

Religious influence and its protection

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ABSTRACT

John Tillson's book *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* addresses several themes: the ground and nature of ethical responsibility; the means and goals of ethical formative influence; the nature and ground of religious belief. In this article, I focus on the issue of justification for educational influence in general. Attention to this issue could avoid some intractable problems of specifically religious influence, most particularly the challenge of providing satisfactory criteria for what belongs to the category of religion. Whilst there may be important reasons for examining specifically religious influence, I argue that religious influence is not fundamentally different from other forms of influence, and that the logic of the ethics of influence in general would encompass the logic of religious influence. If the educator is to justify certain forms of influence, then they should employ a kind of restraint: the educator should influence whilst simultaneously protect the influencee from that very influence.

KEYWORDS: influence, directive, nondirective, Tillson, religion, directive religious influence

INTRODUCTION

John Tillson's book *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* offers an insightful investigation into the ethics of the influence of children with respect to religion. There are many important themes addressed: the ground and nature of ethical responsibility; the means and goals of ethical formative influence; the nature and ground of religious belief. Assuming that the reader has some familiarity with the general outlines of the book, this article focusses on the issue of justification for educational influence in general. Attention to this issue could supersede many issues that concern specifically religious influence, most particularly the considerable challenge of finding satisfactory criteria for what does, and does not, belong to the category of *religion*. Whilst there may be important historical reasons why examination

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of specifically religious influence is considered important, I suggest that religious influence is not fundamentally different from many other forms of influence, and that the logic of the ethics of influence in general would encompass the logic of religious influence.¹

I begin by discussing why a focus on influence is so important in contemporary educational theory whilst also acknowledging the limits of employing this concept. I then examine a key discussion in Tillson's book: the distinction between forms of directive and nondirective teaching and influence, and how each form can be justified. I take issue with the idea that propositional certainty is required to justify directive teaching, arguing first, that much of educational value happens beyond the scope or propositions; second, that propositional certainty does not exist; and third, that all influences are directive, in the sense that they promote some form of life. Consequently, and in contrast to Tillson's argument, I argue that directive religious influence (i.e. of beliefs or claims that are uncertain) can be justified. If certainty is not the basis for this justification, then what is? I argue that if the educator is to justify cases of influence concerning that which is uncertain then they must do so by employing a kind of restraint or discretion: the educator both influences whilst simultaneously protect the influencee from that very influence.

INFLUENCE IN CONTEXT

On page one Tillson justifies his focus on influence by reference to its fundamental nature: the question of influence ensures we are speaking about education in a broad sense (parenting, schooling, lifelong learning, and other forms of socialization). It is worth noting that a focus on general influence lies at the foundations of systematic educational theory: Herbart developed his general pedagogy in response to the fact that Kant's practical philosophy left no room for external influence on practical reason (Kenklies 2012). From Herbart to Tillson, the justification of influence is one of the central questions of education, and places ethics at the heart of educational theory.

This is important to state explicitly since, within the Anglo-American educational tradition at least, one could argue that the concept of education is intrinsically normative (Friesen and Kenklies 2022). What it means to educate, is not defined as *any* intention to change someone for the better, but changes that are taken to be good and that therefore are justified by being called educational. This is in contrast with the concept of influence, where normative assumptions are not so evident. Whilst mere influence can be good or bad, education is often thought to be *good* influence. It is true that we might occasionally speak of *bad* education, but on the whole, we

¹ Tillson argues that it is the comprehensiveness of religions that makes the question of religious influence distinctive. One of my concerns with Tillson's argument is how it frames religion: it presupposes a rather metaphysical view of religion. So it presupposes a central problem: How do we define religion? See my review of Tillson's book on the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain's website: <https://www.philosophy-of-education.org/blog/book-reviews-archived/book-review-children-religion-and-the-ethics-of-influence/>.

use other terms for this: from excessively paternalistic forms of influence (*instilling* and *inculcating*) to imposition (*indoctrinating* and *brainwashing*). By defining the concept of education as induction into activities that are intrinsically worthwhile, R. S. Peters advocates for a positive view of education: '[i]t would be a logical contradiction to say that a man [sic] had been educated but that he had in no way changed for the better' (Peters 1966: 25). But this 'better' depends upon perspective: at one time confessional Religious Instruction was considered educational, whilst today we might call it by another name; where the government of China engages in the mass education of certain religious and ethnic communities in 'Vocational Education and Training Centres', other nations might define this differently. The point is not that these forms of influence are (or are not) ethically defensible, but that they employ educational structures and mechanisms and can be analysed educationally. If we define education only in terms of what we take to be good here and now, then we risk implicitly universalizing our own approaches to, and goals for, education. In short, Tillson's development of the idea of educational influence is welcome.

