Review Article

Suite: Book Symposium on John Tillson's *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*

The Ethics of Influence in State-Regulated Schools: Tillson v Rawls

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Abstract

John Tillson's *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* develops and deploys the 'epistemic criterion' for deciding whether teachers should promote belief in particular propositions. He defends that criterion by arguing that it promotes human well-being and enables individuals to fulfil their duty to pursue the truth. In this article I draw on John Rawls's conception of political liberalism to suggest that the epistemic criterion is an inappropriate basis for the political community's shaping of children's beliefs.

Keywords

Political liberalism; education policy; John Rawls; religion

In his excellent book, John Tillson (2019) elaborates and defends a distinctive conception of the principles that ought to regulate the shaping of children's beliefs. Here, I compare

his view with an alternative account of the principles that should regulate the *political community's* shaping of children's beliefs, which is indebted to Rawls's conception of political liberalism (1996), and I suggest that the Rawlsian view is superior.

I do not claim that the conception I shall outline is Rawls'. Rawls wrote very little about education. Consequently, any Rawlsian conception of public education must be worked out by engaging with his fundamental ideals and principles and assessing their implications for the treatment of children and for their education in particular. Still, I think it is clear that any Rawlsian account will reject the view at the heart of Tillson's conception of education, which is that the political community is morally permitted to require children to be educated in schools that are committed to getting students to appreciate the truth about human flourishing. Rawls is famous for providing an account of political justice that does not to appeal to the 'whole truth' (Rawls 1996: 225). Certain truths, he argues, including truths about religion and what a good life involves, must be excluded as reasons for political action, because their status as truths is controversial among citizens and, therefore, they cannot supply a basis for social unity or individual political autonomy (Rawls 1996; for a summary see Clayton and Stevens 2018: 69–71).

Before getting to Tillson's account it is worth clarifying what I mean by 'the political community's' approach to education. Many philosophers of education ask questions about the concept of education, which include what it means for an individual to learn or to acquire skills, and what are the constitutive features of teaching. I do not deny the importance of these questions. However, questions about education in state-funded schools cannot be settled by inquiry into the meaning of education alone. This is because publicly-regulated schooling is coercive in at least two ways. First, most obviously, children and parents are coerced by laws that require compulsory schooling or mandate that certain educational outcomes be realized. Second, every citizen lives under the coercively administered legal regime of her society. For example, many citizens are forced to accept less income compared to that which they would enjoy under alternative tax and expenditure arrangements. Similarly, a country's education policy imposes on citizens a set of institutional arrangements that significantly affect their opportunities by

making it easier for some, but harder for others, to pursue their distinctive interests or religious beliefs compared to possible alternatives. The fact that publicly-regulated schools are part of this coercive regime makes a difference to the principles that ought to guide their activities. When, as citizens, we assess whether we ought to vote for a particular schooling policy we must ask whether the policy is a morally permissible exercise of coercive force over children and other citizens. Thus, when our focus is a society's education policy, the philosophy of education is a branch of political philosophy.[1]

Tillson's book provides a wide ranging, philosophically sophisticated and thoroughly engaging account of the principles that ought to regulate the shaping of children's beliefs. On the basis of this account, he argues that neither parents nor teachers are morally permitted to impart religious beliefs to children. He contends that children should be taught to understand and encouraged to evaluate different propositions concerning religion. However, neither parents nor teachers should aim to encourage children to believe particular religious propositions (Tillson 2019: ch. 6). Whereas that kind of teaching is appropriate in some parts of the curriculum, such as the sciences, the teaching of religion should generally not promote particular theological beliefs, he argues, because neither the acceptance nor rejection of most religious propositions is rationally required.

Tillson holds a version of what is known as the 'epistemic criterion' for determining whether teachers should or should not promote belief in particular propositions (compare Dearden 1981; Hand 2008, 2018). Crudely put, his view is that the teaching of propositions that are momentous—propositions the acceptance or rejection of which would significantly affect children's lives—should track knowledge. If proposition *p* is known to be true, parents and teachers should encourage belief in *p*; if *p* is known to be false, they should discourage belief in it; if knowledge about the truth-status of *p* is

[1] The claim that educational theory is a branch of political theory is made by Martin Hollis (1971), though Hollis understands political theory as 'communal moral philosophy' (1971: 166). My reference to the moral relevance of the fact of coercion makes my Rawlsian conception somewhat different in character to Hollis's view and, indeed, other interpretations of the view that educational matters are political, such as Paul Standish's argument (2019).

absent, teachers should promote neither belief in *p* nor disbelief in *p*. More precisely, in what I shall call *the core claim*, Tillson argues that teachers ought—in most cases through rational persuasion—to encourage children to believe proposition *p* if *p* satisfies the following jointly-sufficient conditions: (a) *p* is 'momentous', that is, believing *p* would significantly (positively) affect children's lives, (b) children might not come to believe *p* without the teacher's encouragement, and (c) the teacher knows that *p* is true (2019: 99–100).

