

Knowledge, Moment, and Acceptability: How to Decide Public Educational Aims and Curricula¹

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I defend a particular perfectionist approach to public educational policy. The conception that I defend is a pairing of the “Epistemic Criterion” and of the “Momentousness Criterion.”² On the Epistemic Criterion if something is known to be true (or known to be false), it must be taught “directively.” That is to say, it must be taught to be true (or taught to be false) where its truth is the subject of the lesson. If something is not known to be true (or false), it may not be taught as true (or false), it may not be taught directly. Instead, if it has sufficient epistemic credentials to render it a live epistemic option, it may be taught “non-directively.” That is to say, it may be taught as possibly true, with the teacher trying neither to promote or prevent pupils’ assent. On the Momentousness Criterion, if lacking the truth on a matter is high-stakes, this should motivate its compulsory inclusion on school curricula.³ Applied to the case of religion, the Epistemic and the Momentousness Criterion (together with some other considerations) seem to motivate a discrete, compulsory, non-directive subject focused on the critical examination and evaluation of religious beliefs forming part of pupils’ education. The argument (Michael Hand’s “Possibility of Truth” argument) hinges on the plausible premises that some religious claims (about God, salvation, life after death, and so on): (a) “are sufficiently well supported by evidence and argument as to merit serious consideration by reasonable people,” and (b) “matter, in the sense of making some practical difference to people’s lives.”⁴

The critique that I defend it from is one made by Matthew Clayton and David M. Stevens who advance the incompatible “Acceptability Requirement,” which is an interpretation of Rawls’ Public Reason Constraint. On

the Acceptability Requirement, schools ought to restrict implementation of the epistemic criterion to (a) those beliefs that enable them to satisfy their enforceable duties, and (b) those beliefs that are not matters of dispute among politically reasonable people. Against the Acceptability Requirement and in favour of the joint Epistemic and Momentousness Criterion, I contend that where it is valuable for people to set their own ends, they can only fully meaningfully do this in light of facts and free of misinformation. In light of this, I argue that it is the duty of educators to put students in this position; it is then students' prerogative to fail to live meaningfully. While children have no duty to perfect themselves, they do have a right to invent themselves, but they cannot do this in ignorance: if their life is meaningless because they chose as well as they could without being informed, then they could not truly consent to the life they undertook, and did not have a realistic chance at a meaningful life.

POLITICAL MORALITY AND STATE-MAINTAINED SCHOOLS

Considerations of political morality are unavoidably relevant to motivating and constraining the function of state-maintained schools.⁵ As Matthew Clayton and David Stevens observe, “state-maintained schools are funded by citizens through taxation and governed by legislation enacted by the state on behalf of the public.”⁶ For this reason, in order to make progress on the question of what function state-maintained schools may permissibly serve, “we need to know what aims and objectives the government is morally permitted to force its citizens to serve.”⁷

ANTI-PERFECTIONISM AND PUBLIC REASON

On anti-perfectionist visions of political morality (such as Clayton and Stevens'), government has principled reasons not to take a stand on matters that are in dispute among *politically reasonable* citizens. *Politically reasonable* citizens are those citizens committed to the values of freedom, equality, and cooperating with other citizens on fair terms. On this understanding, political institutions “should not be motivated by or directed to serve any particular comprehensive end” or conception.⁸ Comprehensive ends and conceptions

are those ends and conceptions that go beyond commitment to the values of freedom, equality, and regarding society as a fair scheme of cooperation. Call those comprehensive ends and conceptions, which *politically reasonable* citizens disagree about, “politically controversial” comprehensive ends and conceptions.⁹ On perfectionist understandings, state-maintained schools may promote, and, if not promote, at least act on information about the good and the true if what they have is knowledge, even if its content is a matter of behavioural or political controversy. Perfectionists claim they have no principled reason to refrain from promoting or acting on politically controversial information. Within a certain scope (to be discussed in the next section) anti-perfectionists insist that the justification of conceptions and ends use the vocabulary of *public reason* (i.e., draw on a bank of concepts which has been emptied of any *politically controversial* items).

