

The Struggle to Live and Let Live: The Psychology, Ethics and Politics of Tolerance, or, Why Discrimination is Preferable to Tolerance

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Abstract

When faced with the intolerance of the imperialist who denigrates and annihilates other ways of life, one answer is the principle of tolerance as advocated by multiculturalism and biculturalism. This asserts that each way of life has its own legitimacy, to be valued on its own terms, and that its differences with other ways of life ought to be tolerated.

The concept of figure and ground is a helpful way of conceptualising the practice of tolerance, making room for inclusive, both/and forms of existence. It is an image for the attempt to live and let live, in which differences — mountain and sea — coexist in harmony with each other. Whilst broadly in favour of this world view, I will nevertheless inquire into some of its beliefs and assumptions.

Amongst other things, I argue that the “cultural group” is not the straightforward category it is often portrayed as, but always a conflictual, problematic and politicised entity. This in turn problematises the activity of tolerance: what is the psychology of tolerance and how is it informed by the political context? What is taking place within us when we are actively tolerating something? Is tolerance necessarily and always a good thing? Are there occasions when intolerance (and therefore, conflict) is the ethical requirement?

In this article I argue that the ideals of “respecting difference”, “inclusivity”, “tolerance” are not only ethical but also always political. In sum, I argue for the virtues of discrimination over those of tolerance.

Waitara

Ko tētahi whakautu, inā tūpono ki te pēhitanga a te whakahihi whakaiti, whakamate koiiora atu, ko te mātāpono manawa nui taunakitanga a te taurea maha me te taurea

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takirua. Ko tēnei, he whakatau i te tika o ia koiara, ko tōna uara māna anō e whakatau, ā, ko āna noho rerekē ki ēteahi atu koiara e tika ana kia awhitia.

He huarahi āwhina ariā whakawaia manawanuitanga te ariā āhua, ariā papa, kia whai ātea ai te tāua, tātou me ngā momo peka nōhanga. He whakapakoko mō te whakatau kia waiho noa iho te noho, te rerekētanga — maunga moana — e noho āiotanga tahi nei. Ahakoa e whakaae whānui ana ki tēnei tirohanga, ka huri tonu au ki te ui ki ētahi o ana whakapono me ana tohutohu.

I tua atu i enei, ka whakapae au kāore i te rite te taumata whakaahuahia o te “rōpū ahurea” engari ia ka noho hei rōpū taupatupatu, whakararuraru, tōrangapū hoki. Koia nei ki raruraru ngā whakahaere whakamanawa nui: he aha te manawa nui o te mātai hinengaro, ā, pēhea ai te whāngai kōrero atu a te hāpori tōrangapū? He aha kei te mau i a tātou inā āta whakamanawa nui ki tētahi mea? He pai anō nei i ngā wā katoa te whakamanawa nui? He wāhanga anō tō te pēhi whakamanawa nui (te mutunga ko te taupatupatu) te huarahi matatika?

I tēnei kōrero, e whakapae ana au ehara ana i te matatika anake o ngā mātāpono o te “maruwehinga rerekētanga”, “peke katoanga”, “whakamanawa nui” engari huri noa he tōrangapū anō hoki. Hai whakaoti ka tautohe ahau mō te painga ake o te aukati ki to te whakamanawa nui.

Keywords: discrimination; tolerance; diversity; multiculturalism; biculturalism

One of the great ethical principles of liberalism, “to live and let live” is in actual fact two principles: first is the requirement for you to live your life freely and fully, and second for you to allow others to do the same. In between the two principles sits the lubricant called tolerance, helping ease the frictions that can be generated as one tries to live in this way. The idea of tolerance is found in all ethical systems — secular and religious — all over the world. Tolerance is self evidently a virtue — and I say this with no ironic intent. On closer examination, however, the notion of tolerance is not as straightforward as it first seems — and because it is often taken up in a simplistic sense, it can be, and often is, perverted and turned into an instrument of fear and control.

The idea of tolerance has to do not only with ethics, but also politics. For example, is it tolerance or something else that is called for in Aotearoa New Zealand today when we think about the relationship between Pākehā and Māori, or the struggles that are taking place with regard to the regulation of the psychotherapy profession in a post regulation landscape? Before elaborating some ideas about tolerance itself, I need to prepare the ground for it. I do this by describing the European historical stage onto which tolerance will make its entry, beginning with the Enlightenment.

