*CHILDREN, RELIGION AND THE ETHICS OF INFLUENCE*: INTRODUCTION FOR A SYMPOSIUM

John Tillson, Liverpool Hope University

ABSTRACT

It is morally impermissible for parents, educators, and others to initiate children into religious belief systems. That is the provocative conclusion of, *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* – the book which is the focus of the present symposium. This introduction briefly summarises the book’s arguments together with the criticisms levelled against them. The symposium includes critiques by Matthew Clayton, Anca Gheaus, Michael Hand, David Lewin, and Ruth Wareham. Clayton and Wareham propose alternative bases for prohibiting religious initiation, while Hand, Lewin and Gheaus propose conditions under which religious initiation may be permissible. The symposium concludes with a rejoinder by [Redacted].

It is widely accepted that parents are permitted to bring their children up to share their religious faith, and, only slightly less widely accepted that they may enrol them in religious schools which share that mission. In *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* (Bloomsbury 2019), by contrast, I argue that it is impermissible for parents, educators, and others to initiate children into religious beliefs, as well as into other similarly comprehensive and epistemically controversial belief systems, like Marxism and materialism. In brief, this is because knowledge contributes instrumentally and non-instrumentally to theirs and others’ welfare and because religious initiation takes too great an epistemic gamble with children’s beliefs and welfare.

The present suite arises from a symposium held at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain’s annual conference in 2021. In addition to commentaries from the conference by Matthew Clayton (Warwick), Ruth Wareham (Birmingham) and David Lewin (Strathclyde), it features two additional commentaries by Michael Hand (Birmingham) and Anca Gheaus (Central European University), together with a brief reply by me.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this introduction, I summarise the central arguments of my book, focusing on the claims that are taken up or contested by the respondents in the suite. I then summarise my respondents’ criticisms.

In Chapters Two and Three, I provide general account of moral responsibility and of parents’ moral responsibilities. I argue that our positive moral duties are concerned with the predictable and likely effects of our actions on the wellbeing of intrinsically important objects, like children. I argue there that we have the positive duties to particular others that we do (like the extensive duties that *Bertie* in particular has in the first instance to provide care for *Bertie’s* children, and not for all children) in virtue of our being best person for the (moral) job. I then explain how this principle can ground both parental and extra-parental responsibilities to children. Morally speaking, I contend, some primary care givers (usually a biological parent or biological parents) are responsible for ensuring basic benefits for children, and averting harms to them in virtue of their usually being best able to satisfy the role. Additionally, some extra-parental responsibilities are generated by those of children’s welfare needs which out-strip what parents can provide, qua parents. These include teachers’ and doctors’ duties to meet children’s demanding educational and medical needs. To avoid the account becoming overdemanding, I contend that what actions are positively owed to children (as distinct from which omissions are negatively owed, e.g. ‘do no harm’) is a threshold of basic goods, the absence of which constitute a form of harm. Importantly, I contend that knowledge contributes to wellbeing both because of its general usefulness and because of its intrinsic value.

In subsequent chapters, I defend a general theory of moral influence and apply it to the case of religious initiation in upbringing and schooling. First, I note that for any formative trait which is pliant to influence, influencers may choose to promote, demote, float, or ignore it. To *promote* a formative trait is to act in ways that make it more likely that it will be adopted by others, often with the intention that it will be adopted or retained, usually by advocating for it or incentivizing it. To *demote* a formative trait is to act in ways that make it less likely to be adopted or retained by others, often with the intention that it will not be adopted or retained, often by criticizing or disincentivizing it. To float a formative trait is to is to create an opportunity for others to consider whether that trait is worthy of adoption, usually with the intention of doing so, and usually by asking the question explicitly and encouraging the open-ended creation and evaluation of arguments for and against the adoption of the trait. To ignore a formative trait is to do none of these things. While ignoring traits often does not preclude embodying suites of traits, sometimes visibly and in ways which may inspire imitation, it does preclude any intention or additional action taken to encourage their adoption.

In chapter four, I sketch an account of the salient respects in which people can be formatively influenced, which includes the following cognitive and non-cognitive features:

1. The degrees and kinds of their abilities (like being able to evaluate goals and strategies wisely, and to carry out strategies selected flexibly)
2. Their stock of concepts (like goal, strategy, wisdom, and flexibility)
3. Those propositions which they understand (such the proposition that suffering arises from attachment to desires)
4. Their cognitive attitudes to these propositions (such as belief or disbelief that suffering arises from attachment to desires)
5. Their affective attitudes to propositions and objects (such as hope that there will be a good Indian restaurant nearby, and love of curry).

For each prospective formative trait (i.e., concept possessed, proposition understood, and ability or attitude had), I argue that it ought to be promoted, floated, or demoted respectively, according to the following three sets of criteria (and where none of these apply, it might fairly be ignored):

1. (a) It is momentous; (b) it might well not be adopted without intervention; (c) failing to have it is irrational.