BROAD AND NARROW ANTI-PERFECTIONISM

Within what scope would anti-perfectionists have us use the vocabulary of *public reason* to justify our conceptions and ends? When may citizens invoke concepts and ends from the comprehensive conceptions, and when may they not? In other words, when does the *public reasons constraint* apply? It would be clearly authoritarian and offend against the value of freedom to forbid people from acting on their comprehensive conceptions and ends at all. On the other hand, in so far as allowing people to act on them affects other people’s lives, the value of freedom may be offended against from the other direction. Some (including Rawls and Scanlon) recommend a narrow scope, others (including Quong, and Clayton and Stevens) a broader scope. For Rawls, *the public reason constraint* need apply only to how we justify “the basic structure of society,” that is to deciding *constitutional essentials*, “how political power is acquired and the limits of its exercise,” and *basic justice*, “the background institutions of social and economic justice.”¹⁰ This is what Quong calls The Narrow View: “The idea of public reason must apply to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, but need not apply beyond this domain.”¹¹ Pointing out that The Narrow View is compatible with a limited form of political perfectionism, Quong defends the “The Broad

View,” arguing that “public reason ought to apply, whenever possible, to all decisions where citizens exercise political power over one another.”¹² It is this view that Clayton and Stevens seem to share. Clayton and Stevens’s reasons for this view will emerge below. Political power is, I take it, at least any act of government that makes or is based on enforced requirements of citizens. Since, as Clayton and Stevens point out, “state-maintained schools are funded by citizens through taxation and governed by legislation enacted by the state on behalf of the public,” they fit the bill.¹³

BROAD ANTI-PERFECTIONISM VERSUS PERFECTIONISM IN STATE SCHOOLS

Clayton and Stevens have defended a principle that would block the Possibility of Truth argument from going through. According to their Acceptability Requirement, “education policy must be regulated by principles that are acceptable to reasonable people.”¹⁴ The concept of reasonableness they have in mind is what we might call Political Reasonableness (rather than epistemic reasonableness). It is of having a “baseline commitment to treating others as free and equal, and to social unity,” social unity being the view that “society should be a fair system of mutual cooperation.”¹⁵ On their view the Possibility of Truth argument (outlined above) “rests on a controversial claim about the plausibility of different viewpoints” in that it “cannot command the universal assent of reasonable people.”¹⁶ It is, in other words, politically controversial in that it involves ends and conceptions that are in dispute among citizens committed to freedom, equality, and social unity. Educational policy, according to Clayton and Stevens, must be based on the universal assent of people who treat each other as free and equal, and are committed to social unity.

The attraction of Clayton and Stevens’s view is considerable. It seems desirable that the ends and conceptions which people are forced to serve should be acceptable to them.¹⁷ Otherwise, they would seem to be subjects of brute domination, alienated from their community and its governance. Where that domination goes beyond ensuring that they act in accordance with their enforceable moral requirements this seems objectionable.¹⁸

It seems desirable to minimize the degree to which the subjects of political power are alienated from and unable to identify with that power. Instead it seems desirable to maximize the extent to which the subjects of political power can regard themselves “as jointly realizing a fair scheme of social cooperation” or “as partners that produce a valuable shared end.”¹⁹

For Clayton and Stevens, what matters is that people can justly feel included, not that they believe the truth. Besides ensuring that we act in accordance with our strictest moral duties (e.g., the prohibition on doing serious harm), what else are governments entitled to do? While humans seem to have an interest in having the freedom to formulate and pursue their own conception of the good, they may require constraints beyond those of their enforceable moral duties (e.g., constraints regarding taxation, road safety laws, food hygiene standards, and so on). How do we combine our claim to freedom with the need for legal constraints? Following Rousseau, Clayton and Stevens allow that our “freedom is preserved” only if each citizen “endorses the rules that constrain” us.²⁰ The Acceptability Requirement is, for Clayton and Stevens, the “best interpretation of what it means for the state to respect the freedom and equality of its citizens.”²¹

A SELF-DEFEATING REQUIREMENT?

If the Acceptability Requirement failed (in fact) to command the universal assent of reasonable people, it would seem to be self-defeating. If it *could* fail, then it would seem to be hostage to fortune. To be immune from the worry, it would have to be shown that reasonableness entails or requires assent to the Acceptability Requirement. The Acceptability Requirement, again, is the requirement that “policy must be regulated by principles that are acceptable to reasonable people,” where reasonable people means those “committed to treating others fairly and respecting the rights and freedoms of other people.”²² Is it politically unreasonable to deny that policy must be regulated by principles that are acceptable to politically reasonable people? This is Clayton and Stevens’s contention, regarding it as an “important requirement of political morality.”²³ For this to be the case we would need to see that denying the acceptability requirement (a) fails to show citizens equal

regard, or (b) fails to respect their freedom. Over the course of this paper, I hope to motivate the view that neither of these things is true.

