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Response to A New Definition of Tolerance: On Philosophical and Practical Challenges

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In a political (and academic) climate which seems to equate tolerance with radical acceptance, I commend Williams & Jackson (this issue) for their well-reasoned presentation of an alternative definition which, in my view, preserves its function in our language and society. The author’s new definition of tolerance balances both the complexities and beauties of human diversity without sacrificing substance or philosophical rigor. The authors aptly and succinctly introduce readers to an interpretation of Levinas’ philosophy that is rich with implications for the field of psychology generally and the practice of psychotherapy in particular grounded on the notion of “respecting and considering the humanity of a person as more important than any idea or ideal we or they may hold.” While I found myself largely in agreement with many of the ideas and implications of their main argument, I was also left with questions and concerns regarding implementation. I outline a number of these questions in response to the authors’ own invitation for feedback and dialogue “about the philosophical and practical challenges” their new definition of tolerance poses.

The main thrust of my reaction and resulting commentary is that a new definition of tolerance based on valuing the humanity of others more than ideas is itself an idea. It may be a good idea, it may even be a true idea, but an idea it remains and so is subject to some of the same challenges and “underlying problems” of the original definitions of tolerance Williams & Jackson seek to replace. Although not insurmountable, these problems are worth identifying and considering in the hopes of turning a good idea into sustainable and meaningful action. Using the framework of “philosophical and practical challenges” the authors invited comment on, I will identify and expound upon mostly practical challenges, but first a mention of one philosophical question that I suspect has an answer somewhere else in the writings of Levinas but about which I am unaware.

A Philosophical Question

“Tolerance, in Levinasian terms, would focus on accepting and respecting the person, and being responsible to them without being concerned about the beliefs they hold or the activities in which they are engaged.”

The idea of engaging tolerance at the interpersonal level in the way the authors propose is an intriguing and compelling prospect. On the surface however, the above statement could be taken to mean that a person’s beliefs and behaviors are irrelevant and without moral consequence. And perhaps in some sense they are irrelevant. They may be irrelevant in discussions of tolerance and engagement with diverse others. In
fact, given the new definition, beliefs and behaviors are likely to fall under the category of that which commits “totalizing violence” by reducing the infinite nature of the other to a mere object. However, beliefs, behaviors and the ways in which we engage them are central to matters of meaning and morality in life. The philosophical question then is what are the moral implications of this new definition of tolerance? I think it would be premature and short-sighted to say that it leads inevitably to moral relativism. I also think that on the face of it, not being concerned about the beliefs and activities of the others in our lives is a slippery slope headed in that general direction. Again I qualify this 'philosophical question' as I have called it with my sense that the philosophy of Levinas—which as the authors point out communicates an understanding of existence as "primarily ethical"—will also provide a context and grounding sufficient for this question of moral implications.

Practical Challenges

"... Levinas’ view of the world seems to be in stark contrast with most of western civilization ... Trying to reverse course on such a firmly planted individualistic ideal may prove to be an unrealistic goal."

In their concluding remarks, the authors alluded to the practical challenges involved in implementing a definition of tolerance which in many ways is counter-cultural both in terms of the individualism of western civilization as they framed it and I would add the individualism inherent in many mainstream conceptions of psychotherapy. As I read the new definition of tolerance, my thoughts quickly turned to the context of therapy and the challenges of implementing a perspective which elevates the importance of responsibility to the other in a medium which at the outset is by definition focused on the individual. These challenges, in my mind, fall under two main umbrellas, one having to do with the culture in which we live and the other having to do with the professional nature and ethics of psychotherapy.

A culture of individualism and indulgence.

It seems to go without saying that modern life, at least in the western world, is steeped in individualism. In an overly simplified sense, what this means is that when our clients walk into our offices and engage in therapy, they do so within this cultural context (Gantt & Burton, 2013). In that way, a focus on self and responsibility to the self are not only valued and emphasized but far too commonly are their default mode of being in the world—an implicit undercurrent. Not only are many of our clients coming from cultures of individualism, they are also often conceptualized in our discipline as being motivated primarily by self-interest and hedonistic desires—a context which poses certain challenges for a Christian (or in this case, “other-based”) therapy (Gantt, 2003). I fear that often therapy is more about encouraging self-indulgence (using other words and techniques that preach acceptance and self-compassion) than cultivating responsibility to the other. In much the same way that values have been found to be inescapable in psychotherapy (Strupp, 1980; Slife, Smith, & Burchfield, 2003), and clients tend to adopt the values of their therapists over time (Tjeltvet, 1986 and Beutler, 1979), both therapists and clients are susceptible to the influence of society and the cultural values it imparts. But not only are we and our clients influenced by the individualism of our culture in some meaningful ways, so also are the aims of the psychotherapeutic endeavor itself.

