RELATIVISM, ABSOLUTISM, AND TOLERANCE

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Abstract: A common view is that relativism requires tolerance. We argue that there is no deductive relation between relativism and tolerance, but also that relativism is not incompatible with tolerance. Next we note that there is no standard inductive relation between relativism and tolerance—no inductive enumeration, argument to the best explanation, or causal argument links the two. Two inductive arguments of a different sort that link them are then exposed and criticized at length. The first considers relativism from the objective point of view ‘of the universe’, the second from the subjective point of view of the relativist herself. Both arguments fail. There is similarly no deductive relation between absolutism and tolerance—neither entails the other—and no inductive connection of any sort links the two. We conclude that tolerance, whether unlimited or restricted, is independent of both relativism and absolutism. A metaethical theory that says only that there is one true or valid ethical code, or that there is a plurality of equally true or valid ethical codes, tells us nothing about whether we should be tolerant, much less how tolerant we should be.

Keywords: absolutism, relativism, tolerance, voluntarism.

When I teach ethics, I think it important to discuss relativism.¹ Not only is relativism a historically important issue, one that ethical theorists from the time of Socrates onward have thought imperative to discuss, but the subject is also of great interest to students. Many students are constitutional relativists. They think relativism obviously true, because “everyone has only his opinion” and “who is to say what’s right, anyway?” Unfortunately, as far too many people reading this article know, a substantial number of students cling to such arguments even after they have been shown to be of no worth. Not everyone has a philosophical bone or two in his body.

On the other hand, there are the textbooks. Most textbooks, whether anthologies or single-author texts, include at least a section on relativism. The overwhelming majority of textbook authors and editors aren’t too

¹ Although this article has two authors, both of us agree that use of the first-person singular is more natural and less disruptive to the flow of the piece than use of the first-person plural. “I,” “me,” “my,” and so on are thus used to refer to the authors throughout, except in the final footnote.
happy with relativism, and they seem as eager to refute it as students are to embrace it. The arguments offered against relativism are many and varied, and virtually all are an order of magnitude better than the student arguments for relativism of a paragraph back, even if they are not definitive.

There is, however, one concept that comes up again and again in discussions of relativism, whether pro or con, that I think needs a little more scrutiny. Both students and professional philosophers emphasize relativism’s relation to tolerance. Just about everyone takes it for granted that there’s a strong connection between relativism and tolerance. But is there? One of the main purposes of philosophy is critically to examine underlying assumptions, and it’s the underlying assumption just mentioned, that there is a connection between relativism and tolerance, that will be the primary focus of attention here. A secondary focus will be the connection between absolutism and tolerance.

I

Strictly speaking, relativism is the view that the truth of a moral or ethical statement is relative. But relative to what? Not just to the facts, for a nonrelativist would agree that moral truth is relative to the way the world is, to the facts. Rather, relativists hold that moral truth is relative to only certain kinds of facts, namely, the facts we identify as cultural, personal, or societal standards. These standards are created by human beings, are based on human decisions, and differ from culture to culture, person to person, and society to society. Moral truth is thus invented, not discovered, and because there are a large number of different cultural, personal, and societal standards, there is not just a plurality of different moral codes—which is true, and which indicates only that different people have different moral views—there is a plurality of equally true or valid moral codes. Relativists thus hold that the different moral codes of different cultures, different societies, or different individuals are equally true or valid. For simplicity’s sake, if for no other reason, that’s how the term relativism will be used here: Relativism is the view that there’s a plurality of equally true or valid moral codes, with a moral code being a set of moral rules, principles, values, ideals, attitudes, emotions, and so on, which fit together, at least ideally, and reinforce one another.

