

The Paradox of Tolerance — Mark Manson

The paradox of tolerance - Back in the 1940s, the philosopher Karl Popper came up with something called "The Paradox of Tolerance." It goes like this:

If everyone is tolerant of every idea, then intolerant ideas will emerge. Tolerant people will tolerate this intolerance, and the intolerant people will not tolerate the tolerant people. Eventually, the intolerant people will take over and create a society of intolerance. Therefore, Popper said, to maintain a society of tolerance, the tolerant must be intolerant of intolerance... hence the paradox.

Popper proposed the Paradox of Tolerance to explain why a German public full of otherwise good people allowed Hitler to come to power and commit so many atrocities. Since then, the Paradox of Tolerance has survived and has occasionally become a talking point in discussions about social justice. The idea is that it's okay to be a piece of shit to someone because they, too, are a piece of shit.

But the problem is that, most of the time, it's not crystal clear what defines "tolerance" and "intolerance." If a comedian made a joke about gay people in 2005, is that intolerance? If a scientific study finds that there are significant differences between men and women, is that intolerance? If a really religious person doesn't want to be friends with a non-religious person, is that intolerance?

Like most thought experiments inspired by Hitler, it doesn't really work when you don't have someone who is so obviously evil to unite against. As a result, the definition of an intolerant person has become muddled and loose to the point where it might as well mean, "someone who believes things that make me feel bad." And, as we'll see, that's not a very useful definition.

Tolerance demands discomfort - The problem with Popper's reasoning is that it quickly devolves into a cascade of dickish, self-righteous behavior. Let's say Person B decides that Person A's behavior is intolerant and a threat to society. Person B then decides that it is morally correct to be intolerant of Person A and treat her like crap.

But then, Person C strolls by and notices Person B being a totally intolerant assface to Person A. Person C then decides that it's morally correct to be actively intolerant of Person B. But then Person D strolls by, and notices Person C being horribly intolerant towards Person B...

You can see where this is going. And if you ever doubt the realism of this scenario, I invite you to spend a few hours on Twitter some time.

The irony is that in order to practice tolerance, you must be willing to sit with things that upset you or make you uncomfortable. Yet, if your adopted ethic is that no one should ever be upset or uncomfortable, then you make any sort of tolerance impossible

Mark Manson