

Welcome to a new episode of the Thought Project podcast.

*In this podcast, made in collaboration with the 'Re-Doing Good Podcast' we want to call for more empathy and a more human-centred language in the media, humanitarian action, and in everyday life, our aim is to bring **you** closer to the topic of language as a tool that can replicate dominant structures of whiteness and power.*

For this Thought Project, we would like to take you on a short journey to explore the concept of 'doing good' what it means to us, and how we could potentially do even better in the future. We're happy to open up this platform for political reflection and discussion.

Today we will discuss Dignity and Tolerance or the lack of it in political discourses.

Host: Manuel Leon (M)

Guest: Clare Maxwell (C)

About our Guest:

Clare is a first-year MDev student from Boston, United States of America. As an activist and a freelance journalist, she has spent time working in the US, Greece, Puerto Rico, Lebanon, Palestine, and Kenya.

1st section: Dignity and Tolerance

M: "...We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."

Right here I'm quoting the Austrian philosopher K.R Popper and with it, I want to start our conversation about dignity and tolerance.

For me, dignity means being treated with honour, with respect, it is being recognized as a worthy human being like we all are. Dignity is the base for human rights and a natural right for all that matters ... The debates around human rights are still ongoing everywhere in the world. Even though there are still many different value systems and worldviews in our diverse planet, the merit for decent treatment is universal ... every human being possesses dignity, a simple but important inherent quality to our humanity.

It does not matter if your beliefs tie 'dignity' to a religion or not, this quality is priceless.

That is precisely why we now have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and why it has expanded to include more standards for women, children, people living with disabilities, minorities, etc. in order to also protect them from discrimination and intolerance across the societies where they live. What do you think, Clare?

C: Right, although tolerance and dignity aren't just ideals inscribed in declarations or laws, they are actions that people take every day. Our societies work when normal people go

about their daily interactions, big and small, with the understanding that everyone we deal with deserves not only the same treatment that we believe ourselves to deserve but also the right to challenge our conceptions about fair and equal treatment. The acknowledgement of dignity and personhood is the basis of tolerance and human rights, it's that understanding that, no matter two peoples, or groups of people's, differences, everyone needs to have an equal voice in our interactions and our understandings of how we treat each other. The trouble is, all parties need to respect this equality. If one person feels more entitled to a say in a decision than another, everything falls apart.

2nd section Some examples of the language we are referring to

M: You are right, Clare! Personally, I also believe that one of the reasons human life is unique is because of the scale of our choices, how we are all free to choose whether to do good or evil, to help or harm; of course, sometimes we may come across with people that are intolerant and want to limit the civil rights of others or prefer to humiliate those that are vulnerable, marginalized, etc.

Clare, Could you tell us about your feelings regarding hate speech in the United States and what happened in the US Congress on January 6th?

C: Its been troubling to hear calls for unity and tolerance between Trump supporters and the general populace of the US in the wake of one of the most violent and dangerous presidential terms in American history. While calls to forgive and forget when it comes to Donald Trump have significantly decreased since his supporters looted the US capitol building, its worth it to mention that this is far from the first time that Trump has directly or indirectly promoted intolerance or silenced the voices of oppressed people in the U.S. From the case of the Central Park Five, to praising white-supremacist militias, there is a clear pattern of intolerant behaviour that had been allowed to flourish unchecked. I hope that the events of January 6th will be the last of these, but unfortunately, until we make a true commitment to giving everyone an equal voice, in equal rights, attacks like this are bound to continue.

3rd section The moral of the story

M: For sure, every action any human being does generates consequences, some that we want, and others that we wished we didn't. When actions by one generate bigger consequences, don't you think we usually fall into the trap of placing them all together in the same bag? like the rotten apple metaphor?

C: Sure, and I think there is a really big question about how we can impose consequences without writing people off completely. Consider the idea of "cancel culture". Honestly, I think it's great to see that social movements and groups have found a way to impose consequences in terms of following or public image on people who have used their platforms to promote intolerance. What worries me is that so often, these consequences don't offer the cancellee a shot at redemption. And what we hope will happen is not that someone who practices intolerant behavior becomes a complete pariah, but rather that we find ways to

address the issue that bring that person back into the fold, with apologies, with changes in behavior, and with a new willingness to work together.

M: This brings us to a big question, and I would like to know your opinion, Clare. What do you think we must do to protect human dignity? Because it may sound difficult...

C: well one way to start is to distinguish between the free speech that we all have a right to and speech that restricts each other's freedom. Some people have argued that hate speech should be protected under the principle of freedom of expression. This brings us towards an idea known as the tolerance paradox. The tolerance paradox recognizes that, if all speech or all action is tolerated, then intolerance must also be tolerated. So too much tolerance can actually lead to spreading intolerance

M: this could explain why Trump's social media accounts were suspended... because in the exercise of his right to speech, intolerance and hate is what comes out, right?