Relativism has a lot to say for it, according to its proponents. One point in its favor, they say, is that it recognizes that there’s not just one correct way of doing things, not just one right answer to every moral question. To think otherwise, to think that one moral code has all the answers, is to think that one moral code is capable of validly criticizing another. But criticism of one moral code from the standpoint of another is baseless. There simply is no absolute moral code, no moral code that transcends cultural, personal, and societal standards, and in virtue of which other moral codes can be judged. Relativism thus requires us not
to interfere with or condemn behavior, conduct, attitudes, and so on that are not approved by our own moral code. In other words, relativism requires us to be tolerant. With no moral code being any truer or more valid than any other moral code, there is no rational attitude to take toward another’s conduct except tolerance. To interfere is presumptuous. It’s to indulge in self-centered, self-congratulatory, and baseless moral arrogance. Relativists at least take the different moral codes of different people or cultures as merely different and do not try to force their views on others.

Critics of relativism tend to think that relativists are half right about all this. James Rachels, for example, thinks that relativism does indeed entail tolerance, but that that’s actually a powerful argument against it (Rachels 1993, 17, 18, 21). Is it really true, he asks, that no moral code is inferior to or superior to any other moral code? Should we really tolerate all sorts of behavior which we regard as repugnant, but which is sanctioned by the moral code of an agent or his culture? What about cannibalism? human sacrifice? torture? incest? rape? the burning of widows? That’s not the kind of tolerance we want, he and others say, and the inability to condemn or interfere with the conduct of members of other cultures, when that conduct is intolerable, is itself intolerable. The intolerableness of the tolerance of relativism is precisely what’s wrong with relativism, they argue.

Critics of relativism are usually absolutists. An absolutist is someone who believes that there is, at least in principle, exactly one true or valid moral code. This code may be hard to discover, just as the one true physics is, but it exists, and we should try to discover it. While the great majority of absolutists agree with Rachels that relativism leads to unlimited tolerance and, like Rachels, use that as an argument against relativism, a few argue for a contrary and strong position, namely, that acceptable tolerance, tolerance when it is a virtue—which certainly isn’t unlimited tolerance—can be justified only on absolutism. Gordon Graham, for example, is an absolutist who argues that tolerance can be justified only on an assumption of “objectivism” (Graham 1996, 56), with “objectivism,” in his parlance, meaning much the same thing as what I mean by “absolutism.” According to Graham, then, relativism can’t justify the only sort of tolerance worth having.

The principal question addressed in this article is: Does relativism require tolerance, and seemingly unlimited tolerance, as Rachels claims, or does relativism make it impossible to justify worthwhile tolerance, as Graham claims? Rachels and Graham cannot both be correct—it cannot be that relativism both entails unlimited tolerance and makes justifying acceptable tolerance impossible—so at least one of the two is wrong. But the key phrase here is “at least.”

2 “Objectivism,” he says, is the theory that there is in principle a single true moral code.
My view is that both Rachels and the Graham are wrong. Tolerance, unlimited or restricted, is neither required nor justified by either relativism or absolutism. There is no logical or epistemic relation between relativism or absolutism and tolerance. Both are compatible with tolerance, but neither requires tolerance and neither, by itself, justifies tolerance.

I first argue that there is no deductive relation between relativism and tolerance—in other words, that relativism doesn’t entail tolerance, but also that relativism isn’t incompatible with tolerance. There also is no standard or typical inductive relation between the two. Since, however, for many people the feeling that there must be some connection between relativism and tolerance may well linger even so, I then go on to examine two arguments that link relativism to tolerance, but not through any sort of necessary connection and not through any of the more usual sorts of inductive connection. The first argument considers the relation of relativism and tolerance from the completely impersonal or, better, the completely nonpersonal point of view. This is what I, following Thomas Nagel, call the objective point of view. The second argument considers the relation of relativism and tolerance from the very subjective point of view of the modest relativist herself. I find both arguments wanting. I then briefly examine general deductive and inductive links between absolutism and tolerance, and I end with an analysis of Graham’s argument that only absolutism can justify acceptable tolerance. I also find Graham’s argument less than convincing and conclude that there’s no logical or epistemic relation between either relativism or absolutism and tolerance.