Whilst the term 'influence' has advantages, it also has a problem: its ubiquity. We influence each other all the time: parents influence children, children influence parents; teachers influence students and vice versa; marketers influence consumers; doctors influence patients. Influence is more or less intentional or deliberate, and more or less concerned with the good of the influencee. Tillson qualifies educational influences in certain ways: for instance, he argues that learning is a subset of influence because not all forms of influence entail learning (Tillson 2019: 53). It is not clear what Tillson means by learning here, though the examples he uses to show influence without learning (foot binding and female genital mutilation) suggest a notion defined by negative outcomes for the influencee. Even here, it is lamentable, though plausible, to suppose that the intentions of the influencers are to benefit the influencee.² In contrast, the influences of advertisers or propagandists may be completely indifferent to the good of the influencee, seeking to advance only their own interests.

In sum, I would want to qualify the kinds of influence that belong to the concept of education in two respects: firstly, as influences which are consciously and deliberately undertaken; secondly, as influences intended to result in a positive outcome for the influencee. One practical qualification of educational influence in Tillson's analysis seems to be the focus on mental or cognitive attributes: concepts, propositions, beliefs, and attitudes. Whilst Tillson does not claim that such cognitive attributes are the only forms of educational influence,³ he tends to speak of religious influence in terms of beliefs and attitudes (p. 141) rather than the forms of practical influence (e.g. rituals, foods, music). This focus on the cognitive is consistent with a

² These are problematically controversial and gendered examples.

³ Tillson claims that children can be formatively influenced in the following five respects: 1. The degrees and kinds of one's physical and mental powers; 2. One's stock of concepts; 3. Those propositions which one understands; 4. One's cognitive attitudes to those propositions, such as belief and disbelief; 5. One's affective attitudes to those propositions and to other objects.

general focus in the book towards rational influence. This view also frames education as a primarily cognitive activity, marginalizing other influences, such as moral or aesthetic, that take place all the time (e.g. raising a child to eat certain foods, say certain words, or wear certain clothes, all of which may be done more or less with an intention in mind) and which do not appeal to rational persuasion or justification. Interestingly, this narrow view of education mirrors a narrow view of religion that this book also tends to adopt: religion is often understood to be fundamentally concerned with beliefs and propositions, which appear to be in tension and conflict with one another. I have argued elsewhere that such a view of religion leads to a particular framing of the problems of religion and education: that the reduction of religion to truth claims leads theorists to consider the question of justification and indoctrination in narrow terms (Lewin 2017; Parker et al., 2019).

DIRECTIVE AND NONDIRECTIVE INFLUENCE

In Chapter 6 Tillson focusses specifically on the question of ethical influence. He begins the chapter by outlining Michael Hand's notions of directive and nondirective teaching: directive teaching being encouragement or discouragement of belief in a proposition; nondirective teaching being the facilitation of understanding of a proposition. Tillson develops this terminology by introducing the distinction between being promotional versus nonpromotional in one's educational influence (Tillson 2019: 100). These seem like fairly basic distinctions: facilitating someone's understanding of Marxism, seems quite different from encouraging belief in it; one may not wish schools to promote specific world-views such as Marxism or Catholicism. I accept that we can, to some extent, meaningfully distinguish belief in, or promotion of, Marxian ideas, or at least we do talk about this distinction quite often in philosophy of education. But it raises problems.

First, the distinction has the effect of framing our understanding of influence to the cognitive: we generally assume that believing or understanding something has to do with certain relations to cognitive propositions, and if there is an issue with narrowing religion and education to propositions, then it is expressed by that narrow relation. Being religious and/or being educated is, in my view, far more than being furnished with, or accepting certain propositions. So, whilst this distinction might have a plausibility, it unhelpfully primes us to think of religion and education in terms of our relations to certain propositional claims. Second, I take the view that educational influence ought only to promote belief in particular world-views in circumscribed ways which, as I will argue later, acknowledge their own fallibility in some senses. Third, it seems clear that educational influence is always directive or promotional in a more general sense, for instance, promoting intellectual virtues such as the ability to consider issues from different points of view, or healthy eating habits such as the importance of fresh fruit and vegetables—note that these kinds of promotion are not confined to the sphere of the cognitive or propositional.