Historical Context

The Enlightenment was a challenge to the unfair old world order that prevailed in the Middle Ages, where there was one rule for the privileged, and another for the rest (see Grayling, 2007). The Enlightenment’s great cry was equality for all. It proposed that whether one was prince, priest or pauper, all were to be treated equally. To ensure that all

were treated fairly, it deliberately kept the specifics of each human life (black or white, landowner or farm hand, believer or atheist, man or woman, etc.) out of the picture. The Enlightenment privileged the *universal* individual: each individual was to be treated with respect *despite their differences*.

In time, the Enlightenment world view came to be challenged by Romanticism (Guigon, 2004). The Enlightenment required each person to work out for themselves what was a good ethical life, rather than just believe what was being claimed by the princes and priests. Kant and others presumed that when people thought about things rationally, they would all logically end up agreeing with each other as to what is a good life. However, this did not happen. Intelligent people arrived at very different conclusions as to the good life; rather than uniformity there was diversity. The old moral compasses were no longer available; how was a person to orientate themselves when faced with this confusion of possibilities?

The Romantics answered that each person had to look within, where each would find their own unique moral compass — not to be found in the rational mind, but in the Heart — the symbolic heart of feelings. Their injunction was that you should follow your feelings — and that it is your ethical duty to live authentically in harmony with them. Further, society had a duty not to interfere, but to allow each person to live out their unique lives. The Romantics turned what was a problem for the Enlightenment — the variety of differences in beliefs — into a virtue. They became the champions of uniqueness and difference. So, in contrast to the Enlightenment, the Romantics privileged the *particular* individual, and its ethos may be summarised as: that each person is to be treated with respect, *because of their difference*.

This then is the first problem. Liberalism in general, and contemporary equality movements in particular, have not taken sufficient account of the conflict between each of these ethical injunctions, the conflict between “despite” and “because”.

The subject that both movements were addressing was that of “*the individual*”. Both agreed that the beliefs and ways of *individuals* were to be respected, that the state should not interfere in their private affairs, and so on — but then, some of the later Romantics, such as Herder (1968) changed the game. They came to think that cultures too were living entities; and so they transposed wholesale the sets of rights and duties belonging to individuals, onto cultures. According to this view, like individuals, cultures should be respected for what they are on their own terms; the state should not interfere in their private life of cultures (their beliefs and practices); and cultures had an ethical duty to live authentically according to their internal beliefs and principles. This was the beginning of multiculturalism.

By this time the European Imperial adventure had already been going on for some considerable time. imperialists had been riding rough shod over the cultures of the territories they conquered, actively denigrating, pillaging and decimating them, and, as conquerors are wont to do, they imposed their own culture on those that they conquered.

The multiculturalist ethos is a challenge to the imperialist one; it demands that the imperialist stays their already blooded hand, saying that each culture is to be respected on its own terms, and not be interfered with. This gives us its well known strap line: “different, but equal”.

Why was it, however, that people of one cultural group often felt hostility and antipathy to the ways of other cultural groups? The multiculturalist answer is the same as the psychoanalytic one: strangeness and unfamiliarity evoke fear and hostility. The multiculturalist solution was familiarisation and education. They called on Understanding, the light of reason, to dispel the darkness of ignorance. Their work was in the conscious realm.

The psychoanalysts meanwhile thought that the work that needed to take place was in the realm of the unconscious, because that is where the roots of these fears and hostilities were to be found. There is much to each of these ideas, but in themselves they are not nearly enough.

In Britain in the 1970s and '80s, the anti-racist movement disagreed with the multiculturalists to say that the difficulties were less to do with prejudice born of ignorance, and more with power-relations and oppression. Rather than put energy into educating the oppressors, they demanded a change to the power structures of the nation. Their militancy brought about many positive changes in British society, but they lived in a polarised, black and white world, claiming that, although all people were capable of prejudice, only Whites could be racist. Their strap line was Racism = Power + Prejudice.