C: Absolutely. A lot of people will say that social media companies shutting down Trump is intolerant, and on the face of things I can see why someone might make that argument. But this has to make us wonder, what is the point of tolerance? Tolerance isn't just a value that we cultivate on its own, rather it's something that opens the door for a lot of other good things. As we already pointed out, tolerance is a key part of freedom of expression, and it can't exist without a mutual respect between parties of the right to equal voice in a conversation. But I think that to go a bit deeper, we also need to see tolerance as a stepping stone to acceptance. To that feeling that, not only does everyone get a chance to speak and be heard, but that we are excited to hear what others have to say, that we are ready to receive it and learn from it. That's why the limits of what can be tolerated are formed around what speech and behavior lead to greater acceptance. Of course, that's a really subjective line to draw, but I think that the de-platforming of Donald Trump is a textbook case of where there is a clear violation of the limits and the spirit of tolerance, and people took necessary action.

M: Could teaching kids from a young age not to commit any type of intolerant act -Bullying, verbal or physical abuses, violent acts, discrimination, etc.- be a first step to take? I believe these acts, in the end, diminishes the dignity of the victims and must not be accepted.

Also, I don't know what you think (And I would love to know that), but I believe we need to teach kids not to accept any intolerant behaviour in other people, nor they should stay idle while someone is being subject to these acts, although this 'intervention' to help other people shall require them to evaluate if it's better to call the cops and wait, or if they should intervene to help and then call the authorities and look for a safe place.

C: I'm glad to see this approach, of understanding that tolerance is something we do as a group, that there is such an importance to raising whole generations to respect their peers. But what does it look like to not just have a tolerant conversation, but to address intolerance in a productive way. I'm not in support of using police to address intolerant behaviour. That's partially because, in the US, it's very evident that the law enforcement and legal system is part of the oppression of diverse voices, and reproduces the myth that black, queer, immigrant or working class people don't have the same rights and agency as wealthy, white,

heterosexual or cisgender people. I think we should dig into the question of how to confront intolerance in a way that acknowledges the dignity of everyone involved, and can, hopefully, lead to better interactions in the future.

M: Yeah. We need to recognize that this last approach of intervening is precisely the base for humanitarian intervention nowadays... specifically for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which is an international norm that seeks to ensure that the International Community doesn't fail to halt atrocities like genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in general.

C: Its great that you brought up the R2P, because that actually raises a lot of important questions about how intolerance is covered up or quietly encouraged. While the heart of the idea of R2P is definitely noble, it's practice has been much more controversial. The international community should absolutely intervene in human rights abuses. However historically, the R2P can also be seen as a 21st century expression of "the white man's burden", allowing powerful, global north states to intervene in the affairs of developing countries even when they have human rights issues to deal with at home. The results can be devastating. For example, R2P was a main justification for US intervention in Libya, which has left the country in a state of civil war, and, while the Iraq war preceded the advent of the R2P doctrine, George W Bush used the language of opposing Saddam Hussein and his dictatorship as a justification for entering the war, leading to the death of tens or hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

This comes back around to tolerance because we have to critique the way international doctrines and institutions value the voice and action of some nations over others. No matter how terrible a Donald Trump or a Boris Johnson may be, no one would accept another country invading the US or UK under the justification of R2P. So when we consider these ideas, or how these doctrines are applied, we need to consider which actors carry the tacit approval to intervene and police other's behavior. Does this approval really reflect egalitarian ideals or the baseline condition of all actors having equal voices and agency?

M: Yeah, you are totally right about the considerations and critics we should all be having. And that's exactly one of the reasons for a podcast like this one... to create additional spaces to reflect and also think on the power of our language or the lack of it and the results of whatever we decide to do when we are confronted by the opportunity to help others.

We also need to think about why censor some and not others? I mean ... I'm in favour of censoring those that, by using hate speech, step on the lives of others, but I'm obliged to ask myself, why censure Trump and not Maduro or Diosdado Cabello as well? and this is just an example.

C: I wonder the same myself, and while censorship is a way to prevent the spread of intolerance, rather than attack some of the root causes, it's worth it to wonder what would happen if there were greater consequences for powerful people who use harmful or hateful rhetoric to advance a political agenda. Unfortunately, the case of Trump's censorship is unique, and one is left to wonder if he had won the election, or been successful in his efforts to overturn Biden's victory, if social media companies would have taken him off the air.

We can push for the de-platforming of every intolerant politician or public figure, but we can't force it. What we can do is make sure that there is tolerance and accountability within our communities, and hope that this has a ripple effect into our other society. After all, fostering intolerance is often something that powerful people use to control others' actions and opinions, but tolerance is something that benefits everyday people. Like you said, the best way to learn tolerance is to start with children and families and then carry forward into your life, but we can all learn and build the habit of being more open-minded.

Closings

M: Thank you, Clare, for your company on Today's podcast. And thanks for all your comments and insights, and thanks to those listening for this opportunity to share our ideas and reflect upon them.

I will leave our listeners with another quote by the philosopher Karl Popper that is also relevant to tolerance and dignity:

(and I quote) "...If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them." - K.R Popper.

Thank you and see you in another episode.