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**Odd bedfellows: Kukathas, Forst and Arendt? An alternative understanding of tolerance using an Arendtian notion of freedom.**

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# Universiteit Leiden

## **Odd bedfellows: Kukathas, Forst *and* Arendt?**

An alternative understanding of tolerance using an Arendtian notion of freedom.

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The History of Political Thought – BaP

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## ***1. Introduction –***

A central and cardinal value to the liberal tradition is the notion of tolerance (Kymlicka, 1989). In a day-to-day setting, tolerance is often praised on the basis that it underpins the subjectivity of value, and people are often said to be ‘liberal-minded’ if they do not assess the value of other people’s pursuits on the basis of their own choices or preferences. On a different level, however, liberal philosophers have argued for tolerance as providing the best condition under which people can make rational and informed judgements about different moral pursuits. Accordingly, respect for another person’s moral pursuits is often presupposed not by a person’s ability to criticize preferences, but on the inherent freedom connected to the conditions under which one can make their own decisions. Tolerance thus can be understood as the condition that creates the space in which people can decide what values are constitutive of their own notion of the good life. This requires that people don’t interfere in other person’s value systems and beliefs on the basis of their own belief systems, and vice versa.

Precisely this latter point creates a predicament. If tolerance is the basic requirement for people to form their own set of values, which is deemed so essential to the liberal tradition, and is held in such high regard, then how do we deal with people who are *intolerant*? That is: how do we address those who *do* interfere other person’s value and beliefs system on the basis of their own beliefs; how do we address those people who deny us the freedom to act on our own, say, sexuality or religious beliefs?

Liberal theory, in its essence, does not have an answer to this. Liberal theory suggests that we exist in a situation in which we are confronted with a plethora of people and belief systems (Kymlicka, 1989). Therefore, we cannot assume any sort of general higher moral, ethical or normative truth. Rawls (1971) suggested that this should ‘lead to the choice of a regime guaranteeing moral liberty and freedom of thought and belief, and of religious practice’ (p. 186). As such Rawls proposed to attribute the status of ‘highest-order interest’ to our capacity to our capacity to freely form and revise our rational plans of life, which is the liberal notion of ‘the good life’ (Kymlicka, 1989). In order to fulfill this requirement two conditions have to be met: (1) that we are able to lead a life in accordance with our own beliefs about what gives value to life; (2) that we are able to question those beliefs, examine them in light of new information. Persons must therefore possess the liberties that allow them to live their life according to their own beliefs about value, without being persecuted for, say diverging beliefs about religion or sexual practices, underlining the liberal concern for civic and personal liberties.

But, if we accept this, we also deny ourselves of the grounds on which to reject illiberal and/or intolerant values, as we ought not to interfere in anyone's values and belief systems. Should we then just tolerate intolerance? Popper (2002) argues that under no circumstance should we leave space for intolerance in a tolerant society. In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, he states that 'Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance' (p. 226). To him extending tolerance to the point where we tolerate intolerance and failing to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, tolerance will be decimated, and the tolerant with them. This he deemed the *paradox of tolerance*, namely that, if we assume the liberal credo that everyone should be *free* to form their own set of values and beliefs, by not tolerating intolerance, the tolerant *themselves* become intolerant. This then suggests that on its own premises, liberalism cannot reconcile a limit on tolerance with the idea that everyone should be free to form their own set of values.

This is no mere exercise of philosophy. Questions on the limits of tolerance are at the heart of any liberal democratic society. Think matters of religious practice. If a religious diaspora opposes same sex marriage, then on what basis can we urge them to tolerate what they hold to be intolerable. Think matters of free speech. If a right-wing politician, then, acts on his right to free speech to demonize and bigot that specific religious diaspora and propagates racial prejudice, then on what basis can we tell them to stop. Think populism. If a populist leader openly questions the legitimacy of democratic institutions, then at what point do we draw the line. All of these instances represent one party practicing their freedom to decide on their values and belief systems in a way that might infringe on that of another. Failure to address these issues can lead to explosive results, and the 2021 January 6<sup>th</sup> storming of the Capitol building in Washington serves as a stark reminder as to what is at stake when we allow anti-liberal sentiments to roam freely and fail to address the paradox of tolerance (Talbi & Novaes, 2024).