“FLOODGATES OF IMPARTIALITY”

Clayton and Stevens’s view might seem to open up “floodgates of impartiality” concerning what may be taught concerning matters that are rationally settled among expert communities.²⁴ Consider how the questions of whether human actions account for rapidly deteriorating climate conditions and whether flu vaccines cause autism are matters considered beyond reasonable dispute among climate scientists and medical researchers respectively (the answers being “yes” and “no” respectively). Consider also how there is no end of ignorant parties who genuinely deny the former and affirm the latter. Clayton and Stevens can begin to respond to the Floodgate of Impartiality charge by observing that citizens have enforceable duties to one another: they may have duties not to create inhospitable climate conditions abroad, and not to endanger children by failing to vaccinate them. To execute these duties, it may be in some cases expedient and other cases necessary to know the truth. “Anti-perfectionists,” as Clayton says, “may take a stand on the soundness of claims that are relevant to our status or conduct as free and equal citizens.”²⁵ The important question is just how much one has to know, and how ignorant one can afford to be, in going about the business of satisfying one’s enforceable duties to treat others as free and equal.

All systematic ignorance is potentially dangerous: we cannot decide which systematic truths are dangerous for citizens to be ignorant about, that is just those truths that enable them to act in accordance or compliance with their enforceable duties and no more. This is because knowledge is fundamentally interconnected. Facts about reality form a coherent and interrelated whole. As Jonathan Lowe puts it, “Truth is single and indivisible or, to put it another way, the world or reality as a whole is unitary and necessarily self-consistent.”²⁶ Changing facts about the world has ripple effects for the rest of reality, sometimes known as “the butterfly effect,” and changing beliefs about the world has ripple effects for what other beliefs we ought to have about it. That is, the unity of reality implies the capacity for an ontolog-

ical butterfly effect, and recognition of this unity implies the possibility of an epistemic butterfly effect. In line with this, judgments about which claims are true, which are false, and which are reasonable must be presupposed in the selection of topics for further investigation. For those persuaded of biblical inerrancy, there is scant reason to explore the events of deep time preceding man's appearance on earth.

It may therefore be reasonably worried that to the extent that students' views are given scope to diverge from expert community consensus through nondirective teaching, their contents will compound, moving yet away from reality, as their false beliefs become premises even in valid arguments. At worst, they will ultimately become cocooned in delusion. One can only hope (in vain) that people with such beliefs accede to no political power. For every fundamental false belief one holds, the more satisfying one's citizenships duties falls hostage to fortune.

In Clayton and Stevens's sense of the term "reasonable," most findings of the scientific community agreed on by expert consensus both in terms of the conclusions and the means of proof "cannot command the universal assent of reasonable people."²⁷ However, educational policy makers must unavoidably make truth judgements in circumstances of popular disagreement in order to decide on the content and aims of education, and the truth is best gaged by deference to the consensus of subject experts, rather than of non-experts. Contemporary orthodoxy in science forms an impressively mutually consistent body of beliefs that can generate further research questions. Moreover, the Acceptability Requirement seems unrealisable in principle for the following reason. In order for government to effectively decide whether citizens' beliefs do fail to allow them to execute their enforceable duties, the government must construct a theory of how things are, and judge whether believing falsely is likely to lead to harm, that is to say, all of their policy decisions to refrain from intervention in false beliefs would have the falsity of those beliefs featuring as premises anyway. In constructing such a theory and acting on it, they would thereby violate the Acceptability Requirement.

Clayton and Stevens allow that people have an interest in the truth

being known where being wrong about the truth is high-stakes (e.g., whether global warming is anthropocentric, and whether flu vaccines cause autism), and an interest in being protected from negative impacts of “reasonable citizens” acting sincerely in line with their irrational beliefs. The question is just how much ignorance we can be assured is compatible with only internalities. However, it may be that equal regard for people sometimes involves protecting them from their own ignorance. In 1912, for instance, Franz Reichelt died testing a wearable parachute by jumping from the Eiffel Tower. It would seem no violation of his freedom to prevent him from doing this, and it would seem to treat his wellbeing with disregard to allow him to do this.

