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Musings on Williams and Jackson’s New Definition of Tolerance

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I am grateful to Williams and Jackson for a solid application of Levinas to the question of tolerance. I had a reaction across several domains: tolerance, empathy, individualism, and human development. I will deal with each in turn with most emphasis on human development.

Tolerance

The authors’ definition of tolerance surpasses the four extant definitions identified by Robinson, Witenberg and Sanson (2001). It has a philosophical heft that the others lack and is grounded in a very attractive, if not difficult to understand or attain, construct of the nature of being. Tolerance seems to be the only transcendent term allowed in an otherwise horizontal relativism. A colleague once sincerely stated that she was “tolerant of everything except intolerance”. I couldn’t tell whether she was reflecting on the solipsism of her own position, reveling in her ability to hold the seeming paradox as an indication of her brilliance, or subtly expressing her belief that I was intolerant because I was a Mormon (which is how I took it and what the context of our encounter supported). Whatever her construal of my Mormonism was, her comment perfectly illustrates Williams and Jackson’s idea. She was openly intolerant of me because of her idea of me. It felt like being totalized and was subtly violent. That encounter happened almost twenty years ago and it still hurts. I have had that experience many times in this profession. Mormon is a label that is easily adapted to totalizing by Mormons and non-Mormons alike.

It was refreshing to consider Williams and Jackson’s definition of tolerance as it might apply to multicultural psychology. The labels that we apply to human identities as a code for sensitivity to diversity have always seemed to inadvertently reinforce stereotyping. I have been intrigued by the work of Sycamore (2006). Her book, Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity, is quite disturbing on one hand, but refreshing on another when one considers that at some level, assigned labels do a kind of violence to the person receiving the label. Again, it is an expression of totalizing. Williams and Jackson’s definition averts the damage done by totalizing. Isn’t it better to simply engage each other without imposing the idea of the other? We each carry a unique multi-cultural mosaic in our biographies. The fresh, open encounter with the other without imposing identities is both exhausting and invigorating.

Empathy

Williams and Jackson’s definition and philosophical reasoning behind tolerance also give greater power and qualitative meaning to the concept of empathy. Under their definition, empathy becomes a much more dynamic deeply-woven process. Rather than being a therapeutic technique, it strikes to the very core of our being. Empathy may be the treasured, central aspect of all encounters between us. Empathy goes far beyond the totalizing experience and exists with and without words.
Individualism and Human Development

Clearly most of our models of human development emphasize individuation and individual identity development. They privilege Western ideals and traditional male conceptions of competence. As an alternative, the model of development that has most captured my imagination over the years is Kegan’s (sometimes opaque) constructive-developmental, subject-object relations, meta-psychology (1982, 1994, 2006, 2009). I want to use Williams and Jackson’s Levinasian model to better understand one of Kegan’s more difficult balances and then to use Kegan to illustrate one of Williams and Jackson’s more beautiful passages.

Probably in response to Gilligan’s (1978) critique of Western male models, Kegan struggles with the problem of individuation and relationalism but resolves it in a clever way. Kegan’s subject-object balances (stages) alternate like a pendulum between different poles of individuation and inclusion. The imperialism of middle childhood emphasizes self as competent-self-in-the-world, while the inter-personalism of adolescence and young adulthood transcends individuated self and emphasizes absorption into the peer group. As the pendulum swings, the inclusion that is the hallmark of interpersonal adolescence is developmentally transcended by an institutional identity in adulthood which clearly emphasizes individuation and independently-held ideology.

Not all people develop an institutional balance of subject and object. It is even more unclear how many of us transcend individuated institutional identities into Kegan’s highest balance—inter-individualism. The nebulousness of the inter-individual balance is partly due to the fact that it is very difficult, in a subject-object relations model, to self-assess where we are in our development. We can better see where we have been, but by definition, where we are is subject, not object, and thus not quite objected to be observed and operated on. As difficult as it is to see where we are, it is almost impossible to understand subject-object balances beyond our own current level of development. So it is with Kegan’s highest inter-individual balance. If I am there, I can’t see it very well. If it is beyond me, then, well, it is beyond me.