If we then wish to put a limit on tolerance, then how might we substantiate this without being intolerant ourselves? To answer this, this thesis asks the question: *How can we substantiate a threshold on tolerance?* In the literature review, this paper will argue that the ambivalence of tolerance can be attributed to the liberal premise of autonomy; the understanding that people should be free from any interference when they develop their own conception of the good life. In the body, this thesis will compare this with Hannah Arendt's (1960) notion of sovereignty, which states that in a community total freedom of the will can only be exercised by coercing others. This, it will be argued, represents some of the inherent friction associated with tolerance. If we accept freedom as total freedom of the will, this requires that we extend tolerance also to those whose actions we deem intolerable. Therefore, in the final

part of the body, this thesis will opt for Arendt's more narrow definition of freedom, which defines freedom as the ability to take initiative to act through word and deed. Individual freedom ends there however, and when someone tries to follow up on their actions through oppressive power, they overstep the boundaries of their own freedom. A threshold on tolerance may then be said to be at the point where someone oversteps the boundaries of their own freedom. In the discussion this will be put into dialogue with the literature review and suggest some of the pitfalls of this argument, followed by a conclusion.

## **2. Literature review –**

Can we untangle paradox of tolerance, and if so, what philosophical tools do we use? The role and limits of tolerance are still a topic of debate, and a close inspection of the literature reveals two dominant strands. In order to reconcile tolerance with liberalism they both attempt to redefine the relationship between tolerance and another essential element of liberalism: justice. At the forefront of contemporary discussions on the limits of tolerance is German political theorist Rainer Forst (Talbi & Novaes, 2024). Forst (2014) made important contributions to untangling the paradox(es) around tolerance, and the context in which it operates (Talbi & Novaes, 2024; Mason, 2018). In order to overcome the inherent paradoxes with tolerance, Forst (2014) proposed a conception of tolerance that is *normatively dependent*, which means that our understanding of tolerance is dependent on its contextual justice. This implies that we cannot limit tolerance, without an altogether separate understanding of justice. This will be discussed in the following section. At the forefront of the opposing side of the debate, there is political theorist Chandran Kukathas, who specifically avoids a notion of tolerance that appeals to certain moral commitments dependent on a comprehensive conception of justice (Casals, 2006). After a discussion of Forst (2014), there will be a discussion of Kukathas (1997) who conceptualizes tolerance the other way around. He suggests that our notion of justice is dependent on reason, but for reason to occur, we need a space of public deliberation where common ground can be found. This, he argues, requires tolerance, suggesting that tolerance plays an essential role for our understanding of justice. As these authors represent two opposites on the debates on tolerance, they offer an analysis of the debate that digs into the shared and conflicting assumptions around liberal notions of tolerance. This will be the final part of this literature review.

### **2.2 – Rainer Forst**

Rainer Forst (2014) speaks of the profound *ambivalence of toleration*, for it remains a matter of discussion where the limits of tolerance ought to be, what tolerance actually means, and whether we should actually promote it. Questions on whether it is intolerant to forbid Muslim police officers from wearing a hijab, or whether you can tolerate homosexuality while opposing same-sex marriage remain a challenge for liberal political theory on a number of levels. Forst (2014) suggests that in order to better understand the implications of tolerance, we need to come to understand it as a *normatively dependent concept*. This entails that tolerance on its own does not have any normative or ethical basis, and that it is merely our understanding of justice that dictates whether we ought to tolerate something or not. In what follows, this section will offer a breakdown of his conception of tolerance.

Forst (2014) refers to the topic as a “complex” political conflict, since we are not just dealing with a conflict of interest, but with a controversy over the right understanding of tolerance and even democracy itself. First, on the conceptual level, it can be asked whether actually different concepts of tolerance are involved, and if so, if these can be unraveled. And second, on the level of a political analysis, it can be asked which conflicting arguments are present here and how these can, or should, be reconciled in light of a diversity of values.

Forst (2014) argues that a closer consideration of the concept reveals that there are no different “concepts of toleration”, but rather multiple components to a *single* meaningful conception. This one concept involves three components. First is an *objection* component, which dictates that the things that are tolerated are inherently regarded as bad or negative. Without this, there would be either indifference or affirmation, but it can never be tolerance. Second, tolerance also involves an *acceptance* component which specifies the reasons why it is right or required to tolerate the bad or negative convictions, which entails these convictions aren’t annulled, but weighed and overridden. Third and finally, there is a *rejection* component, which entails the much-disputed threshold of tolerance. Here, a negative evaluation calls for a limit on tolerance, and in some cases intervention. This, however, speaks to three paradoxes. The first paradox is tied to the objection component, and it is the paradox of the tolerant racist. This holds that someone inherently racist could be considered considerably tolerant as long as they do not act on their racist predispositions. The second paradox is tied to the acceptance component, which hold that if it is morally desirable to tolerate, then it seems morally right to tolerate what is morally wrong. And lastly, in the case of rejection, drawing boundaries between us and those who we deem intolerable will appear as an act of intolerance by those who we reject, which relates to the paradox suggested by Popper (1971).