In defence of his account, Tillson offers two main arguments: a well-being argument and a duty-based argument. Simply put, the well-being argument asserts that the core claim is sound, because (i) parents and teachers should promote children's well-being and (ii) knowledge is 'partly constitutive of well-being' (p. 33). The duty-based argument holds that 'rational beings . . . have a duty . . . to believe [or pursue] the truth' (p. 47) and adults are under a duty to help children to fulfil their duties.

I offer some Rawls-inspired comments on each argument. Tillson's well-being argument appears implausible, particularly when understood as a statement of the responsibilities of publicly-funded teachers. It is unjust to force 'free and equal citizens' to pay for, or live under, a schooling regime that promotes ethical and religious propositions they believe to be mistaken. This principle is justified on the basis of two further moral principles. First, provided they hold views that are compatible with 'public reasons', that is, viewing and treating themselves and others as 'free and equal', which includes recognizing various duties to others, citizens are morally entitled to set and pursue their own ethical and religious ends (what Rawls calls 'comprehensive doctrines'): for example, they are morally permitted to pursue mistaken conceptions of religion or mistaken views about what makes one's life a success. Second, citizens have a normally decisive moral claim to live under coercive institutions that they can accept in light of the morally permissible ends they endorse. This is a claim to what Rawls calls 'political autonomy' (Rawls 1996: 68).

If these two principles are accepted, Tillson's well-being argument must be rejected, at least for societies characterized by disagreement with respect to the nature of

human flourishing. In such societies, many people deny that knowledge always improves our well-being. Some hold that well-being consists in the pursuit of pleasure or the satisfaction of one's preferences. In these subjectivist conceptions, knowledge sometimes improves one's well-being, but sometimes it is an impediment. Others endorse objective list conceptions of well-being in which knowledge is not on the list or, if it is, it is merely a defeasible element of well-being. In short, very many people are attracted to conceptions of human flourishing that reject the claim that knowledge is constitutive of well-being or the claim that its importance for well-being is never defeated by other considerations. Moreover, even if we suppose that everyone endorses the view that knowledge is constitutive of individual well-being, people disagree about what is known. Some hold that theistic beliefs are demonstrably true; many atheists believe that arguments for the existence of God have been conclusively refuted. Because there is disagreement about the existence of God, we know that some people's beliefs are mistaken. But even if mistaken, it is implausible to think that their holding these beliefs about what is known is *morally* impermissible.

Given the existence of disagreements of these kinds and the ideal of political autonomy outlined above, Tillson's well-being argument for the epistemic criterion, which rests on the claim that momentous knowledge should be promoted because it is good for people, cannot offer what we need, namely, a basis for coercively enforced public schooling that is acceptable to citizens in light of their own morally permissible beliefs. Even if promoting children's knowledge is good for them, the political community should exclude that reason from consideration when identifying principles to regulate state-schooling, because many citizens reject the claim that knowledge is constitutive of well-being or, in the core claim, that the particular proposition for which *p* is the placeholder is true. If government promoted all momentous knowledge through its schools many citizens would be alienated from their political community.

Let us now turn to Tillson's argument that the epistemic criterion is supported by our duty to pursue the truth. Within the Rawlsian view, duty-based arguments are more promising. To illustrate, children have moral duties of various kinds, such as the duty not

to hurt or bully others. Furthermore, citizens are sometimes duty-bound to encourage children to honour at least some of their duties to others, such as the duty not to harm others physically. Notice that the case against the well-being argument for the epistemic criterion is inapplicable here because it is often right for the state to coerce citizens to fulfil their duties to others—in this case their duty to promote children's duty-fulfilment—notwithstanding some citizens' objections to the content or justification of the law. For instance, it is morally permissible for the government to tax citizens to pay for the defence of the community despite some actual citizens' objections to the policy. That is because the idea of a community of free and equal persons just is a conception of how we ought to exercise force over each other. It defends the existence of many enforceable duties, such as, among others, the obligation to obey legitimate laws, the duty to respect others, various anti-discrimination duties, and the duty to share good and bad luck with other citizens via mechanisms that redistribute resources from the lucky to the unlucky with respect to health, ability, and marketable talent. It might, then, be thought that Tillson's epistemic criterion for publicly-funded schooling finds support from a Rawlsian conception of political morality, because children are under an enforceable duty to pursue the truth and adult citizens are under an enforceable duty to provide educational institutions that enable children to fulfil that duty.

