

## RESEÑA REVIEW

**González de la Vega, René. (2017). *Tolerance and Modern Liberalism. From Paradox to Aretaic Moral Ideal*. Maryland, United States of America: Lexington. 231 pp.**

In political and moral philosophy we are used to an uninterrupted succession of texts, heirs of the liberal traditions (headed by John Rawls), communitarians (led by the likes of Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, etc.), analytical Marxists (authors like Gerald Cohen, Jon Elster, etc.).

Besides the names mentioned above, there is a succession of texts that tend to give rise to a sense of routine and, as a result, of lethargy. It is the feeling that political and moral philosophy has reached a plateau within a set of accepted doctrines. Doctrines which, to paraphrase Thomas Kuhn, make up a kind of "normal science" of philosophical theory.

But from time to time, the routine drowsiness is sharply interrupted. This happens when works of philosophy show up to question prevailing theories in political philosophy. Such is the case of the work I propose to review herein. It is the work of Mexican philosopher René González de la Vega, whose text on political philosophy features philosophical rigour, originality and depth.

René González de la Vega's main purpose in this work is to reconstruct the conceptual nature of a crucial concept: that of tolerance. His purpose is not *historical* but rather the analytical reconstruction of the concept in question. A reconstruction that he carries out in the first three parts of the book, from chapter 1 to 10.

Why is the concept of tolerance crucial? The answer is two-fold. On one hand, because tolerance is the kind of concept that, in everyday life, facilitates a more or less peaceful coexistence among citizens who do not share the same conceptions regarding what is good. But on the other hand, the concept is pivotal because it allows the shrewd philosopher to expose systematically most of the main problems political and moral philosophers discuss with regard to notions such as correctness, practical rationality, deontology, political liberalism,

the nature of moral reasons, the importance of individuals' ethical lives, etc. That is to say that the concept of tolerance is a "master key" for joining the debate meditating on a large part of the conceptual agenda faced by practical philosophers.

As one browses the pages of *Tolerance and Modern Liberalism* one cannot help but show enthusiasm upon encountering a philosopher who is making a genuine contribution to political and moral philosophy.

The author identifies three underlying features of the use of the concept of tolerance: i) there are convictions that may be injured by others' attitudes or behaviours; ii) there is an underlying power or competition of the "injured" person to act against the act affecting her; and iii) the rational need arises for a "balance" to offset the strength of the value of the injured conviction before the supposed value given to non-interference in another's behaviour (p. xv).

The three features mentioned account for why the concept of tolerance is *normative* (p. xvi). This is so because, in exercising tolerance, moral, political and rationally practical norms are upheld which determine when tolerance is "genuine" and "proper" and when it is not genuine and refers to behaviours labelled as "acceptance", "indifference", "patience" or "resignation", etc.

Tolerance has been a nuclear concept of deontological theories, developed by philosophers of a Kantian influence who represent political liberalism, like John Rawls. René González de la Vega focuses on three representatives of this current: John Rawls (chapter 7), Ernesto Garzón Valdés (chapter 8) and Rainer Forst (chapter 9). All three of these authors share two features:

- a) The priority of correctness over goodness
- b) The existence of suitable mechanisms to resolve rationally the moral and political conflicts that might arise when the individuals who form part of a society exercise tolerance.

Both features mentioned form the "normal science" of deontological theories. However it is here that González de la Vega identifies two serious problems raised by the conjunction of the two features mentioned. The first is linked to the paradoxical aspects that exercising

tolerance produces within deontological theories (for example, chapter 15). According to deontology, an act "x" of tolerance is completely exhaustive for the future. The fact that subject S tolerates "x", or does not tolerate x, results in the fact that subject S's normative conviction (let's call it "y") is "eliminated" from S's moral system (if she tolerates) or "confirmed" (if she does not). For our author, deontology creates a paradoxical or "suicidal" concept of tolerance (p. xvii; pp. 139-141). Because what is tolerated today stops being an act of tolerance in the future as the system has been moralized a single time through the tolerator's behaviour.