As such, tolerance cannot be reconciled with itself, and it requires external normative substance in order to gain legitimacy, thus, tolerance is a *normatively dependent concept* (Forst, 2014). Forst points towards two separate processes that can provide tolerance with its normative basis. The most prevalent of these is the *permission* process. This entails that an authoritative majority decides on what constitutes the norm but grants the minority the permission to live in accordance with their own beliefs, that are marked as “deviant”, under the condition that these do not challenge the supremacy of the authority. This is a kind of vertical tolerance in which *objection, acceptance* and *rejection* are at the mercy of the dominant group. This is inherently ambivalent. On the one hand it grants the minority with a certain degree of security and liberty, yet at the same time it is also a continuation of domination by the dominant group over the minority.

A more horizontal process of tolerance then is the *respect* process (Forst, 2014). The basic idea here is that tolerance is a virtue adopted by everyone towards each other; they are both tolerated and tolerating. Though every single one has their own values and belief system they grant each other equal status as citizens and the *autonomy* to come to their own conception of the good life. This means that the foundation of social and political coexistence can be found in those norms that uphold equal acceptance of all, and don't interfere in anyone's values and belief systems. However, in order to safeguard this autonomy, and to find a legitimate basis on which to object, accept, or reject certain values, Forst argues that we require conditions of *reciprocity*. This has a normative element, namely that we have to grant everyone the same liberties and restrictions as we grant ourselves, and an epistemic one, which is that we do not assume that others share our values and belief systems, and their validity. When this condition is met, we can reasonably disagree with people while upholding autonomy, and expect from them that they treat us with equal dignity as they treat themselves and others. When this is then not the case, and autonomy is not reciprocated, objection, acceptance, and/or rejection are *justified*.

### 2.3 – Chandran Kukathas

Chandran Kukathas (1997) points out that many argue that it is favorable to tolerate cultures and ways of life that differ from ours, and perhaps especially when these are settled in our midst. The practical problem with this, however, remains; how do we respond to practices we deem intolerable, such as forced marriages? Additionally, how do we make sure tolerance does not become a vehicle for oppression and/or injustice? To put it differently: what forms should tolerance take, and what are its limits.



Liberal theories, and its understanding of tolerance, rest on the notion of justice. This takes liberty and equality as its central tenets. These imply a certain degree of autonomy, which means that everyone is free to form their own set of values and ideas of the good life, without interference from others. The only instance in which it is justified to interfere is in defense of justice itself; when one's autonomy is at stake at the hands of another. Tolerance, in this philosophy, is thus based solely on the principles of justice. Kukathas (1997) states that in this conception "Whether and how far any practice will be tolerated must always be determined, ultimately, by its compatibility with the conception of justice" (p. 73). A theory of justice, then, has to work out from its own point of view how to address practices that deviate from it. Toleration is thus only endorsed on the basis of another moral principle, i.e.: justice, which is taken as the baseline for society as a whole, and this means that when the issue of tolerance arises, the question that is asked is whether or not this tolerance is in line with a commitment to autonomy, which forms the basis of society's moral standpoint. Liberal theories therefore treat modes of life that do not support autonomy as morally inferior, which is why they render themselves beyond the limits of tolerance.

The problem of this, however, is that it does not relinquish the dependence on a comprehensive set of moral ideals which may very well be at odds with the values of some, or potentially even many within society (Kukathas, 1997). Furthermore, these theories presuppose a liberal political order that upholds the value of autonomy embodied by the principles of justice. Tolerance then becomes an issue because of potential dissent from the values that liberalism presupposes. Kukathas suggests that this does not provide a minority culture or value with the right amount of tolerance, for it does not attach any independent weight to tolerance at all, as it is only concerned with the liberal notion of justice. But if we do not have any independent notion of tolerance, then why should we be concerned with tolerance in the first place? Can there not be a defense of tolerance which does not place it second to a moral doctrine?