In the last two decades or so, there has come onto the stage a new movement: diversity. It claims to speak for all differences, not just those of culture, race, disability or gender. It positions itself differently to the previous egalitarian movements, by making it a point of pride to say that it is apolitical. It changes the game to say that differences are not problems as previously thought, but assets, and assets are to be celebrated. This gives them their strap line: Celebrating Difference. Now, there is no need of tolerance, because differences are being welcomed. The celebrating diversity movement is now ubiquitous: it has found favour everywhere in organisational life as well with policy makers. The clever strap line of one consultancy Inclusive Employers is "Value Allsorts" which it supports with an image of a mix of sweets whose trade name is All Sorts (see www.inclusiveemployers.co.uk).

But should I value *all* sorts? If I do not, am I being judgemental and oppressive in some way? What if I think that one of the sorts is toxic to my well being? How do I know if my antipathy to this sort is grounded in reality or ignorant prejudice? Is it the case that it is my ethical duty to nevertheless try to tolerate this possibly toxic sort? The rest of the paper can be thought of as an engagement with these kinds of questions.

VALUE ALLSORTS



The Human Condition

Much psychological theory, despite occasionally tipping its hat in the direction of relationality, proceeds on the belief that the individual is prior to the social. Individuals are born with true selves, and when these individuals decide to live with each other, they form society. This makes the social optional. Unfortunately, the true nature of these individuals becomes contaminated and distorted when they try to live with others.

In contrast, the line I follow is a reversal of this kind of individualism (see Dalal 2002,

2012), in which the social is prior to the individual. Each individual is born into a pre-existing social. The “I” is constituted out of the varieties of “we” into which one is born. This does not do away with the uniqueness of each individual, and nor does it make us all uniform. For example, each of our faces is recognisably unique despite the fact that each is made up of the same chemical ingredients. The internal, the personal, is not outside or prior to the social. Rather, the personal is the communal personalised. In other words, individuals are deeply, profoundly, and entirely enculturated from the first. This is at the heart of the multiculturalist rationale as to why we should be respectful of others. My very being, my moral sensibilities, my sense of right and wrong, are all derived and imbibed from the communities that I am a part of. As the philosopher Raimond Gaita (2008) has put it: “We cannot radically rescind from the ethical constitution of our inner lives without becoming unintelligible to ourselves.” (p. 53)

If we stop here, however, then what we would have done is created a rationale for racism and its result: the ghettoisation of one “kind” of people amongst another “kind” of people. If people are so entirely different, if their beliefs and practices are incommensurate, then the only way that each would be able to preserve their integrity is by isolation. This of course is what many people think. They would say to me that as I am not a Black woman, then I have no right to speak about matters that pertain to them.

On the use of the term “Black” — in the UK in the 1970s and ’80s, the category Black became an umbrella political category for “people of colour” who were — and still are — marginalised by the “White” mainstream. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the equivalent term appears to be “Brown”. (In UK context, “Brown” would be considered by some to give succour to the racialised taxonomy that divided humanity into Black, Brown, Yellow, Red and White.) In the late 1980s in the UK, the term “Black” was replaced with “Black and other ethnic minorities”, the rationale being that the notion of Black was unfairly homogenising the diverse range of peoples to which it was being applied. However, in my opinion, the shift was in part driven by *sections* of the ethnic minorities, for example, some Indians and Pakistanis, who habitually use the term black as a term of denigration. Furthermore, by default, it implies that the category “White” is a homogeneity.

We are rescued from the horror of ghettoisation by the plural of community. I am not born into a community, but into a number of overlapping communities. Often enough, the values of each are in conflict with the values of others, all of which inform the construction of the self. Thus the “I” is not a singular uniform homogeneity, but a conflicted multiplicity.

I am now going to state the issue that is at the heart of the problematic of how to live and let live. I have just been saying that the “they” are constituted out of the mix of cultural milieux into which they are born. Their culturally-formed beliefs and values are integral to their sense of personhood, so much so, that to go against them would constitute a grave psychological injury, a trauma even — but all this is also true of the “us”. My question now is this: What should I do when I find myself faced with beliefs and ways of life that go against my own deeply held beliefs and ways of life? How can I manage the multiculturalist injunction that I should remain respectful of “them” and their ways? It seems to me that the way the situation stands at the moment, the only way I could manage the feat of respecting their ways and sensibilities, is by abdicating from my own ethical

sensibilities, by cutting off from them. But then I would no longer be human, because as Gaita says, in doing so, I would have become unintelligible to myself. I would have betrayed myself, and in so doing, lost something of myself. Is the only other alternative tyranny? What is to be done?