The second problem deontology leads us to is that it returns to the "recalcitrant" concept of tolerance (chapter 11). This can be explained by the low (or non-existent) sensitivity deontology has to the phenomenon of moral conflict (chapter 13). For the deontologist, tolerance does not generate genuine moral conflicts (or dilemmas). Tolerance does not configure a recalcitrant concept.

Nevertheless, when individuals exercise tolerance, it is easy to find numerous cases of tolerance dilemmas. In this work, the author poses a number of examples (the teacher, the fashion designer, the homophobe, etc.).

For purposes of this review, I shall pause briefly at one of the examples addressed in the book: that of the liberal vegetarian mother who must decide whether or not she tolerates her red-meat loving son. The author's point is that the liberal mother may find herself drawn into a recalcitrant situation in which it becomes difficult for her to decide whether to tolerate her son or not. From the point of view of her liberalism, the mother must respect her son's autonomy and free development. From the point of view of her moral compassion for the suffering of animals, she should not tolerate her son's love of meat. Nevertheless, this real, concrete situation seems underrated by deontology.

Up to this point, René González de la Vega's work could be said to make two significant contributions. Firstly, the work shows the paradoxical (suicidal) and recalcitrant aspects that result from exercising tolerance. Secondly, the author reconstructs how the deontological theory operates and in doing so, reveals its weaknesses.

Besides exposing the paradoxical and recalcitrant aspects of tolerance, the work also makes another considerable contribution. This contribution links with the idea that tolerance is not just a normative concept but that, contrary to deontologism, tolerance appears to be a concept that rationally demands “contextual” responses (chapter 17).

Deontologism is a distinctly universalist theory that pays little attention to the “salient” features of concrete cases of tolerance. Hence the rigidity of deontological logic. However, it is upon concrete features, for example on whether the mother is liberal or not, or why she is or isn't vegetarian, that the moral theory should reflect.

The author's proposal is that attention to the context is compatible with moral particularism (p. 213). Illuminated by Jonathan Dancy's contributions, René González de la Vega defends a particularism that does not respond to rules and principles but only to reasons. This indicates that sensitivity for the concrete will inescapably lead to a different way of understanding principles and rules. According to this way, the rules and principles were built based on our experience of the concrete. It is not a question of abjuring rules or principles. It's just a question of changing the perspective of the analysis giving greater emphasis to processes like the “perception” of salient features of cases of tolerance and their narrative aspects. This methodological approach must be prior to the fact of starting out by inferring practical consequences rigidly from the norms, which is typical of deontologism.

But the defence of a contextual aspect in the moral reasoning pertaining to tolerance is not all René González de la Vega has to offer. Firstly because the author's concentration on what is paradoxical and conflictive in respect to tolerance does not just warn us of the unnecessary rigidity of deontological theories. He now adds an awareness of the possibly “tragic” aspect of tolerance to his contextualist contribution.

Indeed, many of the dilemmas of tolerance relate to a collision between the existence of ideal moral norms, on one hand, characteristic of the situation of an unbiased observer, and the norms of our ethical life, of the way we understand the goodness or badness of our actions, on the other. Deontologism attempts to minimize this collision by distinguishing between two normative systems, A basic one where the injured normative conviction belonging to the possible tolerator is

found. And another system, justificatory or ideal, that is the one possibly requiring the conviction be eliminated. The basic system reflects the character of the moral agent. The justificatory system would reflect an ideal morality based on the requirement to make unbiased decisions.

By placing the tolerance situation within “two” independent systems, moral conflicts are “untangled”. In other words, the conflicts dissolve. Deontology’s inability to capture the tragic aspect of certain conflicts is revealed with this approach. The conflict that arises between ideal norms and the norms of our own ethical life.

In choosing whether or not to tolerate, the tolerator may experience “moral loss” or “moral residue”. That is to say, *Tolerance and Modern Liberalism* shows that even tolerance is unable to eradicate feelings of moral loss. Such sensations may originate from having made a decision which, though grounded in the justificatory system, entails a moral loss for the tolerant subject.