Tillson rightly acknowledges that all cases of intentional influence promote something in the sense that they have some target in view. His account could be

enriched by including a qualification that allows us to call certain kinds of influence *educational*: I propose that *educational* influence is defined by the fact that the influencer intends some good for the influencee. This means that the parent who intentionally promotes eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, or the power of prayer to their child, is acting educationally whether or not I happen to agree with one or other influence. After all it is just possible that I (or the parent) am (is) mistaken. As noted above, I reject the idea that we should reserve the terms ‘education’ or ‘teaching’ only for those influences that are considered uncontroversially good. This is partly because I do not consider there to be general or uncontroversial criteria for evaluating what is and what is not ‘good’, but also because I want to be able to use educational language descriptively rather than assume the normative valences of the term. I argue that ‘education’ describes the attempts to influence someone for their own good (as defined by the educator), as long as we acknowledge that the educator’s criteria for defining the good are not universal. Therefore, to teach or educate would mean to promote something that is thought to be for their good, a form of influence that depends on the ethical judgement of the educator.

Throughout the discussion Tillson seems concerned to develop a ‘theory of propositional curricula content’. As already noted, the foregrounding of propositional elements of educational influence is unhelpful since it distracts us from more general educational activities: this reification of ‘propositional content’ is often an occasion for the development of certain intellectual virtues that are harder to point towards (e.g. a capacity to look at an issue from different perspectives; historical consciousness). Nevertheless, if we accept that education can be propositional, Tillson presents a further distinction, namely between propositional certainty, plausibility, and falsity. Ignoring the third category of falsity,⁴ the argument seems to boil down to this: whether one teaches directly or nondirectly (promotional or not) is determined by whether the proposition is certain or only plausible.

One problem here is that there is only a relative basis for the appeal to certainty: it only exists in context. One can be certain about rules for driving a car in the UK and so teach the propositions contained within the highway code directly. There is no claim here that the propositions are true (or false), but that they are correct relative to the context. Anyone could agree that conventional rules are relative to context, but what about the facts of the curriculum? I would not be the first to point out that all facts and propositions are culturally framed, even those thought to be most ‘rational’. We use judgements to determine what, how, and why to teach; as Tillson says ‘we ought to absorb “best bets” into our taxonomy of education’ (p. 99). Within a given context we take particular facts and propositions to be sufficiently certain or uncontroversial and, on that basis, we justify promoting them. But determining the relative certainty of the proposition is a judgement, one which is exercised by a particular person in a particular time and place. Similarly, determining the value of particular virtues or dispositions (e.g. patience or self-control)

⁴ The category of falsity is as problematic as the category of certainty: when it comes to much of what is called education, we are never that certain of the truth or falsity of a proposition.

demands judgements. Tillson appeals to ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ as criteria for certainty at various moments which may be justified because, for him, these notions of reason and rationality provide the basis for sufficient certainty. But further reflection on the origins of these notions would reveal that the criteria for deciding what is rational or irrational are themselves obscure. How are we to know if our reasons are good reasons? What judgements are involved in forming the very notion of what is reasonable itself? Whilst the dependency on judgement does not undermine all possible justifications for directive teaching, it does require some circumspection on the part of the influencer.

Many historical or scientific propositions are supported by reasons that may appear to be persuasive. And yet must we not admit that there is little within history or science today that is straightforwardly certain; all forms of historical and scientific knowledge depend upon interpretations; facts and events are reinterpreted, theories undergo change.⁵ This does not mean that educators present everything as always uncertain, contested, or controversial. There is, no doubt, a context for presenting some propositions in relatively stable and uncontroversial terms, to engage in what I have called pedagogical reduction (Lewin 2019, 2020). Thus, with Daniel Tröhler, we can distinguish the contested claims of ‘research knowledge’ from more stable ‘pedagogical knowledge’ whose chief characteristic is to be ‘combined, arranged, and structured for the purpose of effective teaching’ (Tröhler 2008: 79). Teachers need to use judgement to decide how much of the controversy to discuss, and this itself requires reflection on the context.

So, the fact that the propositions of science are historically contingent, and open to revision, does not mean we cannot justify the directive teaching of them: we routinely ‘promote’ the best hypothesis, and often we do so without describing it as a hypothesis. To deny directive teaching of all but certain propositions would be, I suggest, an excess of relativism. Justification for directive teaching can be made, but we should understand that this is based upon an element of speculation rather than certainty.