The Mythology of Culture

The thing is that just by the very use of the phrase “English culture”, I create an illusion of coherence and uniformity. When, however, I look in any depth at English culture, it disintegrates into a number of conflicting and overlapping practices and beliefs: football, vegan, Left wing radical, miner, ecowarrior, naturist, conservative, farmer, Upper class, hedonist, capitalist, communist, etc., etc. George Bush, the Klu Klux Klan, and Barack Obama all claim to speak for *The American Way*. Islam has its bloody feuds between Shia, Sunni and Wahabi. *The Church of England* is riven with a range of radically different values and beliefs. The Untouchable’s experience of Hindu culture is going to be very different from that of the Brahmin, and so on.

Here is the thing: cultural practices and beliefs are, amongst other things, institutionalised rationales of domination and oppression; and cultures practices are sedimented power-relations. They “explain” why it is that only men may become priests, why it is right and proper that the genitalia of women should be mutilated, why one kind of person is entitled to resources, and another is not, and so on. It is for this reason that it tends to be the ones who are the beneficiaries of the ways that a culture is structured (mostly bearded men), who are its most vocal defenders. They invalidate all and any questions about the ethics of some of their practices, with the counter charge that the questioner is undoubtedly a racist bigot and so cannot even begin to understand why it is that this is the way it is, and has always been. This move, and it has to be said it is a very clever one, this move decouples politics from culture — *for political ends!* It uses the rationale of culture to disguise and legitimise forms of oppression as cultural practice and in the main it is the womenfolk who mostly find themselves at the wrong end of things.

It is for this sort of reason that I say that there is no such thing as *the* Black community nor is there such a thing as *the* Māori community in the singular. There are Māori communities, with different interests and beliefs, often in conflict with each other. The fact that Black people tend to be the recipients of prejudice and racism, does not make them a community. Like the category “English”, Black people are bankers and bakers and criminals too.

There is a key point here. Mostly we think that differences just exist out there, we see them, and we name them. We tend to think like the multiculturalists that differences are the cause of hatreds and animosities — but consider: any two people are the same as each other on a range of categories, and at the same moment they are different to each other on a range of other categories. *Both are true at the same time*. So, in this moment, do you, the reader, experience me as the same as you or different to you? If you are experiencing me as “same” why? If so, what have you done with the differences and if you experience me as different, then once again why and what have you done with the similarities?

The point I want to make is that we always have a choice, but that this choice is radically constrained by the discourses we are born into — which, in turn, determine how we come to experience various kinds of similarity and difference, and come to have experiences of an “us” that is differentiated from a “them”. It is not that there are no differences between us, rather there are multiple differences and simultaneously multiple similarities between us. By amplifying one of the differences we come to construct one kind of us and them, and by amplifying another difference or similarity, we would generate another kind of us and them. When one difference is made prominent, made figure, then the others become background. For me this is a key difficulty with the idea of biculturalism.

Imperialist Pākehā culture obliterated all others, The danger now, as I see it, is that the hegemony of one culture, is replaced with the hegemony of two cultures.

Cultural practices are not only a means of distinguishing an “us” from a “them”; they are also the means of policing those who are deemed to be a part of the “us”. This is why I cannot simply respect “their” culture, because it is not just one thing; it is many conflicting things. There is no universal spokesperson for *the* Islamic community in the UK, there are only spokespersons for specific interest groups.

Tony Blair, the UK Prime Minister (1997-2007), thought otherwise. He spoke with Imams, taking them to be the designated authority for *the* Islamic Community. In so doing, however, he undermined and silenced the many secular progressive Islamic voices in the population. Interestingly, when one of the English Archbishops dares to make a statement critical of the government’s social policy, the government is outraged; priests ought to stick to their ecclesiastical domain; they have no business interfering in the politics of the land — despite the fact that all the Bishops of the Church of England have the right to an unelected seat in the House of Lords.

Here is a not uncommon example: a woman living and brought up in an orthodox context, wants to marry someone outside that community. The father is outraged, and decides the only way to manage the situation is to ensure that she never meets her beloved. What are we to do? The first problem is the liberal taboo: that we should not interfere in the private lives of others. It is an issue internal to their culture, and we should let them sort it out themselves; but to do this, is to tacitly side with the more powerful in the dispute — the father. The woman in effect calls on the values of the Enlightenment, which are universal to all human beings: she says that as a human being she has the right to decide her destiny. The father meantime draws on Romantic values to say that she is a particular human being in a particular society, and has duties towards them. Her choices will bring shame onto the family, and so is morally wrong. If I do not allow myself the twin luxuries of apathy and non-interference, then I am obliged to decide which party I am to support.

