

What Philosophy Owes to the Contemporary World

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Abstract: The article deals with the issue of toleration, as well as respect for man and humanity- anthropocentric features in European thinking; it refers to its most prominent moments and practical demonstrations in the history of Europe. In relation to the present-day situation of the human, it demonstrates that toleration and tolerance are just as topical today as they were in the past and that toleration can only function if based on a symmetrical relationship, i.e. a relationship based on mutual respect. To understand the above mentioned principles is one of the main task of philosophy.

Key Words: Toleration, history of philosophy, Ancient and Christian philosophy, Modern age philosophy, Anthropocentrism, Postmodernism, Islam, Education

Introduction

Recent changes in political systems of East-Europeans countries have brought some new problems. One of them is intolerance. As if Marxism-Leninism were to be replaced by another, equally infallible, ideology. Political parties as well as individuals declare their views in a similar manner as former leaders. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not limited to the borders of Eastern Europe. Our world is full of antagonistic ideologies, conflicts and hostilities – which is a consequence of

a certain way of thinking. Here a question arises: What can philosophy do in this field? If we analyse the most influential ideologies of the world, we find that each of them is based on some simplified philosophical doctrine. That is why there is a danger in what I call “doctrinal philosophies“. And I am afraid most metaphysical systems are of such character. A possible remedy is wide education in sceptical and critical philosophies.

1 Toleration

It is common knowledge that toleration as tolerance towards different opinions and expressions, especially in the areas of religion, ideology, or politics, but also, more generally, towards one's view of the world, used to be, and, more often than not, still is perceived as a concession or, at least, a mark of benevolence in relation to the weaker, of the majority towards the minority.

In the course of history, the issue of toleration emerged whenever radically new, important ideas were born in the intellectual world, which gradually started to show practically in social reality and it was necessary to answer the question of whether to suppress them or let them spread freely. A similar situation arose whenever, thanks to objective circumstances and development, it became obvious that the ruling ideas had had their day and were no longer sustainable, but, nevertheless, some individuals or groups of people would not abandon them.

2 Christianity

In the European setting the necessity of toleration arrived with Christianity. In the ancient world, there was no such need, as, under the conditions of polytheistic belief in various cults, toleration was an obvious fact, and a mere formal obligatory respect toward gods was expected. Christianity brought about intolerance. Through its monotheism and the fact that it was adopted by the lowest social class, slaves included, it attacked the very basis of the social order of the period. From the day it

became the official state religion it started persecuting so-called pagans or heretics. Later Christianity – unlike e. g. Islam – admitted that intolerance was wrong and condemned it for the future. This, I think, gives Christianity a good perspective.

3 Renaissance

Philosophy also shows the anthropocentric aspect of European thinking. Departure from religious dogma and supernatural truths, as a result of the spread of Renaissance science, also means a retreat of theology from its privileged positions and its replacement by an interest in man, in his dignity and natural needs. The stress was shifted from issues of metaphysics and ontology towards noetics – scientific knowledge whose validity or true nature is judged by the learning subject himself, i.e. by man. While in ancient times and in the Middle Ages man was perceived as part of the universe, of the world as a whole that he did not contradict, with this new orientation man achieved a position in which he went beyond nature and the surrounding world. These thus turned into objects of his interest and activities. He became the centre and arbiter of his own free action. A prominent representative of this view is F. Bacon (16th – 17th centuries), to whom science and knowledge are an utmost human thing (see his theory of idols of the mind) and they serve as a tool for subjugating nature (*scientia est potentia*).

4 Reformation

A new and insistent request for toleration was brought about by the Reformation, but Protestantism did not assert it consistently either. It was rather the Renaissance thinkers and later on the philosophers such as John Locke wrote his “Essay Concerning Toleration”. It served as a springboard for another famous treatise, “*Epistola de Tolerantia*” (1685), which was later published under the English title “A Letter Concerning Toleration” (1689).