SELF-DETERMINATION/ INDEPENDENCE AND TRUTH

Clayton and Stevens regard individual self-determination to be one of the fundamental values that “ground” the acceptability requirement.²⁸ As Clayton says elsewhere:

One prominent argument for anti-perfectionism proceeds from the ideal of independence, which asserts that each person should endorse the rules that govern how she lives her life. With respect to our personal goals, for example, independence requires that we decide for ourselves what ends we pursue during our lifetimes, rather than have our ends set by other people.²⁹

However, full self-determination is only possible in light of the truth. Individuals cannot fully self-determine in ignorance. In order to fully self-determine, one needs to commit oneself in light of (a) all relevant information, (b) only accurate, (c) without manipulation, and (d) without coercion.³⁰ Individuals may more fully self-determine than others in as far as they satisfy more of these criteria or satisfy these criteria more fully than others do. Unless they satisfy them fully however, they are not fully self-determining.

Indeed, it seems that we do a disservice to individuals if we do not allow them to make decisions and formulate life plans in light of facts, in that we rob them of a chance to be self-determining. It is quite plausible that decisions and actions made in such circumstances have limited value. It is to labour under a misapprehension, and if one’s whole life is spent in this way, the

very real worry is that one's life will have been wasted. In Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God," Tibetan monks seek to compile all of the names of God, the purpose for which they believe the Universe was created. I won't spoil the story for those who have not read it, but suppose the monks were wrong.³¹ Certainly they would have sense of purpose, but if they were told that they were mistaken, and that there was in fact no god to have names applied, they might wish this to happen sooner rather than later. And given the choice between false appearance of meaning, or meaning premised on a falsehood, full respect might seem to require disabuse. What they might entail is that people live out their lives under an illusion of meaning; they might thereby regard their life as meaningless if only they had access to a fuller range of information.

Some might claim that all meaning is a mere illusion and that false perception of meaning is the best for which we can hope. However, this thought is unstable since objective standards of evaluation are presupposed insofar as one is able to judge that some lives (e.g., those involving a false perception of meaning) are better than others are. Furthermore, what is required from such parties is an error theory as to why all those who sense meaning are mistaken. On my more modest error theory, perceptions of meaning are rendered vulnerable to meaninglessness or, to what also seems problematic, to their meaningfulness having been a stroke of luck by being premised on falsehoods.

At this point, the Rawlsians may seek to invoke the burdens of judgement. Rawls's account of *the burdens of judgment* says that, for various reasons, knowing the truth about the content of what he calls comprehensive doctrines is hard, and as a result a plurality of views is inevitable.³² But knowing the truth is less hard than emphasis on these burdens might indicate. Plenty is known, and still many (politically reasonable people) fail to share in this knowledge. Examples of ignorance despite human knowledge include ignorance about the shape of earth, anthropogenic climate change, the effects of vaccinations, and whether Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. To the extent that Rawlsians use the burdens of judgement to urge the frailty of human knowledge and reason, she undermines all of the other findings

that she argues in favour of (to resist such a consequence would amount to special pleading). Indeed, there is no reason to think that Rawls would have endorsed such an application of the burdens of judgement.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have sought to defend a pairing of the “Epistemic Criterion” and of the “Momentousness Criterion” from a critique in Clayton and Stevens’s advocacy of the “Acceptability Requirement.” I have not attempted to defend the thesis against further alternatives or further attempt to establish it. To be sure, I have not been arguing that people are under any duty to perfect themselves, to seek the maximal meaning in life or to be more morally good than is required by their enforceable moral duties. Instead, I have argued that even where it is valuable for people to set their own ends, they can only fully meaningfully do this in light of facts and free of misinformation. It is the duty of educators to put them in this position; it is then their prerogative to fail to live meaningfully. While children have no duty to perfect themselves, they do have a right to invent themselves, but they cannot do this in ignorance: if their life is meaningless because they chose as well as they could without being informed, then they could not truly consent to the life they undertook, and did not have a realistic chance at a meaningful life. In sum, educators are under an obligation to inform their students of what it is costly for them not to know, as well as what it is costly to others for them not to know. The way to determine what is costly and for whom is, in part, through deference to expert consensus. It does not offend against students’ freedom to inform them in these ways, nor does it require treating them with unequal regard. We ought then, to prefer the politically perfectionist conjunction of the Epistemic and Momentousness criteria in deciding educational policy to the anti-perfectionist Acceptability Requirement.