Kukathas (1997) argues that the inherent value of tolerance can be found on its ability to check moral certitude. He states that "If we are convinced beyond doubt of the correctness of our beliefs or about the immorality of the practices of others, there is essentially no reason to tolerate those whose beliefs or practices differ from our own" (p. 97). But, if there is any reason to doubt the certainty or correctness of our judgement, then we have reason to tolerate different beliefs. This is not to say that tolerance only has an instrumental value, tolerance is valuable because it creates the conditions under which judgements are worth something. The idea behind this is that whatever the strength of our convictions there is always some element

of doubt because no objective method or mechanism to establish correctness exists. The liberal answer to this has always been to appeal to reason, but this is under no circumstance immune to criticism and revision. Reason's "authority" even rests on the conviction that it exists in a structure of openness and criticism; reason has authority only insofar as it can be tried and tested in public, and to secure this tolerance is essential.

This requires a public realm of freedom where tolerance reigns, for restrictions on the public use of freedom not only harms those who seek to reason publicly, but it also undermines the authority of reason itself (Kukathas, 1997). Tolerance is then mainly there to safeguard people's ability to speak freely, without being coerced for diverging beliefs. Tolerance then is essential to reasoning, as it provides for the conditions under which any reasoning can be public. Liberalism, with its emphasis on reason, should therefore hold tolerance in especially high regard. Why not assume instead that free public reasoning establishes those principle of justice that form the basis of liberal thought, made possible by tolerance?

Kukathas (1997) suggests that the reason why we may not understand tolerance in this way is because we often view relations with non-liberal minorities or values as involving disputes in the realm of public reason itself. To counter this, Kukathas argues that reason ought not to be promoted, but *honored*. In communities inhabited by liberals and those deemed illiberal, there will always be disputes about the nature of the good life, in ways in which no one is willing to forsake their own ways and embrace an alternative. What matters then is that tolerance prevails, and people do not attempt to compel or manipulate others to live according to different ways. The result of this, Kukathas argues, is that different conceptions of the good life can lead to heavy disputes, but as long as tolerance prevails, this can only lead to an increase of reason, followed by a conversion of notions of justice.

Kukathas (1997) admits to the fact that there are indeed instances where evidence of terrible practices calls for intervention by an established authority. Here, however, he states that the goal should always be to remain tolerant. Morally speaking, persuasion through tolerance and shared reason is always preferred to coercion. Furthermore, conversion through persuasion often proves to be more effective for it serves to internalize a new understanding of morals rather than simply telling people to comply with them. And lastly, conversion through persuasion does not hurt the minority as much as being coerced by an external majority.

#### *2.4 – Dialogue*

Forst (2014) suggests that justice requires that people reciprocate each other's autonomy; their ability to come to their own conception of the good life. This requires that people (1) grant

everyone the same liberties and restrictions as we grant ourselves, and (2) that we do not assume that others share our values and belief systems, and their validity. If this is not safeguarded, we can put a limit on tolerance. As such, Forst (2014) suggests that tolerance is a *normatively dependent concept*. Tolerance thus becomes a concept that predisposes a certain conception of which safeguards autonomy in order to gain substance. Kukathas (1997) would not accept this. Kukathas argues that assuming a universal notion of autonomy on which to justify a threshold on tolerance implies a set of values that may not be shared by some or even many in a community, and it treats modes of life that do not advocate autonomy as morally inferior.

So, Kukathas (1997) suggests that we cannot decide the limits of tolerance on the basis of justice, as this requires a universalist understanding of autonomy that he argues is not universal at all. Instead, Kukathas (1997) suggests that we should understand tolerance as providing the conditions under which we can check moral certitude. If there is any reason to doubt the correctness of our beliefs – and in a community there always is – then we ought to tolerate different beliefs, and test these against our own. To Kukathas (1997) this is not merely instrumental, as tolerance then creates the conditions under which judgement is worth something. The liberal notion that for judgement to mean something we should appeal to reason is then flipped on its head. Reason’s “authority” rests on the conviction that it exists in a structure of openness and criticism; reason has authority only insofar as it can be tried and tested in public, and to secure this tolerance is essential.