Is the much touted tolerance entailed by relativism acceptable, as many relativists say, or appalling, as most critics of relativism maintain? The answer is neither, because tolerance is not entailed by relativism. Relativists are committed only to

(1) There are two or more—a plurality—of equally true or valid moral codes,

and (1) doesn’t entail

(2) Tolerance of moral practices or moral codes other than one’s own is morally required.

There’s no logical relation between (1) and (2). The point here is simple. It is also indifferent to the kind of relativism in question—it doesn’t matter whether (1) is understood in terms of cultural, individual, or societal relativism. In fact, even if we weaken the principle of tolerance to

(2’) Tolerance of certain moral practices or moral codes other than one’s own, those of sorts \(x, y,\) and \(z,\) is morally required, if such
practices or codes don’t threaten one’s own practices or moral code,  
(1), no matter how understood, still doesn’t entail (2'). There’s no logical,  
deductive relation between relativism and tolerance.

However, although relativism doesn’t entail tolerance, relativism isn’t  
inconsistent with tolerance. Contrary to what is suggested by Graham, a  
relativist could make moral judgments to the effect that we ought to  
tolerate such-and-such behavior, where tolerating this behavior is  
morally acceptable, without contradicting himself—which isn’t to say  
that his relativism either entails or justifies his tolerance. In other words,  

(1) There are two or more—a plurality—of equally true or valid  
moral codes

is not inconsistent with  

(3) Such-and-such behavior, beliefs, or attitudes ought to be tolerated

or

(4) Tolerance is a virtue that ought to be promoted

or

(2) Tolerance of moral practices or moral codes other than one’s  
own is morally required

or

(2') Tolerance of certain moral practices or moral codes other than  
one’s own, those of sorts x, y, and z, is morally required, if such  
practices or codes don’t threaten one’s own practices or moral code.

If relativism were inconsistent with (2), (2'), (3), or (4), it would entail  
their denials, which it plainly does not. Once explicitly laid out—some-  
thing, curiously, no one has taken the time to do—it can be readily seen  
that relativism entails neither tolerance nor the denial of tolerance.  
Considered just by itself, it has no logical implications respecting tolerance.

If this seems odd, especially given the immediate and almost universal  
coupling of relativism and tolerance both by students and by  
professionals, consider this. Tolerance is a first-order virtue, part of (or  
not part of) one’s basic morality, one’s moral code. The same holds for  
the judgments that we ought to be tolerant—they’re first-order moral  
judgments. In that respect, tolerance is no different from courage,  
determination, and diligence. But no one thinks that relativism entails  
our being courageous, determined, or diligent. In these cases, the reason  
why that is so is obvious: courage, determination, and diligence are not
elements of metaethics, while relativism is a metaethical view. It would be very surprising if something that is not a moral code, or part of a moral code, but merely a theory about the number of true or valid moral codes, had implications for the contents of a moral code. This is obvious in the case of what might be called legal relativism. “There are a number—two or more—equally true or valid legal codes or systems of law” by itself entails nothing about the contents of any legal code, any law. Nor, for that matter, is the situation any different for absolutism. “There is one true physics” says nothing about the contents of that one true physics. Thus what is true of courage, determination, and diligence is equally true of tolerance.

3

The argument above notwithstanding, the feeling that there still must be some sort of close connection between relativism and tolerance, even if not a deductive one, will linger for many people. That the two are not as independent as shapes and colors is a strong intuition that we all have. As such it deserves respect. But it’s also an intuition that needs to be critically scrutinized.

If the relation between relativism and tolerance is not deductive, then it must be inductive. By an inductive argument, reason, or connection, I mean an argument (reason or connection) that is not deductive, that’s all. A deductive argument purports to show that, necessarily, if its premises are true, so is its conclusion. Any argument that purports to lend some support to its conclusion, though not deductive support, is an inductive argument. Inductive arguments come in many different shapes and sizes, but in every case an inductive argument, if at all good, justifies its conclusion to some extent.

