Tolerance and the social system

Matthew J. Durey

Talk given as a contribution to *A Symposium on Tolerance*, Uncomfortable Ideas Group, University of Sunderland, 11th June 2026

The liberal virtue of tolerance

Tolerance is one of the great virtues of classical liberalism. Although there are many versions of the liberal project, it is built, fundamentally, on the principle of the liberty – or the freedom – of the individual to act in accordance with their own will. A liberal society is one that values and seeks to protect the liberty of those who live within it. For a liberal society to exist, it is a necessary corollary to the claim that individuals' have, or ought to have, some inviolable liberty, that it is also understood that there must be limits to how far we can exercise our own liberty insofar as it affects others. We cannot act in such a way that our actions would deny to others the liberties we hold sacred to ourselves. The first obligation placed on individuals living in a liberal society, therefore, is that they must tolerate the equal liberty of everyone else. And, of course, because people are different – with different interests, values, and objectives, and different abilities and opportunities with which to enact their will – tolerance of the liberty of others is necessarily also the tolerance of difference.

Liberal society, according to this obviously very brief sketch, rests on a simple, but very powerful, moral injunction: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*; or, in Kant's famous formulation, act only in accordance with what you would wish to be a universal law.[1]

I have great sympathy with this image of social life and its necessary morality, but it is an incomplete image. It is an image of society composed only of liberal individuals with moral obligations, but it implies so much more – and the actual social arrangements that it describes include so much more – than just individuals. Society is a complex network of associations, exchanges, obligations, and all manner of other interactions that take place between individuals and connect them to one another. And more than just interactions, it is a system supported by and enshrined in institutions and practices that go beyond the motivations and actions of individuals, but which at the same time give meaning, life, and limit to them. If we are to understand tolerance, and the challenges facing it today, we must look at it in a way that does not reduce society to individuals.

[1] Kant, I. (2004) *Critique of Practical Reason* (trans. T.K. Abbot), Mineola, NY: Dover Publishing Inc.

Two meanings of tolerance

If you cast about for definitions of tolerance you will find several. My version of the OED[2] gives three, along with neighbouring entries for 'tolerable', 'tolerant', 'tolerate', toleration'; nearly all of which also have multiple entries. Each of these related terms introduces a new dimension, any of which would probably be a profitable avenue of enquiry into our topic today; but I want to focus on a distinction in the first two entries for tolerance itself.

These are as follows:

1. The ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees with;
2. The capacity to endure continued subjection to something such as a drug or environmental conditions without adverse reaction.

When we talk about tolerance, we typically take it to mean the first definition. When I say 'we' I mean both people in general and specifically academics, intellectuals, commentators, and practitioners who travel in politics, philosophy, or social science and humanities. This is the understanding that accords with the liberal image of society, and it anchors the idea of tolerance to human agency. That is, the human capacity for independent reason and action. The first understanding of tolerance places a burden on us as individual moral agents: it demands an act of will. Tolerance, in this sense, is a meaningful action: some people (choose to) act with tolerance; others, perhaps, do not. From this perspective, if there is an insufficiency of tolerance, then it is the result of our moral action (or inaction); to remedy it, we must choose to be more tolerant; or persuade those who aren't pulling their weight to be more tolerant.

The second understanding of tolerance is more recognizable to engineers, chemists, biologists, and other physical scientists. This understanding takes tolerance to be a matter not of will, but of capability or capacity, and while the first understanding, because it depends on agency and will, can only apply to moral agents and therefore to individuals, the second understanding can also apply to other entities: to bodies, buildings, rivers, organizations, communities, or other kinds of things that comprise many separate elements existing and functioning together. What we might call systems.

[2] Soanes, C. and Stevenson, A. (eds.) (2005) *The Oxford Dictionary of English (Second Edition, Revised)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

We are accustomed to talking about individual tolerance: the idea that we, as individuals, have a moral obligation to be tolerant, but we do not typically talk about the idea of systemic tolerance, and the question of what society, as a system, is capable of tolerating. If we want to understand the contemporary challenges facing liberal societies, however, I think there is good reason to consider this systemic understanding of tolerance, and to take the conception of a social system seriously.

Social systems

The idea that societies can, and should, be understood as systems is well established. Aristotle gave us a good shove along the path when he described political societies as analogous to natural systems in which the part must be understood in connection with the whole.[3] The 'organic analogy', which views societies as made up of interacting processes and functions, much like natural systems such as a body or an ecosystem, was used with great effect by early-modern social scientists like Spencer, who argued that societies evolved through competing tendencies to differentiate and integrate,[4] and Durkheim,[5] who saw individualization and lack of moral unity as existential threats to modern societies. In the 20th century, of course, Parsons elaborated the idea of the social system extensively, emphasizing the importance of institutions and the integration of individuals into the social structure for social stability.[6] More recently, complexity theory[7] has shown how a systems-based approach reveals how social systems operate in relation to processes like feedback and are, like complex systems in the natural world, dynamic, open, and susceptible to significant and often rapid evolution, and collapse, in response to internal and external changes.