2. (a) It is momentous; (b) it might well not be understood and rationally evaluated without intervention; (c) neither having nor failing to have it is irrational.

3. (a) It is momentous; (b) it might well be adopted without intervention; (c) having it is irrational.

I gloss *momentous* traits as ones which matter in the sense of making some practical difference to people’s lives (the trait holder’s or others’).[[2]](#endnote-2) A package of formative traits that an influencer intends to promote is *comprehensive* if it influences the recipient in many important respects, and one package is more *comprehensive* than another if it influences the recipient in more respects, or in respects that are more important. The more comprehensive a package of formative traits is, the more important it is that we honour strictures I outline above. This is because the greater comprehensiveness of a trait package multiplies the moment of the traits that make it up. For instance, an ability to shoot a rifle may not be consequential or irrational to develop *in itself*, but it is both if combined with a murderous hatred of a harmless stigmatized minority that one lives among (i.e. a person will have compelling reasons not to develop that ability, if their hatred cannot be overcome).

These considerations, I argue, are binding on both formal educators and on informal educators, such as parents. However, as I emphasize in the book, even to the extent that educators and carers are equipped with such evidence as warrants promoting a formative trait, they ought still to emphasize the fallibility of human cognition and deference to reasons rather than indefeasible commitment to conclusions and traits. So while all signs may point to one conclusion right now, and while we should honour those signs, we should remain open to counter evidence trumping those signs in time. To the extent that educators and carers are not equipped with such evidence as warrants promoting a formative trait, they ought to encourage curiosity about, and rational deliberation on momentous traits – in proportion with their moment and rational support – but stop short of promoting or demoting the traits themselves.

To give content to the question of how children ought to be influenced *with respect to religions* in particular, in chapter six I develop an account of what sorts of things religions are. I argue that religions are those things that essentially require (a) belief in superbeings and (b) and submission to them as having rightful dominion. Religions, I argue, are often highly comprehensive, since they often contain detailed and expansive theories; these theories often include accounts of the origins and purpose of life and of the universe, accounts of the remote past and future, of the requirements and grounds of morality, of the nature of flourishing and means to achieve it, and of how to manage and arrange communal and family life. Once successfully internalized, religious faiths determine the goals and constraints of much of their adherents’ affiliations, allegiances, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, and habits, and, thereby, much of their activities. Gheaus takes issues with this account in her discussion. Chapter eight argues that while there may be scope for some people to generate and sustain religious beliefs rationally, that scope is limited. In brief, this is because the arguments for the existence of God that are most persuasive involve private religious experiences which can persuade only those that have them since such experiences are used to bolster belief in incompatible sets of belief and are vulnerable to debunking arguments.

Since religious propositions are momentous, might well not be understood and rationally evaluated without intervention, and since neither having nor failing to have them must be irrational given the current state of evidence and argument, I conclude that, along with similarly momentous, comprehensive, and rationally tenable packages of traits, religious packages of formative traits ought to be floated, rather than promoted or demoted. Put differently, it is impermissible for parents, educators, and others to initiate children into religious beliefs and other similarly comprehensive and epistemically controversial belief systems, like Marxism and materialism.

In their replies, Clayton and Wareham propose alternative bases for prohibiting religious initiation, while Hand, Lewin and Gheaus propose conditions under which religious initiation may be permissible. Michael Hand defends a parental prerogative to raise their children in their faith, and grounds this in the value of familial intimacy and rational deference young children have to their parents. Wareham is more sympathetic than Hand, but argues that the importance of children’s future autonomy rules out a wider range of religious influences than she takes my arguments to. Lewin is sceptical about my commitment to the objectivity of rationality and proposes alternative criteria for ethical influence which eschew that commitment and are compatible with religious initiation. Starting with a rival account of what religions are, Gheaus proposes that initiation into multiple contradictory religious faiths is both feasible and permissible. Clayton critiques the book’s perfectionist political morality, while arguing that a more Rawlsian approach can support similar conclusions in a way which respects the autonomy of present and future citizens. I defend my view from these challenging critiques in the concluding paper of the symposium.

REFERENCE LIST

Tillson, J. (2019) *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence* Bloomsbury.

Tillson, J. (2020) 'Knowledge, Moment, and Acceptability: How to Decide Public Educational Aims and Curricula' *Philosophy of Education* 76(3): 42-55.  
Tillson, J. (2022) 'Rationality, Religious Belief, and Shaping Dispositions: Replies to Carruth, Gatley, Levy, Kotzee and Rocha' *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 41(1): 135 - 149.

1. A previous symposium focusing on epistemological and ontological aspects of the book was published in *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 2022 41(1): 111-149, with commentaries by Alexander D. Carruth, Jane Gatley, Ben Kotzee, Neil Levy, and Sam Rocha. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I have since made this more precise. A trait is momentous if lacking it is costly for the trait holder or for others (Tillson 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)