Does, then, relativism provide inductive support for tolerance? Does it justify tolerance? Certainly not in the way that an inductive enumeration justifies belief in a generalization or belief that an unexamined case will be like an examined case. The conclusion, in the case at hand, (2), (2'), (3), or (4), does not employ the same terms as the supposed premise, (1). Nor is the argument from (1) to (2) or one of its kin (to which I’ll cease to refer) aptly characterized as an argument to the best explanation. The moral imperative of tolerance doesn’t explain the truth of relativism (assuming that it is true), nor does the truth of relativism explain the moral imperative of tolerance. The argument also is not causal in any way: neither relativism nor tolerance is the cause of the other, nor are the two independent but causally sufficient conditions for the same effect (which would be what?), or independent effects of the same cause (again, which would be what?), or even causally related in any more complicated way. The more usual inductive inferences, modeled on and reflecting scientific or everyday empirical reasoning, are out of place in the case at hand.
Something looser and more informal is needed. Two arguments occur to me, both with their roots in our vague and not fully developed intuitions about relativism and tolerance. As they should, the arguments concern a general relation between relativism and tolerance, and they make no mention of the particular details of any moral code. For not only are moral codes many and varied, according to relativism itself, and so not able to establish a stable and dependable relation between relativism and tolerance, but the question, after all, is: How is relativism related to tolerance? Not, How is relativism related to tolerance if we hold such-and-such moral code or such-and-such moral views? An answer to the latter question probably relates the elements of a moral code other than tolerance to tolerance more than it relates relativism to tolerance.

To understand the arguments, we have first to assume that relativism is true. Then we have to imagine that a relativist who holds to one moral code finds herself disagreeing with someone who holds to a different code. To make this vivid, it is useful, though not necessary, to imagine them disagreeing over a particular moral issue, such as abortion or affirmative action. Our relativist knows that, in a sense, she can’t offer any “ultimate” proof that she’s right. This is the situation to keep in mind in the arguments that follow.

The first argument proceeds from the objective point of view.3 What I mean by the objective point of view is a perspective on the world that isn’t tainted with any of our personal, cultural, or even species-specific idiosyncrasies, biases, interests, or limitations. It’s a point of view that leaves our subjective nature and situation behind, and invites us to consider the world, including ourselves, as God or nature sees it. The world as it is in itself—as pure en soi, so to speak—is what appears from the objective point of view. To illustrate: advocates of the primary/secondary quality distinction claim that from the objective point of view colors don’t appear, that they aren’t properties of objects in and of themselves, that they are a product of our subjective constitution.4 What this has to do with ethics is this: given the truth of relativism, morality is also a subjective construction. From the objective point of view, then, no ultimate grounds for interfering with the conduct of another can be seen. Actions don’t have the objective properties of rightness or wrongness that would warrant interference. When two parties disagree over some moral matter, all that is visible from the objective point of view is equal moral

3 I draw here and in what follows on Thomas Nagel’s useful distinction between the objective and subjective points of view. The distinction is developed in a number of his articles, and especially in Nagel 1986.

4 To be perfectly accurate, colors do appear from the objective point of view, but not as properties of objects. Rather, they exist as appearances for human beings and other creatures.
truth—which, since the moral truths are subjectively based, in essence means no moral truth at all. If we assume the truth of relativism and then take the objective point of view, no grounds for interfering with another’s conduct, no grounds for preferring one moral code to another, can be seen. And that is to say that, viewed properly—that is, objectively—tolerance is required.