For the duty-based argument to work Tillson needs to establish that children have a moral duty to acquire knowledge about momentous matters. To be sure, any view that defends epistemic duties needs to be carefully specified, because improving one's knowledge can be burdensome and there is surely a limit to the extent to which one is under a moral requirement to bear such burdens. But we need not delve further into considerations of cost to rebut the duty-based argument for the epistemic criterion. The widely held view is that, although children have various duties to others and themselves, it is implausible to suggest that they have a duty to improve their knowledge about every momentous matter. Even if knowledge is good for us, we are morally permitted to make a mess of our own lives to some extent. True, we have a duty to enhance our knowledge in certain domains. We have a duty to acquire knowledge of the laws of our society; we are

under a natural duty of justice to improve our beliefs about the demands of justice (Rawls 1971: §19, §51); parents have a duty to improve their understanding of how to raise children; and so on. But these epistemic duties are circumscribed and explained by more fundamental duties—to act with concern and respect for our fellow citizens and to parent well. We are not duty-bound to shed our false beliefs, still less duty-bound to acquire knowledge, about human flourishing. It is morally permissible to remain ignorant about what would make one's life go well because no one is duty-bound to improve the quality of her life. Perhaps there are some self-regarding duties that generate epistemic duties, such as the duty to avoid living an undignified life (Dworkin 2011: ch. 9), but it is implausible to suggest that the duties we have include a duty to pursue the truth about every matter that significantly affects the quality of our lives.

The widely held view that we are not duty-bound to become knowledgeable about what human well-being consists in, for example, is explained by the Rawlsian distinction between 'comprehensive' and 'public' reasons (including duties) we reviewed above. We might have a duty to understand the nature of human flourishing *as pursuers of religious or various non-religious commitments*, but we do not have that duty as free and equal citizens. As citizens, we have duties to pursue just and legitimate relations with others. From the point of view of a conception of what we owe by way of duties to other members of our community, duties given by comprehensive doctrines must be excluded for the sake of social unity or political autonomy. That is because there is no agreement between persons committed to treating each other fairly on the question of what comprehensive duties we have. In the light of these disagreements, the consequence of having an education policy informed by a universal enforceable duty to understand every momentous matter would be that some citizens would exercise coercion over other citizens, many of whom would not endorse—perhaps they would not even understand—the reasons for their being constrained. If we ran with Tillson's expansive conception of our duties, many would be alienated from the political institutions that govern them.[2]

[2] I thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful reflections on how my comments on Tillson's duty-based argument rely on the same fundamental moral ideal that motivates my critique of his well-being argument.

To summarize, Tillson's duty-based argument proceeds from a statement of everyone's duty to pursue knowledge, and adults' duties to help children to fulfil their epistemic duties, to the permissibility of imposing on children a schooling regime that promotes the general development of knowledge. Children have a valid complaint against Tillsonian schooling, because they are not under a duty to know about everything that significantly affects their lives.

To be clear, Rawlsians like me will agree with Tillson's conclusion that state-regulated schools should impart an understanding of different religious and non-religious philosophical views, and the disagreements between them, but not encourage children to adopt any particular view. Our reasons for endorsing that conception of religious education in state schools are, first, an account of respect for individuals' claims to decide and pursue their own conception of religion and human flourishing and, second, the moral importance of citizens' living under political institutions they can accept.

Although as a Rawlsian I am generally sympathetic to the main conclusions of Tillson's book, I reject the claim that the epistemic criterion is an appropriate basis for theorizing education policy. On the basis of my understanding of Rawls' fundamental ideals, I have argued that Tillson's moral theory of belief-shaping rests on either an implausible account of children's moral duties or a controversial account of human well-being that should not form the justificatory basis of the political community's policy regarding schools. First, it is implausible to hold that individuals are not morally permitted to remain ignorant about many matters. If we were under a duty to promote or pursue knowledge, we would be left with very little moral freedom to make our own choices about how we live our lives. For that reason, it is hard to believe that we are under such a duty. Second, in a society marked by disagreement about the nature of human flourishing, citizen Tillson should avoid voting for education policies on the basis of his own particular, but controversial conception of human well-being; he should do so regardless of how plausible it is as a conception of what makes one's life go well. It would not be morally permissible for him to use the powers of the state to force others to support and comply with educational principles they believe would diminish their own or

others' well-being. Instead, political power should be used in ways that can command the agreement of individuals who view and treat each other as free and equal persons. That way, every citizen can regard their political community as a home rather than an alien environment. So, for all its sophistication and ingenuity, Tillson's theory of belief-shaping is an inappropriate moral framework for the design of state-regulated schools.

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