

# TOLERANCE, CONSENT AND AUTHORITY

**Edward W. H. Vick**

Being compelled to live in a certain way – be it by the state or by custom's tyranny – is to be but an automaton . . . rebuts the common objection to the liberty principle (J.S. Mill), the objection being that people may be happier if told what to do.

Mill writes 'A state which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes—will find that with small men no great thing can be accomplished.'\*

Ignorance can be bliss. Many people prefer not to have their views challenged: 'in order to flourish, individuals should not be docile recipients of people telling what is best for them and doing what they are told.

Whether people consent to an authority depends on the alternatives available. But for many people with conviction there is no recognition that there are other alternatives

Consent-- to what extent? Dominated by father, family, schoolteacher, employer, party, church. When the employer is the party or church, wow! Your salary depends on your conformity.

Being aboard a vessel—can only leave by jumping into the ocean. So you stay!

What alternatives are available?

Does silence give consent?

Change and intolerance?

Two separate groups, two different attitudes

1. Will not (=cannot?) tolerate dissent Do not (=cannot) consult. That would be to compromise.

Can't (therefore = will not?) spare time with you! This is the line, the truth, this is the proper way to interpret. The proper way is the accepted way. If you do not agree you will find that there is no place within for disagreement. What we believe is what you must believe. So I must find out what we believe, what the accepted belief is so as to know what I believe. Must believe? What is the logic behind the following process?

This is what we believe

What we believe is what I must believe  
Therefore I shall believe what we believe.  
I believe what we believe. \*\*

2 I can eat with someone with whom I disagree, even if we disagree radically. I listen to you. I question. I provide an alternative, or I am willing to. If you are of the former persuasion, you will not be interested. So you will not converse.

To what extent toleration of disagreement?

1 Points of doctrine. Scale of importance: or the whole package derived from an accepted

2 System of interpretation.

Already assumes an accepted approach

The already assumed accepted approach guarantees that the desired points of doctrine will be guaranteed. It also assumes a rigid doctrine of authority, and a rigid way of defending that authority, that is not available for discussion. At its extreme it manifests a wilful and programmatic indifference to such discussion. Sometimes, more often than desirable even if tolerated, verging on naïveté. If it means changing, I would rather remain ignorant of the issues. So I do not discuss them. I shall therefore never know the joy of making progress. And that means I shall never know whether my views are rational or not. At least if I enter discussion rationally and return after real dialogue with a willingness to be sympathetic to alternatives I shall be rational, or hopefully more rational than previously.

Let's say I joined the party organisation when it was sympathetic to discussion and exchange of views or when I thought that it was. Changes have led me to see that the party has become more closed and as a consequence more intolerant. What are the alternatives for me? I might decide to leave, or challenge and hope to construct by criticism, if that is possible. My attitude and willingness to be constructive may well be dismissed as negative. My loyalty may well be called into question. One is bound to meet resistance when what is demanded is that loyalty to the party take precedence over loyalty to the truth, to my belief and conviction of what is truth. The more likely alternative is that I shall be ignored, not simply ignored but deliberately and programmatically ignored.

It is congenial to remember that a person, a committee, an organisation only has authority to the extent that those within the community accept that authority, or by means of force of some kind are threatened if they do not profess to accept the authority. Being so compelled leads to the subjects, the members becoming automata.

We end where we started. But we can add that within the general acceptance of the status quo, there will always be the honest and disappointed souls who, as long as they are not excommunicated raise their voices in protest to such unwarranted dominance of such suppression of genuine discussion, the violence against the personality of the proponents of alternatives, however rational and congenial and tolerant and longsuffering they may be.

Footnote

Cf. Peter Cave, *How to Outwit Aristotle*, London: Quercus, 2012. pp. 241-243.

\*\*This raises the crucial question as to whether there are improper motivations to believing, for example the desire for security, for acceptance, even for financial security. It raises a further question whether in engaging in this process one is not achieving a genuine belief but only professing it. So there is the real possibility of self-deception. One values acceptance, even authority that such profession provides.

The idea of 'profession of faith' thus has a dark side. When one does not understand because one has not considered alternatives how can one say one is justified in what it is one professes to believe? This is of course unfortunately true of those who as leaders insist on certain beliefs being held by those under their sphere of influence.

From time to time some people have asked me as a teacher within an organisation 'What do we believe about this? (Please tell me and then I shall know!)' My answer has been, 'I shall tell you what I believe. Then you go think about it and then make up your own mind!' That means: 'Don't let the we stifle the I'. An organisation is an establishment, and what has been established, often at great effort, is often considered the only basis for its continuance. But since 'time makes ancient good uncouth', change is often appropriate, indeed urgent. The diehard even while making a great profession to be capable of reading the signs of the times, is often blind to that fact. The irony is that his convictions have made clear sight impossible.

#### **A situation:**

A cannot give consent to what B proposes. There are various possible reasons for this, and they differ according to the situation..

In business you are asking too much or you are proposing too little,

To make a deal whether for purchase or for employment, a compromise has to be accepted by one or by each of the parties involved. Without such agreement no mutually acceptable relationship can be established.

One or both makes a allowance in order to preserve a relationship in which each stands to the other.

If neither side will adjust there will be no congenial arrangement, and the relation in which they stand to each other will come to an end. That happens when one cannot tolerate the idea of adjustment.

Beliefs and motivation are involved.: love one-upmanship, desire (for advantage, for revenge etc.) have to be reckoned with in analysing the particular situation.