1 I would like to thank audiences at Malmö University’s, Philosophical Studies of Education research group, The University of Warwick’s, Centre

for Ethics, Law and Public Affairs, and The Manchester Centre for Political Theory Workshops; Johan Brännmark, Matthew Clayton, Michael Hand, Hwa Kim, and David Rowthorn, for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

2 I have sought to motivate and defend this pairing before in “Towards a Theory of Propositional Curriculum Content,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 48, no. 1 (2014): 137–148, and “When to Teach for Belief: A Tempered Defence of the Epistemic Criterion,” *Educational Theory* 67, no. 2 (2017): 173–191.

3 Michael Hand and John White, “Is Compulsory Religious Education Justified? A Dialogue,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 8, no. 2 (2004): 101–112.

4 Hand and White, “Is Compulsory Religious Education Justified? A Dialogue,” 102, 103.

5 They are relevant to the mission of private schools also, but I leave these to one side for the sake of developing the more fundamental point of this article.

6 Matthew Clayton and David M. Stevens, “What is the Point of Religious Education?” *Theory and Research in Education* 16, no. 1 (2018): 67.

7 Clayton and Stevens, “What is the Point,” 67.

8 Matthew Clayton, “Anti-Perfectionist Childrearing,” in *The Nature of Children’s Well-being*, eds. A. Bagattini and C. Macleod (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 126.

9 Politically controversial ends and conceptions are a special case of Robert

Dearden's "behaviourally controversial" ends and conceptions. Those ends and conceptions are behaviourally controversial, on which "numbers of people" disagree. Robert Dearden, "Controversial Issues and the Curriculum," in *Theory and Practice in Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 85.

10 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 229.

11 Jonathan Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 274.

12 Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection*, 274.

13 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 67. Whether similar principles apply to political influence tout court if it could somehow be separated out from political power, and where the difference between power and influence lies are questions for another paper.

14 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 65.

15 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 65.

16 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 73-74.

17 For a discussion of acceptability versus actual acceptance, see Victor Tadros, "Chapter 8: Political Liberalism and Criminalization," in *Wrongs and Crimes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

18 See Tadros, "Chapter 8" for an attractive account of how respect for citizens' authenticity and independence provides states with pro tanto reasons to refrain from forcing reasonable citizens to serve ends which are not acceptable to them without revising their most fundamental moral beliefs.

19 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 70.

- 20 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 69.
- 21 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 69.
- 22 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 70.
- 23 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 66.
- 24 John Tillson, "Religious Education and the Floodgates of Impartiality," in *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook*, ed. Robert Kunzman (Urbana: IL, Philosophy of Education Society, 2011): 118 – 123.
- 25 Clayton, "Anti-Perfectionist Childrearing," 139.
- 26 E. Jonathan Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.
- 27 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 74.
- 28 Clayton and Stevens, "What is the Point," 71.
- 29 Clayton, "Anti-Perfectionist Childrearing," 126.
- 30 Following Moti Gorin, one's reasoning cannot have been bypassed or subverted, or cannot only have been engaged properly because doing so happens to serve the ends of the person engaging it on this occasion. Moti Gorin, "Towards a Theory of Interpersonal Manipulation," in *Manipulation: Theory and Practice*, eds. Christian Coons and Michael Weber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 73-97. Following Allen W. Wood, "I am coerced to do something when I either do not choose to do it or if, when I choose to do it, I do it because I have no acceptable alternative." Some alternatives "might be unacceptable because they threaten an evil so extreme I can't or won't consider them (being shot, letting my family starve), while others might be unacceptable for moral or legal reasons." Allen W. Wood, "Coercion, Manipulation and Exploitation," in *Manipulation: Theory and Practice*, eds. Christian

Coons and Michael Weber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21, 23.

31 Consider the cave dwellers in Plato's famous allegory in *The Republic* (VII, 514a–518b) for another illustration of this point. *Plato: Complete Works*, eds.

J.M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

32 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36–37, 55–57.