The inter-individual balance is characterized by “interpenetration of systems in a culture of intimacy. It acknowledges and cultures the capacity for interdependency, for self-surrender and intimacy and for interdependent self-definition” (Kegan, 1982, p. 120). It seems that the hallmark of Kegan’s highest developmental subject-object balance is somehow allowing one’s hard-won precious ideology to be subjugated in service of deep intimacy. I think that one of the reasons that God ordained marriage between a man and a woman is because it is the process by which we are most likely to obtain our greatest development. Even in Kegan’s limited time frame, marriage would require two very different types of ideologues to subjugate individuated self in service of a deep interdependence and true intimacy. The self becomes inextricable from the other, not because of immature co-dependency, but by transformative interdependency. They become a new creature which is more than the sum of their two world views. Something transcendent is born of celestial marriage. In celestial marriage, each makes their covenant with the Other, who is then an active force as husband and wife encounter each other.

As difficult as it is to capture Kegan’s inter-individual balance, Williams and Jackson’s Levinasian explanation of totalizing helps me to understand. As they say, “In short, the philosophy of Levinas helps us to separate the humanity of a person from the abstract ideas that we hold about them. In Keganesque terms, true intimacy of the inter-individual balance is achieved by surrendering ideology in favor of encountering the other. All of which makes me wonder whether capturing and living by Williams and Jackson’s Levinasian definition of tolerance isn’t a developmental process. Or perhaps, some folks are just loving enough to never fall prey and they simply see the Other in the other.

The preface of The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development (Kegan, 1982) contains a moving anecdote that is subtly the core of the entire book. It aptly illustrates what Williams and Jackson meant when they stated,

In coming face-to-face with the other, we also come in contact with the Other—to be understood as God or the Divine. The Other leaves traces that we can see in the faces of the other. Coming in contact with the Other in the face of another begins a type of non-verbal dialogue. This exchange consists of the other’s humanity calling to us, appealing for us to do no harm,
but to serve them. In response, the self has a moral obligation to answer "here I am" (this issue).

From Kegan’s preface,
This story is about Rifka, who told me right away she was no Hasid. “This you could know from the Super Duper,” she said. We had been talking, as was usual with Rifka, about several things at once—Hasids, why she was so exhausted today, children. ‘There was a story coming. How could she be a Hasid if she would buy, in a pinch, from a store that was not kosher?

“I vhass at the Super Duper food store. ‘Les’ night came home the whole family, my boys vhat are away at collitch, and my daughter vit her husband that doesn’t verk God should bless him. So, I am making for my Harold like he likes it kreplach to eat. And vit it, for my Louis that came home for the veekend vit a girl, nuch, a matza ball soup vit schmaltz. And vhat should happen—I need the aggravation—there is no schmaltz. I got a housefulla guests, a fancy girl from Scarsdale vhat my Louis brings home, and—my maazel—no schmaltz.”

At this I smile and Rifka frowns at me.

“So. I go to the Super Duper. I’m hurrying to get back to my dinner I valk through the aisle I see her. I saw a voman vit her child vhat vhass an idiot. You could see he vhass an idiot. I saw this voman, I saw this mother, she vhass holding two different kinds of mustard. I vhass in a hurry. I had my schmaltz and I vent out of the store.

“That night vhen all my children and guests vere asleep I vhass not. I could not. I could not go asleep. ‘Vhy? I din’t know. I vhass thinking of all the excitement and it vhass hot but I could not go asleep.

“And then vitout—I mean I din’t do it myself, I started to cry. And I cried. I cried for that mother vit her idiot vhat kept on living. I cried for that mother vhat had an idiot and vhass pricing the mustard. And I cried for the idiot vhat vhass life. He vhass life.”

“It’s terrible,” I mumbled, not knowing what to say.

“Don’t say this. ‘Vhat is terrible?” she said. “I’m telling you. You should know. I’m talking to you.

“That voman, that mother, ve did not say a vord to each other, but ve talked. Not till I came home vhass many hours later did I know ve talked. But ve talked. I heard her and she gave me. ‘Vhat is terrible? You live, you talk. Ve talked. And you know what I thought when I vhass crying?

“I thought: ‘I cry tonight now this mother vit her idiot vhat is so beautiful vhat is life, tomorrow she vill cry less.” (pp. 20–12)

The trace of the Other in the other, seeing the divine, the non-verbal dialogue, the deep empathy and Rifka’s true encounter in the condiment aisle has always touched me. It makes Williams and Jackson’s definition of tolerance make sense.

References