

Reconsidering Tolerance Education: Should We Recover Tolerance or Replace It with Hospitality?

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Bernard Williams wrote that the “difficulty with toleration is that it seems to be at once necessary and impossible.”¹ Though Elisabeth Langmann breaks with the familiar and well-rehearsed paradoxes of toleration,² I find her “Welcoming Difference at the Limit of Tolerance Education” to be engaged with the tensions of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of tolerance. Langmann’s analysis welcomes further discussion of this tension by drawing upon the concept of hospitality to buttress aspects of tolerance, while attempting to make tolerance education more nimble and lithe as a tool for personal transformations and social justice. As I share many of the concerns undergirding Langmann’s fine essay, I should like to use the space of this response to further question the impossible necessity of tolerance by pushing (in perhaps, contrasting ways) the observations that Langmann raises, in my attempt to extend the meaningful discussion that she presents.

Langmann identifies the difficulties of exclusion and domination, as exemplified in recognition of the limits of tolerance, as of particular concern to the educator who endeavors to clearly and nonoppressively teach the virtue. Langmann invokes Jacques Derrida’s work on hospitality in an effort to transform the discussion of the problematic boundaries of tolerance into a discussion of the necessary limits of hospitality. Langmann outlines a conceptualization of tolerance that is invigorated with the structure of hospitality, such that tolerance education no longer fears the previously troublesome limits and boundaries but, rather, finds them essential.

I take Langmann’s essay to offer an account of tolerance that is rescued and reinforced by an appeal to hospitality, but the essay leaves an important question open: “why should tolerance be so rescued?” That is to say, what assurance do we have that tolerance cannot ameliorate those problems itself, without enlisting another concept (that is, hospitality)? Perhaps we need only reinvest in our conceptualization of tolerance, strengthening its use in tolerance education in order to escape what turns out to have been merely a superficial worry. Turning this observation about, perhaps tolerance is instead too weak to be salvaged. If this is the case, we may wonder why we should preserve tolerance at all when it seems that an appeal to hospitality might better serve our ethical, political, and pedagogical needs. Considering each line of inquiry may further Langmann’s initial questions of tolerance education.

The problems and contradictions of tolerance are well known and discussed.³ An engagement with tolerance education, however, raises the possibility for new formulations of these problems as well as their solutions. Recognizing the malleability of the individuals in the educational space (the students), I put forth a conceptualization of tolerance education that seeks to understand tolerance in its own terms, and in so doing, strengthens its educational appeal. To this end, tolerance

can be understood as an interaction that is neither aversion nor acceptance, neither hospitality nor hostility. Tolerance-as-tolerance (as opposed to tolerance-as-hospitality) can be seen as a necessary element of student identity.

Students are beings in formation. Putting aside the issue of whether all persons, student and non-student alike, share that status, the point is generally accepted. Students must possess an openness, without interference or premature judgment, to the new and foreign (whether it be subject matter, classmates, teacher, and so on) and a willingness to possibly being shaped by the same. Indeed, a conceptualization of what it means to be a student may be found in the practice of openness. This is not to imply an embracing or adoptive attitude towards all novel experience, but rather, a hesitancy to dogmatically deny the legitimacy of difference when encountering the other. This positions the student in a pose of questioning that does not simply provide the student with prescriptive answers, but allows the student a space to respond to the new. Under this definition of studenthood, the student enacts tolerance in response to all of her educational experiences, tolerating their novelty as she encounters them. That said, tolerance education no longer burdens an educator with the odious task of including and excluding the “right” and “wrong” forms of difference. Allowing difference to exist in one’s presence, or tolerating difference, before engaging with the unexpected and unknown is understood as a necessary component of study, of consideration, of contemplation. Tolerance education is then not a special topic, but rather one that permeates what it means to be a student on even the most basic level.

Recognizing the primary role of tolerance in studenthood, tolerance education need not rely upon external concepts in order to avoid the pitfalls of hegemonic oppression that Langmann suggests; tolerance might then be reclaimed for educative purposes, even in light of its shortcomings in other realms of application. But, how should we respond to those who would claim this conclusion to be insufficient? Perhaps tolerance, even when so reconsidered, remains unattractive to those educators committed to social justice education for many of the very same reasons Langmann presents. Perhaps tolerance-as-tolerance is unable to avoid the deep-rooted tensions inherent in conceptualizations of tolerance. If this is the case, then we may be better served by completely abandoning the language of tolerance in service of intended educational ends.

Robert Paul Wolff observes that each form of political society possesses a characteristic Platonic virtue, that is, a “state or condition which enables it to perform its proper function well.”⁴ The virtue of a monarchy would be loyalty; the virtue of a military dictatorship, honor. A traditional liberal democracy and a socialist democracy possess the virtues of equality and fraternity, respectively. Wolff finds tolerance as the virtue of the modern pluralist democracy, as it is the trait that allows multiple perspectives to exist in the ideal form of its political social order.

Langmann does not explicitly engage in the larger political context of tolerance, but her attempt to remedy its shortcomings necessarily refers to and reflects that larger scene. Tolerance’s present deficiencies, its inability to meet the demands of an evolving world, may point to an outdated and inaccurate model of the social

political order. Just as monarchy's reliance upon loyalty to the monarch gave way to liberal democracy's insistence upon equality of the people, perhaps yesterday's tolerance should be replaced by tomorrow's hospitality. A failure to recognize political society's changing structure may result in confusions about its virtue and frustration in attempts to make sense of an obsolete ideal condition.

Rather than reinforcing tolerance with the logic of hospitality, Langmann's proposed synthesis may be weakening hospitality by placing it within the outdated framework of tolerance in education. As my colleague Stephanie Burdick-Shepard illustrates, hospitality, taken seriously as its own concept, offers a promising and fertile ground for considerations of educational identity and space (to say nothing of hospitality as educational content).⁵ Hospitality might be taken to be the virtue of some new, emergent social-political order; its usefulness as a virtue in the educational environment might be indicative of some wider application.

I have attempted to point to two diverging positions of response to Langmann thought-provoking work. On the one hand, we might delve deeper into the unblended concept of tolerance to liberate it from the impurities or imperfections that seem to plague its application. This invites further questions of the nature of tolerance in education and its relationship to tolerance more generally. We may also attempt to respond in the other direction, finding tolerance too far gone, past a point of salvage; we might then consider its replacement. This invites questions of the replacement (hospitality), and its position in education and beyond as a central or peripheral social-political virtue.

Either response seems to present some problems along with their products, but continued thinking about these answers seems to return to and further address Langmann's initial worries. Langmann's strategy, of hybridizing tolerance and hospitality, perhaps stands to offer strengths that an isolated consideration of either concept lacks. However, without a direct address of the rationale behind this combination, it is difficult to shake the worry that the unification of tolerance and hospitality might do a disservice to both. Langmann offers us a fine entrance point to asking these and many more tough questions as she hospitably invites us continue to think about the future (if any) of tolerance education.

1. Bernard Williams, "Toleration: An Impossible Virtue," in *Toleration an Elusive Virtue*, ed. David Heyd (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

2. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), Section 35.

3. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. See also Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, eds. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

4. Robert Paul Wolff, "Beyond Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, eds. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

5. Stephanie Burdick-Shepard, "Reading Feminist Hospitality in Plato's *Timaeus*: Possibilities for Education," in *Feminism and Hospitality: Gender in the Host Guest Relationship*, ed. Maurice Hamington (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, forthcoming).