While the approaches and aims of therapy are many and varied, almost universally the self is a defining feature or focus. Whether the goal is that of self-actualization, self-fulfillment, or self-awareness, all psychotherapies of which I am aware are directed toward self-improvement of one kind or another. Many therapeutic approaches draw on strategies of self-soothing, emphasize self-care, and at every turn ask clients to consider what would be in their best self-interest. All of this “self-ness” of therapy may not inherently be antithetical to the new definition of tolerance proposed by Williams & Jackson, but it appears to be in the least inimical to it. That is, it poses a practical challenge in terms of implementation. There may indeed be “no escape” from the choice “to either ignore or accept the call to be responsible for the other,” as the authors claim, but there certainly is distraction from this fundamental call to the other. And, as the authors also allude to, the modern western world has become quite skilled at providing incentives and ample opportunity for self-indulgence.

I want to be clear that I am not saying self-care and
self-awareness are bad strategies for therapy. I am saying, however, that they create a context which may prove difficult to enact a definition of tolerance which depends upon ‘other-care’ and ‘other-awareness.’ It seems that in both theorizing and psychological research, a Levinasian-based understanding of tolerance is much smoother to implement and endorse, but in the practice of psychotherapy, one must be prepared to go against the grain, so to speak, which will require overcoming certain obstacles—mainly of a sociocultural making.

A professional ethic.

The authors spoke at length about responsibility to the other and its implications for their definition of tolerance. “Even though we can never see the complete picture of a person, we still can answer that call to be responsible for them” (emphasis added). This foundational idea of responsibility to the other seems particularly applicable and significant in the context of the therapist-to-client relationship in psychotherapy. However, does and should this same responsibility to the other exist in the reverse direction, client-to-therapist? Given my suspicion that this responsibility to other in the philosophy of Levinas is likely ontological in human nature, my question is: how should it be addressed and managed in the psychotherapeutic context?

As a profession, therapists need to be set apart from clients in some important ways. Even the most collaborative approaches to therapy in which the therapist is seen more as a fellow-traveler than an expert, the therapist is still different from the client, and needs to remain so for the practice of psychotherapy to exist as a discipline with a set of professional ethics. A bi-directional relationship in which the client is “responsible for” the therapist in the same ways that the therapist is “responsible for” the client appears to be ethically problematic. Would not such an arrangement be more akin to a new and reciprocal therapy with the client occasionally assuming the role of the therapist’s therapist? Perhaps if the responsibility to other the client feels and enacts toward the therapist is a felt moral obligation that inspires them to take seriously the aims and messages of his/her therapist, such would not be inescapably problematic. However, if the client’s responsibility to other inclines him/her to take care of the therapist in ways that cross the boundaries of ethical therapist-client relationships, such would prove difficult given the professional nature of the discipline. Much like the challenge of individualism, I do not see this as an impenetrable barrier. I do see it as an area around which we need to be careful and intentional about how the new definition plays out.

I conclude by again commending Williams & Jackson for introducing a new definition of tolerance which truly does make progressive strides in resolving problematic issues inherent in prior definitions (such as the four they identified from Robinson, Witenberg, & Samson, 2001). I also thank them personally for providing a philosophically sophisticated grounding and context that I feel makes genuinely possible a popular Christian imperative to ‘love the sinner, hate the sin’ that seems to have all but lost its meaning due perhaps to overuse and misinterpretation. The distinction Levinas (and the authors) make “between the humanity of a person—their most basic alterity—and the abstract ideas and concepts that we hold about them” appears to provide the philosophical (and phenomenological) space for such a possibility. And while I may still take issue with some aspects of this popularized idiom and question its ability to fully answer the complexities, clashes, and contexts of human diversity, the new definition with its “valuing a person as more important than any idea” appears to bridge my own dissatisfaction and move the conversation from one of deficit and abstraction to a much more fruitful one concerning truth and tolerance (Oaks, 2011). It is my hope that the questions and concerns I introduce here serve only to stimulate further thought and dialogue aimed at the implementation of the new definition of tolerance within the applied context of psychotherapy.

References