There are two things here: first, that in tolerating, supporting or respecting one part of “them”, I am *necessarily* disrespecting another part of “them”. Second, the decision-making process is *necessarily* a *discriminatory* process. I have to make a decision as to what I will respect, and I cannot help but draw on my own value system to make that decision. Indeed, it is precisely my capacity to discriminate that makes me a moral being. To stop discriminating, is to stop thinking; it is to rescind from my ethical constitution; it is to stop being human. Discrimination is not the opposite of tolerance, but integral to it

(Dalal, 2012). The problem then is not discrimination, but *unfair* discrimination. It is only now that I have finally arrived at the subject that is central to this paper: tolerance.

The Politics of Tolerance

What is the mechanism of tolerance? What is it I am tolerating?

First, when I thought about it, I realised that, although I think I am tolerating something going on outside me, what I am actually doing is tolerating the feeling of discomfort arising in me in response to that something.

Second, not all differences require tolerance. As a meat eater and sometimes atheist, I find it very easy to spend a convivial evening with vegetarians and deists. I have no difficulty in enjoying the differences between skirts, sarongs and sarees, or chappatis, pancakes and tortillas. In these situations, I am not required to tolerate anything. I can indeed enjoy and even celebrate these differences. Tolerance is required when faced with something difficult.

Third, when we talk about tolerance, we talk about it in the conscious realm. It might well be a conscious activity, but it is impregnated unconscious motivation. If and when we speak of tolerance in the abstract, then we can make it seem to be a universal virtue — true of all people in all contexts.

Human life, however, is not lived in the abstract. It is always situated in a mix of power-relational fields. When viewed in this light, we will see revealed a powerful asymmetry when tolerance is practiced by the more powerful in contrast to the less powerful. The less powerful are constantly required to put up with the whims and expectations of the more powerful. The master of the house casually humiliates the servant. The servant swallows hard, subjugates the rage and endures the humiliation. This is a kind of tolerance, but it is more akin to endurance. Tolerance of this kind, of the underdog, goes on all the time; but it is not recognised as the activity of tolerance because it is taken for granted. In contrast, when the more powerful person is slighted in some way (say the servant had stolen something), then they have options available to them; they have choices. It is because they have choices, that their decision to forgive looks magnanimous. Tolerance by the more powerful is a kind of patronage, a gift that can be withheld as easily as given.

In sum, the tolerance of the underdog is continual and invisible, whilst the occasional dispensations of tolerance by the more powerful are noticed and applauded. Of the two, the tolerance spoken of by the multiculturalists, is the second of these. It is becoming clear that the activity of tolerance is not just an ethical activity but also a political one.

The Psychology of Tolerance

Even though I consider myself a more or less ethical being, my decisions as to whether to tolerate, and what I tolerate, is not always ethical, nor is it ever fully rational. I know that I am much less likely to tolerate some obnoxious behaviour, say in a driving situation, from someone by whom I do not feel intimidated. I know that if the man talking loudly in the quiet carriage of the train compartment is drunk, large and tattooed, then, like the servant, I am much more likely to grin and bear it. But what is the cost to me in these

sorts of situations? Say I do nothing when I witness some bullying behaviour, either because the bully is my boss, or frightening in some way. I am more than likely to feel some mix of guilt, shame and humiliation. These feelings are experienced as attacks on the self, made all the worse because I am complicit in their creation. On the outside it looks like peaceful acceptance and tolerance, but on the inside there is no peace; there is disturbance and turbulence. It is this discomfort that I will find myself tolerating.

One way of coping with these difficult emotions is to deny and displace them onto the victim. Somehow they come to be construed as being to blame for what is happening. Some such mechanism might be one of the drivers that transform crowds into baying mobs that attack hapless victims.

We can see then that the activity of tolerance is continually difficult work, coping with something that is testing us on all kinds of levels: psychological, political, and ethical. Here I must make yet another distinction: between tolerating something that is disagreeable (say a bad smell), and tolerating something I deem to be morally wrong. These are very different situations, each with very different requirements — but often little or no distinction is made between them.

