mean that we legally permit exponents of the doctrine to meet (perhaps only once a week, on Sundays) - while making it illegal for the doctrine to be disseminated on the air or in schools, etc. (thus interfering with or preventing its general expression)” (King, 2013, p. 53)

This, however, is at best a pragmatic form of tolerance. The terms of acceptance, here, are bound by the particular context or sphere in which the objected-to item is accepted. Of course, King's usage of the term ‘acceptance’ does not necessarily mean a positive acceptance of the item objected to, in the sense that the objected-to item is now regarded as valuable. However, one could see why confusion might arise with using the term ‘acceptance’ in this case. For this reason, other scholars have also preferred using a different term. For example, David Heyd uses the term ‘accommodation’ (Heyd, 2022) and Andrew Cohen uses ‘non-interference’ (Cohen, 2004).

King’s usage of the term ‘acceptance’ is not in the same line as espoused in this paper. This paper proposes that there is an objective item of acceptance, i.e., the individual’s worth and dignity, which is not relative but universal. This acceptance of the inherent worth of the other justifies the tolerance (not acceptance) of the other person’s actions or beliefs to which one objects.

The above arguments can be, thus, formulated as,

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1. Toleration involves objection and acceptance, but not towards the same item.
  2. Every individual has an intrinsic worth. Toleration involves acceptance only of the inherent worth of the other.
  3. The other individual's actions or beliefs, which are objected to, are not accepted but tolerated.
  4. Hence, tolerance involves only ontological acceptance (the person's intrinsic worth), and never experiential acceptance (the person's beliefs or actions).
  5. The acceptance of the inherent and intrinsic worth of the other individual justifies the toleration of the objected-to item.

## Conclusion

I have shown that in talks of tolerance, there is an apparent tension in accepting what one objects to. This tension arose from the conceptual and semantic bearings of the two opposing concepts applied to the same item simultaneously. By taking a moral stance, this paper highlighted the intrinsic worth of an individual, which is universal and irreducible, and, thus, makes possible an element of acceptance in tolerance. I argued that tolerance only involves acceptance of the other as an intrinsically worthy individual (*ontological acceptance*), and that the actions and beliefs of the other individual, which are objected to, are not accepted but tolerated. Therefore, there can never be an acceptance (*experiential acceptance*) of what is objected to, only tolerance. Subsequently, this tolerance of the objected-to items is justified because of the regard and acceptance of the other as equal and intrinsically worthy.

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