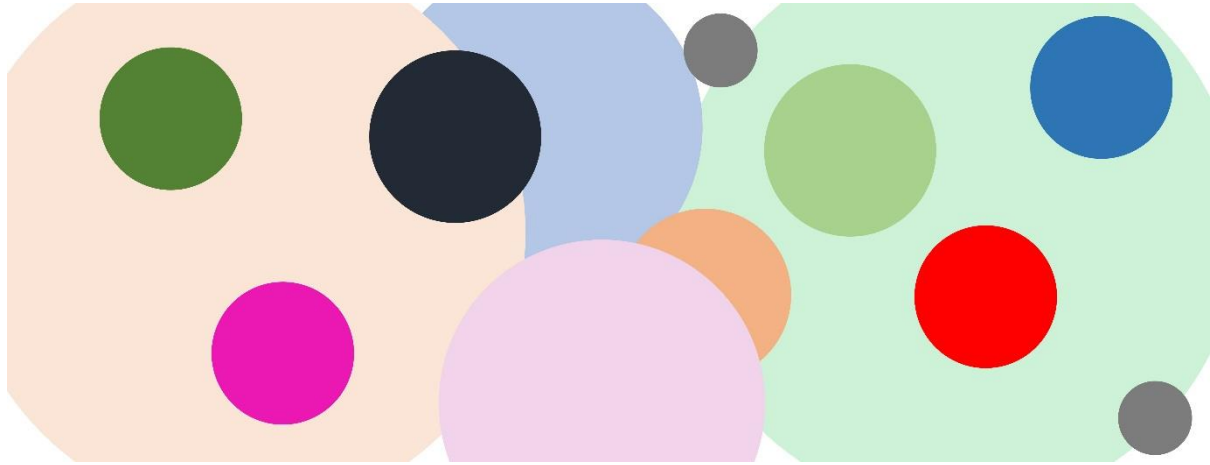


How Big is Your Circle of Tolerance?

Shôn Ellerton, June 4, 2023

If the size of a circle reflects one's tolerance level to others, just how big is your circle?



A thought came to me the other day. To what level of tolerance could we, or should we, accept from someone belonging to an outlying group? A group whose ideas we don't identify with or more to the extreme, ideologies we abhor with our most utmost making our stomachs churn even thinking about them.

Now and again, I have had those discussions with people I know very closely. Some of a religious nature, and some political. In any case, they are both ideologies in my view, so I tend to treat them both with the same respect or contempt, depending on what that ideology is.

There is a saying that one can draw a figurative compass around oneself to represent a boundary which should not be crossed. Perhaps, a personal Rubicon with reference to the river Caesar crossed in which there is no going back. However, there is also another way of thinking about this. To draw a circle that encompasses others that may differ in your own way of thinking. In essence, being placed *away from* the centre of the circle representing increasing tolerance and those positioned further away from where one stands being those who are not tolerated by those positioned closer to the centre.

Think of a scatter plot or a target used for rifle practice, most of the dots will be congregated not too close to the centre nor too far from the outer edge. Think of a doughnut where the centre and edge areas are sparse. After all, there are more of us in society that get on with others who share similar opinions and viewpoints. But most of us are relatively tolerant and civil to others neither being extremely

intolerant in the centre nor outstandingly unbiased and impartial around the edge, which is a rare talent indeed.

Within the 'doughnut' area where most of the points will be scattered; in other words, not too close to the centre nor at the outer edge is where most of us probably fit into. Many shared attributes for those who reside in the 'doughnut' include a relatively high trust for establishments, a dislike of being an outlier or sticking one's head over the parapet. Also being content with a 'safety in numbers' approach, wanting or even feeling it necessary to follow a narrative based on majority consensus, and, in general, not being too fussed either way what life is thrown at them as long as it doesn't affect them adversely. If one can take the red pill/blue pill analogy, the blue pill would be the best fit. After all. For those satisfied with life, why overthink it? I would say that most of us in this area, and, indeed, most of us, in general, are quite tolerant with each other. Especially when face-to-face encounters prevail.

However, this group is often prone to being influenced by those with extreme intolerance in the centre much like a black hole sucking in those residing in the 'doughnut' towards the centre of intolerance. The other weakness this group often exhibits is a sense of nonchalance being somewhat quiet and unspoken. The so-called 'silent majority'.

In the very centre lies an area of extreme intolerance for those who interact with others of differing opinions and ideologies. Those who proselytise are often highly intolerant to other opinions, ideologies, faiths, and other tenets and narratives. They know they are right and others are wrong. Nor do they make any attempt to have an open discussion challenging their views. They make much of the inner circle of intolerance and are often very active in trying to coax others into their environment.