How do we then approach those who seek to restrict us in our values and beliefs? Although Kukathas (1997) suggests that public deliberation under conditions of tolerance is always desirable as this forwards our ability to reason, which may serve to find common ground with those with whom we are in conflict, he stops short of providing any substantial grounds on which to put a check on tolerance. As Kukathas (1997) rejects autonomy as a whole, on the basis that we cannot assume this to be a universal value, he seems to also have undone himself of any objective basis on which to restrict practices that we deem to be inherently intolerant, and that present a threat to our capacity to live the way we desire. Surely, finding common ground by reasoning and deliberation is always preferred, but there are some instances where common ground is not the best outcome. E.g.: finding common ground with a practicing neo-Nazi would be suboptimal to say the least, and anyone who upholds some notion of liberalism should wish to reject its dogma as a whole. To find substantial ground on which to put a threshold on tolerance we may then refer back to Forst (2014), as he provides the only somewhat concrete base on which to put a limit on tolerance, when he argued that tolerance extends only to those respecting our notion of justice, which safeguards a notion of autonomy. But, to settle

this discussion by referring back to a universalist understanding of autonomy would be paradoxical, as this was exactly what Kukathas (1997) tried to avoid. It may therefore be said that this debate has not been settled, and it may therefore be fruitful to look at a different approach.

### **3. Body –**

So, a discussion on the implications and meaning of tolerance ends up circling around the notion of autonomy, which entails that we are free to develop and act on our own notion of the good life without interference from others. Forst (2014) suggests that we ought to understand tolerance as being normatively dependent on justice, which upholds a notion of autonomy. Any breach of this is violation of justice serves as a substantial basis to put a threshold on tolerance. Kukathas (1997) on the other hand disputes this, on the basis that this assumes a universal notion of autonomy that he argues is not universal at all. Instead, tolerance is valuable insofar as it offers the basis on which we can check moral certitude and reason collectively, which is essential to our understanding of justice. But, if justice requires that we reason collectively and find common ground, and we don't uphold a particular inviolable virtue – in this context autonomy –, are we then not opening the door to potentially illiberal values and beliefs?

So, we need to uphold some kind of inviolable value that cannot be overstepped in order to justify a threshold on tolerance, but to say that this has to be autonomy is contradictory, as this specifically suggests that people should be able to form their *own* values. While the discussion between Forst (2014) and Kukathas (1997) focusses mostly on the relation between tolerance and justice, it is autonomy – the idea that everyone should be free from interference to come to their own conception of the good life – that constitutes the basis of their disagreement. Forst (2014) argues that autonomy should be respected at all times, but Kukathas (1997) suggests that that given the different conceptions of the good life that are out there this is contradictory, because autonomy is a value that might not be shared by everyone. Both arguments represent to a certain extent the friction between autonomy and a diversity of values. Forst (2014) says that because we are constantly confronted with different notions of the good life, we need to uphold autonomy to protect our own, while Kukathas (1997) suggests that it is precisely autonomy that does not stroke with this variety of values.

If for the sake of this paper we consider this to be the nature of the problem, then what other way of understanding autonomy are there, and what are the implications thereof? Autonomy is an incredibly broad concept, that has been subject to plenty of philosophical enquiry. In our context, however, it presents considerable parallels with Hannah Arendt's (1960)

notion of sovereignty. Arendt, having radically expanded our understanding of politics, came to be one of the most important thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similar to liberal notions of autonomy, sovereignty, to Arendt, implies total freedom of the will without interference from others. The problem with this, she argues is that in a political body, and its constraints, total freedom of the will can only manifest itself by overpowering others. This to some extent illustrates the zero-sum game between individual freedom and that of others, that tolerance seems to struggle with. Instead, Arendt argues that we need a more limited understanding of freedom that does not require total freedom of the will. In what follows, there will be an analysis of Arendt's contribution to our understanding of freedom and sovereignty, followed by a discussion of its implication to our debate on tolerance.

### 3.2 – Hannah Arendt on freedom

Following the rise of totalitarianism, we are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics end (Arendt, 1960). This is because totalitarian forms of government have failed to recognize civil rights and have subordinated all spheres of life to the demands of politics. Thus, we experienced that freedom disappeared when so-called political considerations started to overrule everything. This is summed up by the liberal credo “the less politics the more freedom” (p. 30). Is it then not that we somehow believe that politics are compatible with freedom only because and insofar it guarantees freedom *from* politics?