JUST ENOUGH RELATIVISM

Tillson is (mostly) discussing (educational) influence through propositions, with a view to justification of influence concerning religious propositions. Put simply, Tillson’s logic is that we can be directive inasmuch as we are certain of any proposition: or as he puts it, when it is irrational to withhold belief (Tillson 2019: 175). Criteria for determining what is irrational in such cases remain obscure (to me if not to him). Not only do I argue that there is never total certainty, but I also claim that we do not need certainty to be directive. Being relatively certain

⁵ A fuller argument to support the claims that historical and scientific knowledges are themselves products of historical forces and are therefore contingent is beyond the scope of this article though it draws from Paul Feyerabend’s theories of knowledge (Feyerabend 1991) and can be found in the line of thought that is expressed in the formula that *all facts/data are theory-laden*, as proposed by Hanson, Kuhn, Feyerabend, and others (see Boyd and Bogen 2021).

that the outcome will benefit the influencee will undoubtedly help with the justification, but it is not necessary or sufficient.

I have argued that all educational influence promotes something, and so is directive in a general sense: it is aimed at some conceptual, practical, or ethical improvement in the influencee. Whether the concept of education refers to the transmission of propositions, or to other forms of influence (e.g. ethical or aesthetic), there is always something directive going on. But, somewhat paradoxically, to *justify* such influences requires at least some awareness of the possibility that the criteria of justification are not universal but are historical. Only an awareness of one's possible limitations provides the influencer with the appropriate sense of circumspection concerning the knowledge, values, or practices being presented. Paul Feyerabend convincingly develops this thought through his *Three Dialogues on Knowledge*:

A good teacher will not just make people *accept* a form of life, he will also provide them with means of seeing it in perspective and perhaps of even rejecting it. He will try to influence and to protect. He will not only make propaganda for his views, he will add an ingredient that makes them less lethal and that protects people against being overwhelmed by them. (Feyerabend 1991: 75)

The argument that the influencer must provide not only influence but also protection from that influence is persuasive when we consider the limitations on our certainty. Thus, although educational influence necessarily promotes something, the risks of uncritical acceptance are mitigated by offering a perspective upon whatever is promoted, a perspective that draws on the self-awareness, or 'historical consciousness', of the influencer. Here historical consciousness refers not to a great knowledge of history, but to self-awareness derived from sufficient understanding that one's perspective is always historically/culturally framed. As a form of educational influence, I argue that religious influence shares these basic features. Thus, the educator who wishes to influence with respect to religion may be justified as long as the influence entails some historical reflexivity that therefore includes protection from itself. Similarly, religious upbringing is justified where the upbringing provides some additional protection by way of understanding different ways of life. Where children are raised within a particular world-view, efforts to understand that view in the context of other world-views illustrate this idea (for instance the Amish practice of Rumspringa⁶).

Building on Hand, Tillson seems to approve of the idea that education ought to enable children to 'make rational judgements about the truth or falsity of these [religious] propositions' (Tillson 2019: 92). This reasonable sounding claim masks the problem already outlined: the criteria for determining what counts as rational belong to a particular context. The view that we can supply children with the ability to make rational judgements should be considered in relation to the need for historical/cultural consciousness concerning the conditions of rationality itself. We can induct children

⁶ Rumspringa is an Amish rite of passage which includes leaving the segregated Amish community of one's youth, often to find a spouse but also to experience life outside of the community. Some remain within other Amish groups during this period whilst others leave the Amish altogether (Shachtman 2007).

into the norms and standards of our culture, and that can be justified, but perhaps we should hesitate before universalizing those standards as the only ‘reasonable’ (code for ‘possible’) view of the matter. Acknowledging that our standards of rationality are our own does not mean that educators are not entitled to initiate children into them. In fact, they must initiate children into their own standards if they are to initiate children into their own culture. What is important is that these standards are not taken to be sufficient and universal. Self-consciousness must find its way into our educational influences. For when Tillson claims that ‘it is reasonable to think that a planned programme of learning delivered by subject experts is precisely what would be required to enable one to make rational judgements about the truth or falsity of religious propositions’ (p. 92), does he accept that this initiation into what is rational does not furnish us with the absolute truth or falsity of the claims, as much as the standards we have been brought up to accept or reject?

There are so many interesting and important themes raised by this book. My main concern here has been to elaborate some of the problems and limitations of the concept of rational influence. Many of my concerns can be summarized by the observation that we do not need to avoid nonrational forms of influence and we certainly should not characterize all such forms as ‘indoctrination’ (Tillson 2019: 88; Lewin 2022). Our educational influences are important, necessary even. But equally important and necessary are the protections we provide against those very influences.

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