Response to Commentaries on A New Definition of Tolerance

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We very much appreciate the time, effort, and goodwill of all those responding to our article. Each was generous with their feedback and insights, and contributed to a meaningful dialogue centered on tolerance. While we cannot respond to each commentator in depth, we will highlight and discuss a few of the thought-provoking insights they raised.

Thank you to Hansen for bringing to our attention that our phrasing and use of words can have philosophical ramifications. As Hansen points out, our use of the term without when we say “accepting and respecting the person, and being responsible to them without being concerned about the beliefs they hold,” could signal a certain laissez-faire attitude towards moral questions. To clarify what we meant, we suggest that our responsibility is to lovingly engage a person’s divine nature, without stipulations requiring certain moral stances to be eligible for our love.

In response to Hansen’s concern about the client potentially being responsible for the therapist, we suggest a more finely nuanced look at our ethical relationship to others. Responsibility to the other (Other) can be visualized as being asymmetrical—extending outward from the self towards another. This asymmetry does not necessarily require that it be omni-directional at all moments. Ideally, the therapist would live that responsibility for the client as the client lives it for others in their life. At times it may turn towards the therapist, but that is neither necessary nor constant. Nor is it necessarily in the same form and intensity as the therapist is showing the client. At some level, the client does bear a responsibility for the therapist, just as they do for any other being. Recognizing that and processing that experience might be therapeutic in its own right. A relational approach to psychotherapy does not diminish the reality of the power differential in psychotherapy or the vulnerability of clients. In some ways it enhances one’s sensitivity to those realities.

Young brought up the important issue of healthy boundaries. What happens when one person in a relationship is trying to live the ethical call, and the other has no intention to heed the call. How do we avoid raising martyrs to the other? This is once again a place where a close look at the nature of this responsibility can help. The responsibility towards another is an ethical relationship calling us to act ethically towards others. We can, therefore, ask whether allowing another to act selfishly or manipulatively is the most ethical course of action and response. A simplified example of this comes in the form of parent child interactions. While we are not implying that children are inherently selfish or manipulative, children are apt to express needs and demands to parents that are not in their best interest. Would we consider a parent to be acting ethically if they honor their child’s request to never go to sleep, or play with a matchbox, or forcefully take toys away from other children? Ethical responsibility to others require vision of what a person truly needs.
Our responsibility is to consider how to best love the other, which often requires us to establish limits, contradict, or even distance ourselves from the other.

Fischer set out to apply the new definition of tolerance to human/moral development. In applying developmental notions to our ideas, Fischer suggests that we “become new creatures” in the process. While we agree with this notion in some ways, this becoming is not something sought or developed. Rather it is a resignation to a reality—a reality that is prior even to ourselves as selves. Fischer raises another issue which we don’t really address in the paper. The question of whether we can really know, really understand one another’s pain. Individualism seems not to allow for this. A radical relationism seems to allow for it, and maybe even require it. This is a critical question for those in the helping professions. Some would argue we can only know another’s pain if we have experienced similar pain. We suggest that because we are not really separate from one another in the first place, we can, in fact know another’s experience—even if we haven’t had such an experience ourselves.

We appreciate Gee’s wonderful exposition on the changes in the meaning of tolerance over the ages. We agree with Gee’s citations showing that grounding tolerance in a relativistic view of truth has counter-productive consequences. While we did not explore the full etymology of the word tolerance, that was not our overall purpose. Technically correct or not, we used a definition that matches the meaning of the word in the common vernacular. The comparison between tolerance and charity (as informed by LDS scripture) adds an important piece to the dialogue on tolerance. We would add that the definition of tolerance that we put forth is inherently tied to a very important judgement: the judgment that I deem this person I am engaged with as worthy, to respond to their divine nature before all else.

Gee illustrates the difficulty of overcoming the individualism inherent in so much of our language and culture. For example, his proposal that charity and tolerance are mutually exclusive depends on individualistic definitions of both. In saying, “Charity begins with judging and being able to discern good from evil,” he presumes that individuals are the fundamental reality and that these individuals make independent judgments and that these judgments can be tempered by an individualistic sort of charity. For us, if you start with the assumptions of individualism, it is difficult to come to any sort of charity (or tolerance or judgment for that matter) that is either Christian or meaningful.

Consider three statements by Oliver (2001) and how they might inform this discussion:

To see oneself as a subject and to see other people as the other or the objects not only alienates one from those around him or her but also enables the dehumanization inherent in oppression and domination. (p. 3)

What we are suggesting is that tolerance, as typically understood among therapist-types, is too often used to mean the endurance of those alien to oneself. Accordingly one could be objectifying, dehumanizing, judging and still be tolerant.

Only if we imagine ourselves cut off from others and the world around us do we need to create elaborate schemes for bridging the gap. We create an impossible problem for ourselves by presuming to be separate in the first place. (p. 12)

By using judgment as the starting point for our engagement with others we create an impossible (albeit imaginary) gap between ourselves and others. This gap precludes the kind of charity, or tolerance, that we suggest should precede any sort of judgment.

How can a unified, self-contained being ever come in contact with something or someone wholly other to itself? If the self is bounded and experiences only that which is within its boundaries, then how can it encounter anything outside of its own boundaries? (p. 2)

The ultimate danger in individualism is that it precludes any real knowledge of the other. Because the other is separate and foreign, I cannot know them. And we would argue, because we cannot really know them, we can neither love them nor righteously judge them.

References