

The Path to Tolerance begins with Eliminating Certitude

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ABSTRACT

The nub of this essay is that all our certitudes are illusory. But first, let me explain certitude, an uncommon word. It means holding absolute certainty about a notion, which, though one may believe that conviction to be the result of an intellectual process, is actually a feeling generated by our subjectivities - our formative and environmental circumstances - consistent with and reinforced by them. For instance, if we are financially secure, we may believe utterly that stealing is wrong, a moral consistent with the preservation of our wealth and comfort; whereas those who are starving may be less convinced. In short, certitude is a rigid sense that no other view is arguable. Certainty is also a firm conviction about an issue, but may be reached after logical reasoning, without any involvement of emotion. For example, once we accept the premises that All men are mortal and Charles is a man, we conclude with certainty that Charles is mortal; but we probably aren't emotionally invested in that result. The availability of certainty in any enquiry depends much on the subject-matter and the methodology employed. Closed systems, like law and engineering, where accepted definitions and principles abound and deductive logic can be readily applied, offer a degree of certainty of conclusion on issues within the field. But with open topics, such as ethics, human rights, social behavior, politics and culture, both certainty and certitude about conclusions are unavailable. (The one exception is when those conclusions are dictated by religious belief, a situation which stands outside this discussion.) To say that certainty is unavailable is not to suggest that we should not hold firm opinions; merely that we should recognise that others may have contrary views for reasons no less arguable than our own. Why is certainty not achievable in respect of open topics? Because subjectivity enters the reasoning process, because language is ambiguous, especially when we address concepts themselves created by language, because truth is an abstract concept, and because of the limitations of the "tools", such as logic, which we use for reasoning. If we rid ourselves of unjustified certitudes and certainties, what might follow?