If we think of tolerance only in the first sense, as a characteristic of individuals and dependent on will, we reduce our understanding of society to individual motivation and action alone, and we must conclude that as long as people think, and act, in a tolerant way, then society as a whole will be tolerant. But society is not just individuals, it is groups, institutions, practices, structures, roles, rituals, expectations, obligations, and all the other things that shape and govern our associations. It is a system. A complex, dynamic, open system, sensitive to changes in time, composition, and

[3] Aristotle (1992) *The Politics* (trans. T.A. Sinclair, revised T.J. Saunders), London: Penguin Classics; 1235a18-28.
[4] Spencer, H. (1867) *First Principles* (2nd Edition), London: Williams and Norgate; Spencer, H. (1898) *The Principles of Sociology* (vol.1), New York: D. Appleton & Co. See also Turner, J.H. (1981) 'The Forgotten Theoretical Giant: Herbert Spencer's Models and Principles', *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, T.19, No.59; pp.79-98.
[5] Durkheim, É. (2013) *The Division of Labour in Society* (trans. G. Simpson), Digireads.
[6] Parsons, T. (1970) *The Social System*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
[7] Byrne, D.S. (1998) *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: An Introduction*, London: Routledge. Byrne, D.S. and Callaghan, G. (2014) *Complexity Theory and the Social Sciences: The State of the Art*, London: Routledge.

environment. From this perspective, tolerance, in the sense of the second OED definition, takes on a new significance. It is no longer agency, will, reason, or intent that determines the tolerance of a social system; it becomes, at least in part, a question of mechanics. This does not mean that human will, judgement, and agency are irrelevant – far from it – only that what can be tolerated is not *merely a matter of willingness*. We must accept the reality that a liberal, tolerant society may reach a point at which it becomes *unable to tolerate* – that is, does not have the capacity to endure – the consequences of changes in its composition or environment (whether internal or external) without adverse reaction.

There is, perhaps, only so much that a social system can tolerate before its functions are impaired. Before it can no longer remain healthy, protect itself, secure the resources it needs, withstand the impacts of otherwise minor perturbations that would undermine it.

The questions we then need to ask are things like, 'What can the social system tolerate?' and 'What are the signs of fault lines developing?' or 'What kinds of changes in the composition of the institutions and practices of social life, or in the external, environmental pressures, risk disrupting the processes that enable social institutions to function?'.

Economically, these kinds of effects are quite evident. A spike in inflation caused by the economic consequences of overseas conflicts can mean a rise in unemployment, or a rapid decline in living standards. If there is no approximation between the number of jobs and the number of people to carry them out, or if the rising costs of social welfare can only be met by taxation that impoverishes those in work, the economy would collapse.

The same logic, however, applies to other institutions and practices. If the criminal justice system cannot effectively administer justice in a way that people recognize as fair, how long will people respect the law? If education is not seen to prepare children for adulthood, to impart necessary skills and aptitudes, or cultivate more able and moral citizens, what would happen to attitudes to schools and universities? If governments fail to govern in a way that the citizens see as being just, or in the interests of the polity, how long before institutions and offices of government cease to have meaning and be respected? These are all issues in which we can see the social system's capacity to endure – to tolerate – change being stretched and perhaps exhausted.

A social system, like any other kind of system, responds in complex ways to internal and external stimuli, to feedback, and change. Robust systems – and, depending on how your measure it, social systems can be extraordinarily robust – can tolerate, or endure, significant changes without systemic collapse: China survived the Mongol invasion in the 13th century; Rome endured the collapse of the

Republic; Western civilization survived the Wars of Religion, the collapse of empire and two World Wars; and Germany survived the post-war occupation, 40 years of the DDR, and the Berlin Wall. But Sparta, the superpower of ancient Greece, was destroyed by the economic consequences of the liberation of Thebes; in the 18th century, a fiscal crisis brought the Kingdom of France, Europe's then most powerful monarchy, to an end in under three years; the South American empires of the Incas and Aztecs collapsed in under two years after conquest by the Spanish; the Soviet Union, a global superpower whose reach shaped the geopolitics of the 20th century, unravelled rapidly after opening the operations of government to scrutiny and criticism. No social system is invulnerable.

The paradox of tolerance

This has a bearing on a final point worth considering: the paradox of tolerance. According to this paradox, typically attributed to the formulation by Karl Popper, 'unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance.'[8] As Popper, put it, the thing that a tolerant society cannot tolerate is intolerance itself. Not simply ideas, people, or behaviours that tolerant, liberal people consider to be bigoted, but ideas, people, or behaviours that would seek to destroy tolerance itself.[9]

Liberal society requires tolerance; and the first understanding of tolerance, anchored as it is to agency, places an obligation on us as moral agents to treat others with toleration. But the second, systemic understanding of tolerance places an equal moral obligation on us to protect tolerance itself; to protect the social system from that which it cannot endure. Liberal societies cannot endure attitudes, actions, people, or pressures that would destroy the foundations of the social system on which liberal values – tolerance included – depends. Therefore, those of us who value tolerance and the liberal social system from which the virtue of tolerance emerges and upon which it is based, must recognize a moral obligation that goes beyond acting in a tolerant way, and being tolerant of difference, and which obliges us to defend the social system and the institutions that make up its foundation and give it stability. That means acknowledging that there are some things which the social system cannot endure – whether we would will it or not – and which we, therefore, cannot tolerate.

[8] Popper, K.R. (2003) *The Open Society and its Enemies: Vol 1: The Spell of Plato*, London: Routledge Classics; p.293.
[9] Ibid.