Three Ways of (not) Managing to Live and let Live

We have seen that the project of trying to live and let live, is not one in which “anything goes”. Rather, it is a state of tension due to the call of two duties: the first duty being to be true to oneself, and the second, a spirit of tolerance and generosity towards others. Surprising as this may sound, for things to go well, this tension ought to remain and not be dissolved. The reasons as to why this is the case, is made apparent by looking at the three ways in which it is dissolved.

For the imperialist and fundamentalist there is no tension at all. There is only certainty about their own beliefs, and so they do away with the second duty, to let live. Their stance is — *my way or no way*.

Meanwhile, the diversity enthusiast dissolves the tension by capitulating on the first duty. They end up with the position: *I defer to your way and celebrate it*. The shame and guilt they might feel because of having abandoned their own ethical frameworks is defended against by a manic positivity, which they call celebration. They come to fetishise Otherness.

Last, the liberal does manage apparently to abide by both duties, but by the device of not having much to do with them. The “haves” live in one borough, and the “must not haves” are ghettoised in another. The haves do not much come across them and so they can afford to have a benign and complacent view of themselves. I am not doing anything wrong or bad in the way that I am leading my life. So although it looks like their ethic is one of live and let live, it is actually *live and leave well alone*. Why do I say that the tension ought not to be dissolved — and, if it is not to be dissolved, then what is one to do with it? What we can see from the above, is that in each of the three occasions, the tension is dissolved by breaking the connection between the “us” and “them”.

If, however, we are to endure the contact, then we will have to give up on one of the fundamental ideals not only of liberalism, but also of our profession — psychotherapy

— this being the ideal of neutrality and non-judgemental respect. Consider this: to be neutral requires us to see and experience something, and *not have a response to it*. If I do have a response which I choose not to follow through on, then, as we saw earlier, I will have broken with myself. On the other hand, how can I not have a response? Humans are entirely responsive beings: we cannot help but continually respond to our contexts. Human responsivity is analogous to the law of physics which says that there can be no action without a reaction. This is also entirely true of human reaction — which is another way of talking about our capacity for empathy. But let me persevere some more: how can I engender in myself a state of neutrality when I witness some activity within the “them”? The liberal injunction is that what goes on in their private lives should be no concern of mine — but the only way that this can happen is if I feel no concern. Another way of putting it is to say that I should inhibit my responsivity to such a degree that I should have no response. This follows seamlessly out of the same liberal injunction, which we can reframe as one which says that my responsibility ends with me and mine, and what happens to them is not my responsibility. The only way to have no response is to cut off and have no feelings, to amputate my capacity for empathy, but in doing so, I will have become unintelligible to myself; I will have dehumanised myself. To be neutral is to be hard and hardened. We can see that the ideal of neutrality and non judgementalism which are humane principles, can actually lead to their opposite, creating a radical rupture between the “us” and the “them”.

The Fallacy of the Superior Virtue of the Oppressed

There is one last deadly problem that I need to touch on, a problem which ironically is generated by the liberational movements themselves, as they battle for the liberty of the less powerful. It is seen at its clearest in the latter stages of the colonial situation.

As Frantz Fanon (1982, 1983) and others have shown, the colonising process was devastating in its range and fury. Not only did the coloniser colonise the land, it also colonised the minds of the native. One of the ways that they did this was to try to destroy the language, culture and traditions of the native, and replace it with the language, ways and culture of the coloniser. In their struggle towards liberation, the colonised understandably turn back to reclaim the native tongue and the traditional world view in order to challenge and counter to the world view being imposed by the coloniser. What can happen now is a reversal in which the colonised say to the coloniser: “We do not recognise your ways as having any legitimacy in our land.” Further, in utilising “tradition” as a weapon against the ways of the coloniser, there is inevitably a tendency to idealise “the old ways” and “the good old days”. It can come to pass that any criticism or questioning of “tradition” by anyone is interpreted and experienced as attack, betrayal or sacrilege. We see something of this kind of dynamic taking place in some parts of the world today not only in regards to Islam, but also many of old colonies. Thus it can come to pass that the struggle for liberation can create a mind set in the dispossessed as rigid as that in the more powerful coloniser.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1950/2009) picked up on this theme in a slightly different way. He noticed that the liberals and progressives of his day tended to idealise