I think that this much of the above argument is correct: viewed solely from the objective point of view, neither moral code of the disputants mentioned two paragraphs back is preferable to the other, and neither disputant has the right to interfere with the other. But the problem with this argument is that this doesn’t mean what a proponent of a connection between relativism and tolerance thinks it means. ‘Neither disputant has the right to interfere with the other’ is ambiguous in much the same way that ‘A doesn’t believe that God exists’ is. On one reading, this says that A is an atheist; on another, that he’s an agnostic. On the second reading, all it says is that A lacks a belief, namely, one in God’s existence. It says nothing about any beliefs that A does have. On the first reading, however, ‘A doesn’t believe that God exists’ attributes a belief to A, namely, that God doesn’t exist. The same sort of ambiguity attends ‘from the objective point of view, there’s no right to interfere’ and ‘from the objective point of view, no ultimate grounds for interference can be seen.’ On one reading, this says merely that from the objective point of view, there is a lack of a right to interfere, and a lack of grounds for interference—that is, that no right to or grounds for interference show up or can be seen. That is not a moral claim; it doesn’t say that it would be wrong to interfere. Colors don’t show up from the objective point of view (according to some philosophers), and so the claim that ‘from the objective point of view, there are no grounds for thinking that car red’ doesn’t mean that the car in question is some non-red color, such as blue. On a second reading, however, ‘from the objective point of view, there’s no right to interfere, no grounds for interference’ does say that it would be wrong to interfere. This is probably the more usual way to interpret such claims. For example, it would be a much more natural way to interpret ‘you have no right to take my suitcase’ and ‘you have no grounds for firing me’ as claims that (or, better, as reasons for the claims that) it would be wrong to take my suitcase, wrong to fire me. Read in this second, more natural way, ‘from the objective point of view, there’s no right to interfere, no grounds for interference’ is a moral claim.

It is because the argument confuses these two readings that it seems convincing. Just because, from the objective point of view, neither of the two disputing parties has the right to interfere with the other, or any grounds for interfering with the other, that does not mean that the two parties have to practice tolerance toward each other. It means that the objective point of view doesn’t grant a right to interference, that no grounds for intolerance can be found in the objective point of view. But
then again, if relativism is true, the objective point of view doesn’t say anything about what is right and wrong. It thus certainly doesn’t say that we should be tolerant. Whereof it cannot speak, it is silent. All that’s true is that the proponents of differing moral views have their own (equally true or valid, but subjectively based) moral codes—that’s all the objective point of view says. For each disputant, either the practice of tolerance or the practice of intolerance is a part of his moral code, or neither is. If the first, then tolerance is entailed; if the second, then intolerance is entailed; if neither, then neither tolerance nor intolerance is entailed. In no case does, or can, the completely neutral point of view of the universe say which of these positions is correct.

The only reading that is warranted on the argument is the first one, the one that says nothing about morality at all. The argument seems strong only because key phrases are first read one way, as normative, when only a second way of reading them, as non-normative, is warranted. Added impetus for the equivocation is the fact that a normative interpretation of such claims is, in most contexts, the most natural interpretation.

A final point of clarification. Emphasis on multiple moral truth encourages viewing the situation as similar to choosing between two equally good or praiseworthy alternatives within a normative framework. But if relativism is assumed, the point of view adopted in the argument, the objective point of view, would recognize no values to choose between. Choice within a moral framework thus isn’t in question.

5

The second argument linking relativism and tolerance is very different. It adopts the subjective point of view of a self-conscious relativist and examines how she might reason about a dispute she finds herself in with a proponent of a different moral code. Such a relativist may say to herself that she has no ultimate reason to prefer her moral code to that of her opponent, even though she believes in her own code. In the ultimate scheme of things, she realizes, she is nobody special, no one who has privileged access to the way the world is, morally speaking, any more than her opponent or anyone else. There is no such privileged access, for there is no way the world is, morally speaking, independent of the way people decide it is. Knowing as much, she humbly concludes that she should be tolerant. But since this fact, the fact that she is nobody special, that there is no privileged access, applies to any and all situations, and to any and all conduct, she concludes that she should just plain be tolerant, period.