Arendt (1960) argues that the question of politics is always present when discussing the problem of freedom, and it is hard to touch a single political issue without touching upon the matter of a person's liberty. To her freedom is the *direct* aim of political actions; the whole reason people live together in political organization. She sums this up by stating ‘The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action’ (p. 28). Arendt based her argument around the misconception that freedom and free will are one and the same, and that freedom is different from the inward space that we can flee towards to escape coercion, and where we might *feel* free, because that too is not true freedom. The prerequisite of this inward experience of freedom is that they embody a retreat from the outer world, where freedom has at times been denied, say in the face of totalitarianism. In spite of the great influence this concept of inward experiences of freedom has had on our philosophical and theoretical understanding of freedom, Arendt argues that it is safe to say that humanity would not know anything of freedom had it not first experienced freedom as a condition of being free amongst others as a worldly tangible reality. Before its attribution as a quality of the will or thought, freedom was considered as a status of the free person, that could move out of the confines of the household

and meet equals in deed and word. Not only did this require liberation from the necessities of life, freedom also needed the company of others who were of an equal standing, and that required public space for them to meet; a politically organized world. However, not all types of human organization are characterized by freedom. Totalitarian or despotically ruled communities do not allow its inhabitants to speak or act, which thus prevents the rise of a public realm where people can be free *together*. Without the guarantee of a political public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make an appearance.

This understanding of liberty as freedom *from* politics is not merely a result of recent experiences but can also be attributed to the history of political theory (Arendt, 1960). To the thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the concept of political freedom was equated with security. Politics highest purpose was the “end of government”, which served as the guarantee of security, and security made freedom possible. With the rise of the social and political sciences in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century widened the breach further, as the role of the government was being considered to be the appointed protector of the interests of society and its individuals, rather than freedom of the life process. Therefore, not only we, who have solid reasons to distrust politics for the sake of freedom, but the entire modern age has separated freedom and politics.

Part of the explanation of this can be found in our tendency to think of freedom as a phenomenon of the will, and not as the freedom to call something into being that did not exist before; *action* (Arendt, 1960). The distinction between the two is that the latter is not a future aim that is intellectually assessed on its desirability on the basis of the will, whereby the initiator calls on the will to dictate action. That is not to say that this action does not have an aim, but this aim varies and is dependent on the changing circumstances of the world, and this aim is not a matter of freedom but a matter of adequate judgement. The will, on the other hand, follows judgement, i.e.: cognition and then commands its execution. The power to command, or to dictate the outcome of this execution is not a matter of freedom, but a matter of strength or weakness. Action – calling something new into being – is free neither as an exercise of the intellect nor the wishes of the will. Action derives out of something else, which Arendt calls *principle*. A principle can inspire, but it cannot dictate any particular outcome. Separate from the judgement of the initiator, or the desires of the will, the inspiring principle is only manifest in the performative act itself. The principle which inspires action can be repeated time and again, and such principles arise from honor, glory, love, equality, distinction, excellence, but also distrust and hatred. Freedom or its counterpart can appear when such principles are actualized, and people are free as long as they act; to be free and to act are the same.

The moment that freedom became separated from politics was the moment it got associated with the free will (Arendt, 1960). Historically, the notion of the will did not manifest itself as an I will therefore I can, but rather as a conflict between the two. When people first discovered the will, they were confronted with its impotence instead of its power. Arendt argues that even in the inherent conceptualization of the will, there is the underlying assumption that it is at struggle with itself. If the will was a flawless phenomenon of human existence, it would not require that there even be a will, because the will would be aligned with all other forces. So, if people have a will at all, it always presents itself as though there is something opposite of it, fighting with each other in the mind. 'Hence, the will is both powerful and impotent, free and unfree' (p. 39).

The never-ending conflict between the will and worldly desires was supposed to be liberated by power, but the most this has seemed to achieve is oppression (Arendt, 1960). As a result of the impotence of the will and its capacity to generate actual power, the fact that the I-can exhausted itself in light of the I-will, the will-to-power switched to a will-to-oppression. Arendt argues that this is also why we today automatically equate power with oppression or rule over others. Power thus arose from a conflict between the willing and the performing self. But however powerful the individual may become, the will shall always be bound by the self, which distinguishes it from the I-think, and is carried out in dialogue with itself, and is therefore not bound to the constraints of the individual.

Since freedom was no longer experienced in acting and associating oneself, but rather with free will, freedom has been a first-tier problem for philosophy (Arendt, 1960). Since then, the ideal of freedom ceased to be to excel in one's actions – what Arendt calls *virtuosity* – and instead it became the idea of *sovereignty*, which suggests total freedom of the will and without interference from others. Arendt argues that in politics, this connotation between freedom and sovereignty is potentially the most dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will. This equation either denies humanity of freedom, namely that when realized people may never be sovereign, or it leads to the understanding that the freedom of an individual or group can be bought at the freedom – that is: sovereignty – of others. Arendt says that under human conditions, that people live together instead of alone, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they could not even exist at the same time.