In Descartes a subject is already strongly detached from the surrounding world, it is detached from the rest of reality. (The established

subject – object paradigm then marks all the philosophy that was to come later). Man as a thinking creature assumes a privileged position in relation to other living creatures and to nature as such; his attitude towards them is superior and distantly instrumental. (Here we can notice the very first signals of harmful human activity and his technically oriented civilisation, which came much later). The general preference for man over anything else has more than a merely rational side to it. It is evident in the whole of British empirical and sensationalistic philosophy, as witnessed, among other things, by the titles of the most important works by their protagonists: “An Essay of Human Understanding” by J. Locke, “A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge” by G. Berkeley, “A Treatise of Human Nature” and “An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding” by D. Hume.

5 Enlightenment

The importance of man and a far too optimistic interpretation of his role in the world were stressed by the Enlightenment; despite the variety of angles and views (e.g. J. J. Rousseau, 18th century). I. Kant looks upon man as an active creator of knowledge (transcendental subjectivity), and as both the source and purpose of the moral code (categorical imperative). The active subject – the Ego – subordinates and changes the world, i.e. the non-Ego, according to the Ego’s own wishes; this is the leitmotif of the philosophy of J. G. Fichte. In his criticism of Christianity, L. Feuerbach points out that the idea of God as a moral being is but a personified, alienated essence of a human being and that the reality of religion is just a reflection of human reality. He insists that anthropology replaces theology and the religion of love between You and Me without the go-between God replaces religion.

6 Marxism and contemporary philosophy

In Marxism an originally humanistic motivation, which unfortunately rejects the universal, timeless, generally valid value of humanity (claiming it was hollow abstraction), cannot be denied.

What is important is the Marxist notion of practice, which is seen as a specifically human, sensory objectively creative action, through which man changes the world he lives in; in a revolutionary way, he projects himself into this world. A prominent personality who supports the line of philosophers rejecting God and making man responsible for all his deeds is F. Nietzsche. He is the author of a new morality of strong individuals, from which an "Übermensch" is about to arise. Other strong supporters of the same philosophy were the Existentialists, above all J. P. Sartre. He claims man is bound to freedom, he perpetually negates and creates himself, and projects himself outside his own present existence. The unique, unrepeatable human existence, "Dasein", is the central motif of Heidegger's philosophy. Dasein is the being, the "place" which is highly suitable for the explanation of being in the broadest sense of the word.

Anthropocentrism is a distinct feature of pragmatism, too, especially evident with W. James, to whom meaning and its consequences for an acting subject is the measure of all things.

The contemporary post-modernist reaction to the present-day globalisation of mankind serves as an indicator that issues of toleration and tolerance by no means ceased to exist in the age of the Enlightenment. In reality, the issue has not lost its topicality; on the contrary, it seems to be more and more urgent. There is a desire, which is growing clearer and clearer, for our Euro-American civilisation, with its learning and culture, which so far has claimed its right to universality, to acknowledge the equality of other cultures and forms of civilization. Theoretically and verbally, we have accepted it for centuries but the widespread expansion of Euro-American culture and civilisation on the basis of the principle of freedom is an indisputable fact. Especially in the Islamic world, this is perceived as aggression, which is neither an adequate nor peaceful reaction. How can we face this ominous reality from the point of view of toleration? Let us start from the premise that toleration means a relationship. This relationship is either symmetrical or asymmetrical. In real life it is often both, but as an asymmetrical relationship, of tolerance towards intolerance, it can only exist for a limited period of time, and then it is no longer bearable and it stops

working. If tolerance in real life is to be effective and long-lasting, it must be in a symmetrical relationship. If only one of the parties shows tolerant behaviour, while the other is constantly on the attack, it is time for defence or even for an offensive. This means more or less a war without end, unless the aim is the total destruction of one of the warring parties. Even then, one cannot rule out the possibility of a comeback of new followers, starting on the ideological level, proceeding to physical attackers, to avengers.

Conclusion

The social, economic, and political problems of the contemporary world represent an intricate complex and they demand a complex solution. However, this does not seem to be within reach, as there is no real will to achieve it. This brief contribution does not aim towards that end either. One can but give advice, namely the education of the public, their patient and untiring persuasion. As long as it misses its aim, then there is only one relatively painless and peaceful way: a gradual, consistent, and permanent elimination (expulsion) of intolerant individuals and groups of people and a thorough isolation of the intolerant world. Such an ending is far from optimistic, but the contemporary world itself does not offer many reasons for optimism.

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