Modesty and humility are admirable qualities, especially given human limitations and, despite such limitations, strong human tendencies to the contrary, but the argument here is problematic for at least two reasons. First, despite the supposed unavailability of the elements of first-order morality—that is, the fact that the relativist’s own first-order morality,
whatever it may be, shouldn’t guide her reasoning from relativism to tolerance\(^5\)—empathy is smuggled into the argument, and used as a moral emotion or premise to conclude tolerance. This is a clear violation of the parameters of the problem.

But even apart from the fact that a hidden moral fulcrum is doing the real work in the argument, there is a second problem, an even greater one. No one can really be tolerant of everything and at the same time be committed to her own moral code. This isn’t just psychologically impossible, though it is that, but logically impossible. Anyone who really retains a moral code can’t embrace unrestricted tolerance. Moral codes require that some things aren’t done, that some things are horrendous, that some things aren’t tolerated. That’s their nature. If a moral code excludes nothing, if it doesn’t ever say ‘this sort of conduct isn’t to be tolerated,’ it is not a moral code at all, just as a legal code that excludes nothing, that puts up with everything and attaches sanctions to nothing, is not a legal code. At least in normal circumstances, for example, a moral code has to say that destruction of its adherents shouldn’t be tolerated.\(^6\)

That, in fact, points up another aspect of self-refutation lurking within this subjectivist argument: assuming, as the argument does, that a relativist holds to a first-order moral code, if she argues to the unrestricted tolerance of other moral codes—and that is where she is inevitably led, given the constraints on her argument (i.e., none of her first-order morality being allowed to guide her reasoning\(^7\)) and possibly thereby circumscribe her conclusion; parity of reasoning necessitating that the same conclusion, tolerance, be drawn no matter what moral matter first prompts her ruminations)—her attitude requires tolerance of others ignoring her moral code, and not just consciously, but in unreflective practice. It implies, in other words, that her moral code has no force.

What this amounts to is that a self-conscious relativist of the sort envisioned is in danger of becoming an amoralist. To treat all moral codes as equal—which, in effect, is what she does—is to preclude the commitment essential to having a moral code in the first place. Morality requires taking a stand, locating oneself morally in this place and not somewhere else. Regardless of whether it is absolute or relative, morality

\(^5\) Otherwise the conclusion to be drawn would be not that relativism provides strong support for tolerance but that relativism plus moral premises, emotions, and so on of such-and-such a sort provide strong support for tolerance, when such premises, emotions, and so on may be, on relativism itself, valid but completely idiosyncratic or culture bound. See also the first paragraph of section 4 above.

\(^6\) And normal circumstances are necessary. As one of Metaphilosophy’s sharp-eyed referees pointed out, it is conceivable that a moral code would sanction its own destruction. It might be the case, for example, that utilitarianism is a view that, when held, does not lead to the best consequences. Some other view, a false one by its lights, might be the view that, when held, leads to the best consequences. In that case, a utilitarian could condone, and even champion, the destruction of her own view.

\(^7\) Though this condition is actually violated; see above.
is a highly partisan undertaking. Unrestricted tolerance of other moral codes—treating other moral codes as the equals of one’s own—precludes such partisan commitment in much the same way that treating all women as equal precludes the partisan commitment, the favoring, that is necessary for a man being married to one woman and not every woman. A self-conscious relativist can’t hold that other moral codes are merely different—merely chocolate and strawberry ice cream, whereas she prefers vanilla—while being committed to her own moral code.

6

What about absolutism and tolerance? Is there a connection between them, irrespective of any connection, real or alleged, between relativism and tolerance? Does tolerance require absolutism, or at least does belief in tolerance require belief in absolutism?

Actually, much of what was said above about relativism and tolerance applies equally well to absolutism and tolerance.

(A) There’s a single true or valid moral code, for example, certainly doesn’t entail

(2) Tolerance of moral codes or practices other than one’s own is morally required

any more than (1) does. Nor does (A) entail (2’), (3), or (4). Conversely, neither (2), (2’), (3), nor (4) entails (A). In that sense, it is not true that tolerance requires absolutism. There’s no deductive relation between absolutism and tolerance, not even worthwhile tolerance, just as there’s no deductive relation between relativism and tolerance. The reasons are exactly the same in both cases (see section 2 above).

