

BRONZE MEDAL BSPEE 2014 : Marie Wohlgemuth Wergeland. St. Paul Gymnas,
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“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.”

(Karl Popper: *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1945)

In order to explain, defend or argue against this quote, we must first understand the most vital term used: tolerance. What is tolerance, and what does it mean to live in a tolerant society? (One could argue whether or not we live in a tolerant society, but the Western democracies are widely agreed to be classified as tolerant societies in smaller or larger scales.)

Tolerance is defined in the dictionary as “the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behavior that one dislikes or disagrees with.” This is a fair and accurate explanation of the term. Tolerance in practice is challenging, and forces us to keep an open and non-judgmental attitude toward other people and their beliefs. Tolerance is closely related to another term that is vital in a well-functioning society: respect. Tolerance can be seen as the mere willingness to let others express their beliefs and opinions, the (often reluctant) acceptance of behavior and opinions one disagrees with. Respect entails a deeper acceptance, a deeper understanding, and an open-minded and respectful view of other opinions. Often in arguments, one part will grow tired or frustrated and say: I tolerate your opinion, but I cannot respect it. To tolerate: to give room to other opinions, to allow them to be expressed. To respect: to strive for an understanding of the other opinions, to *respect* them and value them (perhaps not equally as your own, but value them nonetheless). Tolerance is the first and easiest step, however hard it may seem sometimes. Respect is what we should strive for in the long run.

Now that I have expressed my views on what tolerance is, it may appear to us that it should not be so hard. It is simply to *give room to* other beliefs, opinions, behavior. To step out of our own heads and allow other viewpoints. It is well-known that countries with tolerant societies are better off than non-tolerant countries. People who have the right to express their opinions, no matter what they might be, are happier than those who risk prison time (or worse) for stating and standing by their convictions and opinions. It is our duty as members of tolerant societies to help those individuals who are not blessed to live in a tolerant society, those who have to fight for freedom to express their opinions, something that is a given to us. It is our duty to spread tolerance.

With tolerance follows a very complex question. It is the question the quote of this task leaves us pondering. What can we allow? Can all opinions be tolerated? And most importantly, *should* they be tolerated?

These questions resurface in the media time and time again in Western societies. A good example is the Norwegian blogger “Fjordman”, who was one of the inspirations of mass murderer and right wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik. He posted hateful content against Islam on his blog and spread his Islamophobic attitude on the Internet. He was and is still read by many Norwegians. After the terror attacks of 22.july, there was a massive discussion on whether or not “Fjordman” should be allowed to post his conspiracies. He was, in most eyes, an intolerant man. Yet the media allowed him to write in the newspapers, he was allowed to publish a book. This was all met with great controversy, and there are similar cases all over

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the Western world. Limits are being pushed constantly, and I believe this will be a very big problem in the future.

I find Popper's quote to be contradicting. The definition of tolerance is the willingness to accept behavior and opinions we dislike or disagree with, even the intolerant opinions. Tolerance is the willingness to accept *any* opinion, be it tolerant or not. If a tolerant society could not accept intolerance, could not give room for the supposed "onslaught of the intolerant", would it then be a tolerant society? The tolerant will only grow stronger by allowing the intolerant to speak their case, the tolerance will only increase. If a tolerant society were to be *capable* of being destroyed simply by being tolerant, *by being what it strives to be*, is it then worth keeping?

Tolerance cannot be compromised. It is all or nothing.