the working classes and the dispossessed generally. He took them to task saying that they were suffering the fallacy of “the superior virtue of the oppressed” (p. 85). In other words, they presumed that the suffering of the dispossessed had ennobled them and made them wise. This attitude continues even today in certain circles on the left. To imagine that the dispossessed are necessarily wise is like countering the racist slur that “all Blacks are thieves” with the foolish assertion that “no Blacks are ever thieves”. Racialised thinking is always generalised: it says that “they” “are all the same”. The irony here is that the defence continues to use the racialised mind set of the racist. Before they were uniformly bad because they are Black, now they are uniformly good also because they are Black. The real counter to racialised thinking is discriminatory thinking, and the courage to say, on the occasions you think it to be true, that that person (who happens to be Black) is bad. Of course this is difficult to say because of the fear of being branded a racist, because, although you have said “This person is bad (and they happen to be Black)”, you are likely to be heard as saying “This person is bad *because* they are Black”.

In any case, all this can get caught up in the activity of tolerance. The Other can become idealised, and this leads the liberal into a thought paralysis (Dalal, 2012). In any dispute, a certain kind of liberal thinks that he is bound to tolerate and accept the views and ways of the Other, as they must be superior. There is an ocean of difference between “causing offence” and “being offensive”. A certain kind of frightened liberal is unable to distinguish between them because they are in the grip of the fallacy of the superior virtue of the oppressed. In any dispute, if the other is offended, they immediately collapse because something they have said or done had *caused* offence. This is no help to anyone. I do think it wrong for me to be deliberately offensive to my hosts. At the same time, it might be that my hosts find themselves offended by some of my beliefs and practices. It is not the case that I should therefore and necessarily mute myself. Much so-called cross-cultural and diversity training in organisations make this same error, and so they end up being trainings in etiquette: a training in how not to offend exotic people.

Conflictual Ethical Conversation

I return to the question I posed with the “All Sorts”. What am I to do when I find myself having a negative response to some aspect of “them”? Should I even try to tolerate something that which I find intolerable? The thing is, I cannot trust my response. How do I know whether my antipathy is born of projection, or some version of racialised prejudice, or whether it is indeed an ethical response? I know that there are some things that I cannot and will not tolerate, because to tolerate it would be (in my view) unethical, for example, the world views of the child sexual abuser or the racial supremacist. In these situations I would argue that the ethical response is intolerance. In these matters, I am not open minded. Does this make me a fundamentalist, or, to put it another way, what is the difference between me and the fundamentalist, given that the fundamentalist too believes that their stance is an ethical one? My stance, like that of the fundamentalist’s is “centric” and local. There is no god-like objective position from which to judge one against the other: “*The View from Nowhere*”. as Thomas Nagle (1986) called it. Our viewpoints are truly incommensurate.

What is to be Done?

At first sight, it seems that the only options in this situation are the ones we met earlier: annihilating the Self or annihilating the Other. The fundamentalist would of course choose the latter. Meanwhile, because there is no objective way of choosing between the two viewpoints, the relativist refuses both options, and ends up with thought paralysis.

Although I am convinced by the ethics of my response, I also recognise my centricity, the partiality of my knowledge, and so on, and, because of this, I also know that, although I firmly believe what I do, my view is not unassailable, and therefore open to interrogation. It is this that rescues me from the charge of being fundamentalist: my openness to be interrogated.

If — and it is a big if — both parties were similarly inclined, then we would engage in conflictual ethical conversation. If not, then there is no virtue in me trying to tolerate the intolerant. This would be suicide as, in effect, it would be tolerating someone coming at me whilst wielding a hatchet.

Even if conversation were possible, for me to propose some notion of conversation at the conclusion of this paper, probably comes across as somewhat limp and totally banal. The kind of conversation that I am referring to is, however, anything but banal. It is actually quite frightening. The kind of deep ethical conversation that I am referring to is something much more than a debate and an intellectual exchange of ideas. The kind of deep conversation I am talking about entails an exchange of ideological fluids. It is a transformational process. I truly do not know if I am capable of it. I find within me an enormous reluctance to know the world from the view point of my disputant, because the effect of doing so will be that I will be changed. I will have lost some of what makes me me. I fear engagement in this kind of process, because of the possibility that through it I will become a stranger to myself. I would become Other to my Self. Nevertheless, I think it a conversation worth risking.