7

But what about a weaker relation? Again, as with relativism, it is obvious that none of the standard inductive relations holds between absolutism and tolerance. No inductive enumeration or abductive argument will establish a relation between them, and causal arguments, no matter how complex, are equally futile. Again, something looser and more informal is needed. The arguments of sections 4 and 5 aren’t available, however, not even mutatis mutandis, for multiple moral truth is (so to speak) absolutely essential to both.

One argument of a more informal sort connecting absolutism and tolerance—rather, the tolerance that’s morally acceptable, not unlimited tolerance—comes from Gordon Graham. According to Graham, the justification of tolerance is founded on the value of voluntarism, which in turn is based on absolutism.

Why should I tolerate, still less believe in tolerating, the opinions of others when I hold their opinions to be false or erroneous? One obvious answer, the
answer that historically lies at the heart of the belief in religious toleration, is voluntarism, the claim that a large measure of the value that attaches to religious and moral belief arises from individuals coming to believe and accept moral and religious truth for themselves. . . . The justification of toleration lies in voluntarism, and voluntarism is intelligible only on the presumption of objectivism. (Graham 1996, 56)

(As noted previously, Gordon’s use of “objectivism” is close to what I’ve been calling “absolutism.”)

Is this right? I’m not going to discuss whether tolerance can be justified on the basis of voluntarism, though that certainly seems debatable. For even if that point of Graham’s argument is granted, it doesn’t follow that voluntarism, defined as Graham defines it, as a value attendant upon the exercise of free will, can be founded only on absolutism. Just as relativism has no implications for normative ethics, so, and by exactly the same token, does absolutism have no implications for normative ethics. If voluntarism is a moral value and grounds tolerance, that is true whether there are a number of equally true moral codes or only one true moral code. The justification comes from within morality. Tolerance, even what Graham regards as proper or acceptable tolerance, can thus be accepted by relativists. Graham’s claim, then, that absolutism is the only metaethical theory that can justify voluntarism, and thus tolerance, is not correct.

Graham is not the only one who thinks that it is absolutism, and not relativism, that is really linked to tolerance. “There is no special affinity,” David Brink writes,

between realism [or absolutism] and intolerance or antirealism [or relativism] and intolerance. If anything, the appropriate sort of commitment to tolerance seems to presuppose the truth of moral realism [absolutism]. (Brink 1989, 94)

Brink’s first statement here is correct, but I fail to see any reason for the second. If someone believes in absolutism, she may be psychologically more likely to believe in tolerance. But belief in absolutism isn’t necessary, epistemically speaking, for belief in tolerance, since relativism and tolerance are compatible, and any indirect route between the two will need to be spelled out in detail. What I’ve been suggesting is that any such route will have to travel through normative ethics, and that that is where the real justification for tolerance will be picked up. Absolutism will be a free rider all the way. 

I’ve argued that neither relativism nor absolutism has any evidential value so far as tolerance is concerned. There is no epistemic link between relativism or absolutism as such and tolerance. Relativists and absolutists are committed to their own moral codes, and the justification of tolerance will have to be found within a moral code, if it’s to be found at all. A

8 But see the small exception noted at the end of the next paragraph.
relativist who is committed to tolerance by her moral code and an absolutist who is committed to tolerance by his moral code are both tolerant of moral codes other than their own, regardless of their metaethical views. With an exception to be noted immediately below, their commitment is not related, epistemically speaking, to the particular metaethical theory they happen to hold. If there is a connection between either relativism or absolutism and tolerance, either it will be causal and psychological—belief in the former will cause, for psychological reasons, belief in the other—or it will be forged from within a moral code itself, in that a morality will dictate that if relativism/absolutism is true, then we ought to be tolerant. That would be a strange normative claim, but it’s a logically possible one. The first alternative, that the connection is merely causal and psychological, is the far more likely.9

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