4. EDUCATION FOR TOLERANCE

Respecting Sameness, Not Difference

For those who are interested in the successful accommodation of the ethnic, cultural and other diversity that exists in contemporary liberal democracies, the teaching of specific civic virtues to children, and perhaps even to adults as well, will seem a sensible idea. For while the state can do much directly to help with the accommodation of diversity—for example, by reforming laws and practices that may directly or indirectly discriminate against certain groups—much of the successful accommodation of difference will rely on the attitudes of the citizenry. Recent public policy in several multicultural jurisdictions has emphasised the importance of the attitudes and practices of citizens themselves. This has been particularly evident in the language of social cohesion, which is prominent in policy discourse in Canada, Australia and Europe. Yet, this does not settle precisely what type of attitude and approach should be promoted among the citizenry. One approach that has been suggested is the encouraging of respect of difference, and with it an approach of embracing diversity. Another approach would be to promote the importance of respecting sameness, that is, common citizenship, or if one wishes to cast the net wider, common humanity. While both types of approach will have their benefits, in this chapter, I will argue that the respect of difference approach is less likely than respect of sameness to accommodate diversity in liberal societies. While respecting the sameness of another individual will entail several duties (e.g. non-harm), of particular importance here is the duty to respect another individual’s right to live/act/be in a way that may or may not be at odds with one’s own life and views.

This raises the question of how respect of sameness relates to tolerance. To put it simply, approaches that attempt to encourage a respect of difference try to transcend tolerance (understood as forbearance). If we all respect each other’s differences, then the practice of forbearance tolerance will no longer be necessary. On the other hand, respect of sameness neither tries to transcend forbearance tolerance, nor valorises it. It simply acknowledges that, because of the fact of diversity—we live different lives and have different values from each other—forbearance tolerance is a necessary minimum to enable liberal accommodation of difference. The structure of the chapter is as follows. In the first part of the chapter, I turn to the meaning of tolerance, and argue against defining away its unpleasant parts and trying to turn it into something much more positive. In the second part of the chapter, I turn more directly to respect of difference and argue that, perhaps surprisingly, this approach may not turn out to be as accommodating of diversity as it first appears. In the third and final part of the chapter, I turn to the issue of education, both for adults and
children, and defend respect of sameness as the most liberal and most accommodating approach to diversity.

TOLERANCE

A state that practices liberal toleration will be very accommodating of the diversity of its citizens. Such a state will, at minimum, not interfere in the (non-harming) practices of its citizens, and in some cases may even change its own policies and practices to enable particular citizens, or groups of citizens, a greater possibility to follow their own practices and beliefs. Yet, this is only one dimension of liberal toleration, that of the relationship between the state and the citizen. The other dimension that must be examined, particularly in relation to education, is that relationship between citizens. If we care about the freedom of citizens to practice their (non-harming) lives, then it will matter that individual citizens, at least in the public realm, do not unjustly interfere with each other’s freedom. A society where both dimensions of liberal toleration are practised will be one where individuals are highly free to follow their own life plans, and it will rightly be described as a tolerant society. Yet the meaning of ‘tolerance’ here is not settled. At one end of a spectrum, we have tolerance involving a very positive set of attitudes and practices. This approach is expressed, for example, in UNESCO’s (1995) Declaration of Principles on Tolerance, which reads:

Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication, and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have a much narrower and more negative view. Here,

\[ x \text{ can be said to be tolerating } y \text{’s performance of } z \text{ when } x \text{ disapproves of } y \text{ doing } z, \text{ and when } x \text{ has the capacity to hinder } y \text{ in their performing } z, \text{ and yet chooses not to.} \]

These two views are very different. One view sees tolerance as a type of forbearance, of putting up with things you disapprove of despite having the power to negatively interfere, and the other sees tolerance as something much more than simply not interfering with things you believe to be repugnant or problematic, but much more positively, embracing and appreciating these very things.

Yet when it comes to the question of how we, as citizens, should relate to our fellow citizens within a tolerant society, both of these meanings of tolerance have limited application. If we take the second view that a tolerant society means forbearance towards difference, then this can only capture some instances, and probably very few, of how we both will and should relate to each other. Many differences between citizens will be quite unremarkable, and will simply be objects of