We often see such displays of this type of intolerance in current affairs, particularly so, in social media, where consequences are often eliminated through anonymity and virtualisation. By following a different political party or believing or not believing in a Supreme Being or even the *same* Supreme Being, are common cases. In extreme cases, there are those that lie in the very middle of the centre who feel no remorse in doing harm to others that do not follow their ideologies. Worse still, is that they can instil martyrdom into malleable minds to perform such acts. One such repugnant case that springs to mind is from a story a friend of mine who, during his childhood in Saddam's Iraq during the 80s, a

time of conflict between Iran and Iraq, said that children were given ‘plastic keys from God’ and were told to run through mine-infested zones in the knowledge that, should they be blown up, they would enter the gardens of Paradise.

Those around this centre of extreme intolerance also tend to be more prone to gravitate towards in-group biases than those away from the centre. On debating potentially polarising topics of sensitivity, it is not necessary for them to hear out opposing views as they are often considered either unnecessary, mere annoyances, menaces, or even outright dangers to society. Safety through obfuscation and censorship rather than safety through rigorous and open debate.

Now, it may not be clear cut where one may lie on the scatter plot because there may be particular items of discussion which may set off a trigger leading to often irrational behaviour ranging from extreme disgust to unbridled fandom. However, in general, there are often a shared set of attributes amongst those with gross intolerance to others with differing opinions. To be clear, I need to reiterate that ‘the centre’ in this analogy is not a place of good values and morality as, perhaps, portrayed in the Buddhist Middle Way or in the Masonic sense, in which the centre is a point where one cannot err.

So, what are some the attributes of those who lie far away from the centre of intolerance of this figurative rifle practice target?

Those who sit far away from the centre have a much larger circumference of tolerance to others and also have attributes which are far more suited for impartiality and neutrality. In the world of business, one of the most important traits of a management consultant is the ability to make recommendations to a client with the least amount of bias. In the world of justice, the judge’s ability to mete out unerring justice and impartiality is dependent on having a fairly high degree of tolerance. Judging with candour, admonishing with friendship and reprehending with mercy is a mantra very well-known in Masonic circles and applies so very well in day-to-day lives of all. An intolerant, heavily-biased, or easily influenced judge is an inherent danger to justice as a whole. It is no wonder that positions that require high levels of clearance are never given to those that do not tell the truth or are easily influenced by personal gain, usually of monetary means.

Other attributes of those who have a large circumference of tolerance include the ability to take in various viewpoints in their entirety with a fresh and open mind untainted by pre-empted prejudices and personal bias. To be comfortable with

listening to opinions not shared can be uncomfortable for many, but not for the highly tolerant. It is, of course, nigh-on impossible to be *completely* impartial; however, it is not an unreasonable request to make the time and be courteous by listening to other viewpoints and trying to be unemotional and objective. In the business world, this is key to the professional's toolkit. In my case, the world of data architecture, I have had to listen to quite polarising opinions and formulate a recommendation from an external consultant's viewpoint. A judge in a court would do the same, likewise.

Alluding to the statement I made earlier regarding particular items of discussion which may trigger someone to become angry or incensed, there is an interesting attribute to those who are highly tolerant. The ability to be tolerant to those who *partially* agree to one's viewpoints and opinions. No where have I seen this better demonstrated is in the world of podcasting and vlogging, the most famous example to date being Joe Rogan, who has, much to the ire of his detractors, managed to outperform just about every major news networks in terms of viewer numbers. In the world of writing, the most famous to date is inarguably J.K. Rowling, who, despite her enormous fan club, has vast numbers of detractors, all with highly intolerant attributes, who decried her on grounds of either dabbling with witches and magic, supposedly ungodly-like pursuits, and, very interestingly some years later, at the other end of the spectrum, an angry mob who wants her head on a pole for daring to suggest that men are men and women are women, which, for many God-fearing folk, uphold with absolutism. Fascinating stuff.

So, the question holds. How tolerant should we be? Or perhaps, maybe I should ask myself the same question. How tolerant should *I* be?

Do we grow more tolerant with age and the collection of wisdom? And how does that mantra work with the diametrically opposed statement that one cannot teach an old dog new tricks? I often wonder.

Do we learn to accept others if part of what they believe or practice is in contradiction to one's agenda or belief? In my case, I would like to think that I am very accepting in this regard. For example, an old school friend who I dearly love adheres very strongly to an ideology that I express little or no interest in; however, he is quite persistent in pushing that ideology. I had, long ago, given up open and rigorous debate on the matter and rather just ignore it, and likewise, I think he has given up as well, but it does it make my friendship with him any less for me? Absolutely not!

For me. How far would my tolerance for others go? Aside from causing *real* harm to others, or being pushed too far and being told that I *have* to follow someone's ideology for no practical or logical reason, I would like to think that my circumference of tolerance is large enough to encompass most in society.