One weakness of deontology within the context mentioned might be that it “alienates” subjects within an ideal ethics (typical of the justificatory system) that disregards how important a subject’s ethical life (her basic system) is for her character and integrity.

Lastly, René González de la Vega proposes that tolerance should not be a normative concept, understanding normative in the deontological sense. His contribution is based on considering tolerance as an “aretaic” concept, that is to say, based on virtues.

The virtue theorist seeks to minimize, in a sense unlike the deontological sense, the moral loss experienced after decisions made in the context of cases of tolerance. It is not a question of alienating the subject or of distinguishing two different normative systems: the basic and the justificatory systems. It is more about tolerant subjects, in being virtuous, becoming *wiser*: they will learn to see the salient features of cases of tolerance. In knowing how to see such features, they will seek a way for the ideal norms based on correctness not to collide brutally with the norms of our ethical lives.

So if I had to summarize the essence of this work, I would say that it amounts to an original effort that offers meditated answers to focal topics surrounding the concept of tolerance. These answers combine a

dose of Aristotelianism (in how they receive the aretaic approach) with, in my opinion, a Hegelian touch. This is so because the author seeks to reconcile us to the importance of “our own” ethical conceptions of the good life.

Although the book in question targets the deontologism typical of political liberalism, this does not imply that the author is not a certain complex form of liberal. A liberal who, along with certain sensitivity for rules and principles, notices the risk involved in forgetting the ethical conceptions that define our moral identities. And here there is another wink at authors like Michael Sanders who, not in vain, are cited near the end of the book.

However, this is not a book to which only Aristotelian, Hegelian or Aristotelian liberals like Charles Larmore will feel attracted to on account of a corporate identity.

Deontologists will want to read it and respond to the objections raised by the author. Thus for example, philosophers enrolled in this current will want to point out that the convictions of future tolerant subjects must be rational, not prejudiced or capricious. Our ethical lives are not always heavenly. Many norms that identify our convictions appear to us as moral. However, a reflexive inspection reveals their obscurantist, revengeful or prejudiced nature. Thus the homophobe who interferes with gay pride parades every time he can would be hard put to defend his acts of interference as “truly” moral. For there to be a genuine moral conflict between both norms, the ideal and those of our ethical lives, they must demonstrate the same justificatory weight. Otherwise the dilemma would be false. With which the feeling of moral loss would lack practical significance. Such a sensation would only reveal the psychological nature of an aggressive subject's fears and hates.

Deontologists might also attempt to accommodate the idea of a contextual response within their theoretical structure. They might say that the particularism of reasons is something a neo-Kantian theorist might reformulate without falling into the possible vices of particularism. Among which, the deontologist would say, is particularists' potential inability to grasp the need for moral generalizations built on the basis of decisions of cases of tolerance. Without such generalizations it would be difficult to talk about more

or less tolerant “societies”. There would be as many tolerances and intolerances as tolerators there were. Thus universalism could restore its capacity for reasonableness, accommodating the value of the salient features of cases without sacrificing the generality of rules and principles on account of it. Rules and principles which, paraphrasing Jon Elster, make up the “cement” of society. Nevertheless, the author could respond to these types of objections that his perspective, in discerning between the particularism of rules and the particularism of reasons, gives generalizations an important role. The universalist would in turn respond that the distinction between “rules” and “reasons” is not very clear if we admit that the identity of a rule depends on the types of reasons it brings together.

All in all, the work proposes topics for heated discussion. And if it does, it is because it is able, like any important work, to provoke good discussions. I am quite sure no rational reader will be able to remain indifferent to the variety, depth and subtlety of the author's arguments.

Guillermo Lariguet<sup>1</sup>  
Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina  
Correo electrónico: gclariguet@gmail.com  
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-5688>

~  
279  
~

---

<sup>1</sup> Este trabajo ha sido posible a Conicet y al apoyo complementario de las siguientes instituciones de Argentina: SECYT (UNC), PIP (Conicet), CAID (UNL) y de España el siguiente DER2016-74898-C2-1-R.