### 3.3 – *Analysis*

The friction between the I-will and the I-can – the sovereign self and the presence of others – could potentially explain to some extent the ambivalence of tolerance. If we should all be free

from interference, then we cannot interfere in the actions of those who we deem to be intolerable. This section will try to strengthen this argument by applying Hannah Arendt's (1960) understanding of freedom and sovereignty to tolerance as understood on liberal premises. Thereafter, in the final paragraph, the research question will be revisited and answered using an Arendtian notion of freedom.

How does this untangle some of the controversies surrounding tolerance based on liberal premises? Liberalism's notion of autonomy – that everyone should be able to come to their own conception of the good life – can be seen as a way to reconcile individual autonomy with that of others; one can exercise their will, as long as it doesn't interfere with the will of another. This is inherently contradictory, as one *cannot* fully exercise their will if their will is constrained by the will of others. Therefore, the autonomy suggested by liberalism could be a different way of identifying the incompatibility between the I-will and I-can, and a person's inability to influence the values of others based on their own beliefs can be seen as a demonstration of this. Where the I-can is exhausted in light of the I-will, the only option people have is to resort to the use of oppression. Liberalism's notion that people should be able to develop their own notion of the good life, i.e.: autonomy, is in some sense a way of preventing people to use oppression to influence the will of others, while this is exactly what autonomy allows for.

If we instead opt for Arendt's (1960) notion of freedom, and freedom *as* politics, this will have important ramifications for our understanding of politics. Arendt (1960) argues that politics should provide people with a space to meet in deed and word, but this does not imply any predisposition about the nature of the argument. People then should *indeed* be free to form their own values and beliefs systems, even if this means they hold anti-liberal values. What Arendt's theory implies however, is that this is not the nature of the problem, but rather that this should not be turned into coercion at the cost of another person's ability to act through word and deed. This is then also applicable to those who seek to coerce those who hold anti-liberal values in the name of upholding liberal values. They too should not overstep the boundaries of their own freedom.

Additionally, this furthers our understanding of tolerance, namely that it is not so much about the content of people's belief systems, but rather how they manifest themselves in the sphere of politics. When anti-liberal values are let loose in the world, through word and deed, this need not require any initial response by liberals, other than that they are met with word and deed of an equal standing. It is the very nature of politics to allow people to disagree, for this is to Arendt the very essence of freedom. People expressing anti-liberal values in itself does not impede a liberals' freedom. Rather, this is only a manifestation of the freedom possessed by the



both of them, for they both have a space where they can deliberate, to which disagreement is inherent. The line should then only be drawn when any of the actors seek to follow through on their word and deed in a way that takes away another actors' ability to act through word and deed.

So, how does this help us answer the research question: *how can we substantiate a threshold on tolerance?* Arendt's (1960) notion of freedom is thus far more limited than the liberal notion of autonomy and/or non-interference. Arendt argues that freedom should be considered as having the opportunity to *act*; to take the initiative to begin something new through word and deed, which does not presuppose any outcome of the action, nor complete freedom of the will. If we accept this, the problem is not so much that we do not overstep the boundaries of another person's autonomy, but that we do not overstep the boundaries of our *own* freedom, which entails that the person uses oppressive power to see to it that its words and deeds materialize. This flips our discussion of tolerance on its head. Tolerance then becomes more an exercise of self-constraint rather than accepting another one's notion of the good life, and requires not that we safeguard everyone's freedom of the will, i.e.: autonomy, but, again, that we do not overstep the boundaries of our own freedom. If *this* is the premise on which we base tolerance, then the paradox of tolerance is put into a new light. The paradox that by not tolerating intolerance we are intolerant ourselves becomes superficial if we argue that someone overstepped the boundaries of its *own* freedom rather than the autonomy of another. If we then refuse to tolerate the intolerant act, this does not imply the concomitant breach of the freedom of the one committing the intolerant act, rather just an enforcement of the limits of their own freedom and preventing them from using oppression. It would then be wrong to suggest that it would be intolerant to not tolerate intolerance, as no one's freedom is at stake. The threshold of tolerance then should be when someone oversteps the boundaries of their own freedom and uses oppression to follow through on their word and deed.

#### ***4. Discussion and concluding remarks –***

By rethinking our notion of freedom, Arendt (1960) furthers our understanding of tolerance and its limits. This mitigates to a certain degree some of the inherent contradictions associated with tolerance in the liberal framework and provides us with additional philosophical tools to analyze the debate. At the same time, however, it also presents new challenges. This discussion will proceed by applying a tolerance based on Arendt's notion of freedom to the literature discussed earlier, followed by some of the challenges presented by Arendt's notion of freedom.