Figure and Ground

To end with, I want to turn to the conference title which draws on the Gestalt notion of figure and ground. To my understanding, this is a metaphor to represent a way differences might exist harmoniously with each other, granting each of the differences the respect that it is due. It is another way of voicing the multiculturalist aspiration: equal but different. In one sort of context, one set of values come to the foreground and the other becomes background, and in another context it is the other way round. I think this picture helpful and can recognise myself in it in both my every day and professional life.

The notion of figure and ground also happens to play a central role in Foulkesian Group Analysis (Foulkes, 1948/1983). It is used as a way of thinking about the relationship of the individual and the group, and this is how it is often put: sometimes it is the individual that is in the foreground when it is useful to draw on (individualistic) psychoanalytic thinking; at other times it is the group that is foregrounded, which is when group dynamic formulations are more appropriate. Previously (Dalal, 2008) I have challenged this way of thinking, arguing that this is a theoretical sleight of hand, as the metaphysical assumptions of psychoanalysis are incommensurate with those of Radical

Group Analysis. The illusion of harmony is evoked by the device of granting one world view centre stage, and “disappearing” the world view that contradicts it. One more point: not only does the figure—ground model allow just two states to come into view, it also lends each of them a comforting illusion of stability and permanency.

The form of this critique has some bearing on a *particular version* of biculturalism which proceeds as follows: in a Pākehā context, Pākehā values ought to be foregrounded, and on the Marae, Māori ways of life should be respected and privileged. I am not against this sentiment, but there are some problems with this way of proceeding. First, this is not a model of two cultures living “with” each other, rather it is a model in which each takes a turn at being ruler of the roost. It is a kind of serial monoculturalism. Despite this difficulty, it does nevertheless represent *real* progress, because, until very recently, the Māori voice was never granted a “turn” at all: it was entirely silenced. Given the vast power differentials between Pākehā and Māori, a serial turn is better than no turn at all — but also, given the power differentials, it is in the gift of the more powerful to grant or withhold the possibility of a turn to the less powerful; so even when they are granted a turn, it might be nothing more than a form of patronage, rather than real respect. Thus, whilst the metaphor of figure and ground has the potential to inspire the principle of live and let live, in practice it often turns out to be a version of live and leave well alone. Second, on the whole, the world is not to be so neatly apportioned, and if it is, then we are back to a form of ghettoisation. It would be deeply problematic if we were to assert say, that because *The University* is a Pākehā institution, then Māori values have no place in it. This would make and keep Māori “Other” forever. Further, it presumes that the academy is property belonging to Pākehā, in which Māori are guests who must defer to ways of the host, and the only way they can belong is by assimilating, that is, disappearing.

In contrast to this either/or way of proceeding, it seems to me that the real exciting challenge of this Conference was to try to find a way *to be with* each other and our differences, not serially, but *at the same time*. This entails deep engagement and therefore necessarily, conflict. I think this kind of conflict of values and desires, if entered into sincerely and authentically (whilst being ever mindful of the power differentials between the protagonists), is ultimately beneficial for all concerned. For example, in the large group taking place on the marae — whether we sing or not? Why? Why not? Who decides? Whose voice carries weight, and so on?

One way we can unhelpfully dispense with these tensions and difficulties, is by following rules rather than engaging with each other. It might be asserted that it is an established (Pākehā) convention (and therefore a rule) that one should not stand in order to speak in the large group, and to do so is “acting out” in some way; or it might be asserted that because the group is taking place on a marae, then we should automatically follow the established (Māori) convention to have a karakia at the beginning and to sing at the end of sessions, and that to suggest something different is in itself insulting or colonising.

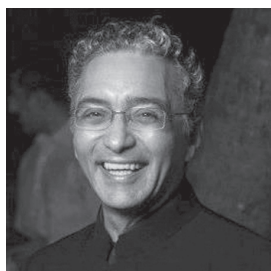
For me, it was exactly these moments of tension and conflict which, although difficult, were inspiring, as it was through these that we stood a chance of being together in a new, as yet un-thought, way. It is working with and through exactly this kind of tension and difficulty that I construe as conflictual ethical conversation — a continual journey with no place of ultimate arrival.

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