Kukathas (1997) argues that in communities inhabited by both liberals and those they deem illiberal there will always be disputes about the nature of the good life. Therefore, to assume that everyone should be free to form and revise their own, i.e.: autonomy, would be contradictory, because this *is* a notion of the good life, and that is exactly what is being disputed. But, by dismissing the concept as a whole, he is left with virtually no basis on which to put a threshold on tolerance as there is nothing that can be violated. In her discussion of sovereignty, Arendt (1960) offers us a new language by which to understand the problems with autonomy. By instead opting for freedom as the ability to act one resolves to some extent the inherent contradictions associated with assuming a universal notion of autonomy, while still upholding a core value that can be used to put a threshold on tolerance. Kukathas (1997), on the other hand, could argue that swapping autonomy for Arendt's (1960) notion of freedom we would still be imposing a foreign value or belief system upon others, whereby the problems remain. But, on the other hand, one could argue that Arendt's notion of freedom doesn't require that people are free to revise their own notion of the good life to begin with.

Arendt (1960) notion of freedom as a basis for tolerance can also be applied to the work of Forst (2014). Forst's conceptualization of the *objection*, *rejection* and *acceptance* components become fuzzier if we understand tolerance as an exercise of self-constraint rather than accepting that which we disagree with. In our alternative understanding of tolerance, it merely matters that we identify when freedom turns into oppressive power, so that we can put a halt on it. Manifestation within the limits of individual freedom don't require any evaluative judgement, other than that they are met with word and deed in conditions of equal standing.

Against this, a critic could argue that pinpointing the exact point at which an exercise of freedom turns into oppressive power is quite the challenge, and they would not be wrong. The distinction between exercising freedom and using oppressive power is at the very least arbitrary, and in our modern-day societies this is never as black on white. This final part of the discussion will try to analyze some of the pitfalls of an understanding of tolerance based on an Arendtian notion of freedom, followed by a conclusion.

If we revisit some of the examples given in the introduction it quickly becomes clear that it is quite challenging to pinpoint the exact moment an exercise of freedom turns into oppressive power. If we take the example of free speech and contrast it with hate speech, we could question at which point free speech becomes hate speech, and whether hate speech is an exercise of oppression. The same goes for populist leaders who challenge liberal democratic institutions. In itself this does not imply any direct attempt to turn to oppressive power, but this

may very well be the result. An understanding of tolerance resting on Arendt's (1960) notion of freedom then falls short of providing us a substantial basis on which to reject intolerance.

Arendt herself was not blind to the pitfalls of her conceptualization of freedom. Due to what Arendt has described as the frailty of human affairs, or the fact that an actor never moves in isolation, every human action initiates a chain reaction which leads to new actions and so forth (Arendt, 1958). As a result, one does not need to follow up on its own actions through oppressive power for it to still have this effect. If, say, a politician criticizes liberal democratic institutions, this is not necessarily an act of oppression. It can, however, set in motion a process, e.g.: by mobilizing individual support, that ends in oppression. It is then hard to establish a single point where the freedom to act turns into oppressive power, making it even more difficult to use this as a threshold on tolerance. Put differently, intentions and outcome are not the same thing.

Moreover, Arendt (1958) based her notion of freedom on her understanding of the ancient Greek polis. To enter the realm of politics located in the polis meant to be free from the necessities of life associated with the private spheres. Thus, politics was freedom. Needless to say, however, we are not living in an ancient Greek polis, but in a modern society in which politics has taken a completely different shape. It would be wrong to suggest that Arendt was unaware of this, but an analysis of her opinion on the matter is beyond the scope of this discussion. What matters for us here is that Arendt (1960) proposed her notion of freedom more as an ideal type rather than an actual phenomenon.

Notwithstanding the legitimate criticism then, Arendt (1960) still manages to identify some of the friction inherent in liberal understandings of freedom. Her argument on the incompatibility between the I-will and the I-can illustrates to some extent the tradeoff between the individual freedom and living with amongst others and their freedom. This paper has tried to illustrate that a similar tradeoff is present in discussions of tolerance and its limits, as total freedom of the will requires that we extend tolerance also to those who we deem intolerant, and that by adopting a narrower version of freedom some of this friction can be resolved. That is not to say that Arendt's understanding of freedom is a cure-all to the predicament of tolerance, but it does offer us a new manner of approaching the topic.

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