

Pragmatic Perfectionism

Alexander M. Sidorkin

*California State University Sacramento and
National Research University Higher School of Economics*

John Tillson’s paper argues against the acceptability requirement, under which school curriculum should avoid matters that are subject to public controversy. He proposes a “perfectionist” approach, where education should go beyond the limits imposed by the acceptability requirement. He correctly points that errors among the general public are common, including that part of the public that is otherwise reasonable. Such erroneous beliefs are common among antivaxxers and climate change deniers. If we wait for the controversies to die down, we will never get such topics into curriculum. I liked the argument, until I realized that Tillson uses it to justify teaching religion in public schools. In his view, we should teach students things that are important even if a part of an otherwise reasonable public disagrees with it. Religion is important, he writes, and may be consequential to students’ lives; therefore, we should teach it. Then I did not like the argument anymore, and found some holes in it.

To advance his agenda, Tillson proposes we pair the epistemic and the “momentousness” criteria. The most problematic part of this is in his understanding of pairing. What does it mean to pair two criteria? Does it mean we apply both of them at the same time, and knowledge has to meet both to make it into curriculum? Apply one first, and if it fails, apply the other? Are the two both sufficient and necessary? Use whichever fits our pre-existing bias on a case-by-case basis? I do not believe the argument holds without clarifying what pairing actually is. He seems to believe that we first need to apply the momentousness criterion and figure out what is worth learning, and then apply the epistemic criterion to see what’s proven and what’s not. And even if the knowledge fails this criterion, it can still be applied if it is momentous enough. So, why even have a criterion that does not matter in the end, if it can be over-written?

These two criteria have very different origins because they apply to two different kinds of knowledge. Let us call them for simplicity the yes-knowledge and the maybe-knowledge. The epistemic criterion applies to yes-knowledge that has some consensus achieved by communities of experts. The momentousness criterion seems to apply more to maybe-knowledge. Tillson uses the weakness of the acceptability requirement against the epistemic criteria to imply that it is equally weak against the momentousness criteria. But that is not right; no justification is offered for such an extension. Such pairing does not work for the purposes he identifies, namely, to counter the acceptability requirement as developed by Clayton and David. His entire line of reasoning against the acceptability requirement rests on the epistemological argument. Yes, many otherwise reasonable people are wrong about various things, and that is why we have experts who can apply their own specialized criteria of truth and tell us what they know to be true. However, it does not follow that the propensity of the general public to be wrong about scientifically established facts also denies their authority to decide on things that are not scientifically proven facts.

If Tillson's proposal is accepted, who would be playing the role of experts in selecting the momentous knowledge for curriculum? Who is there to tell the public that the knowledge of God and salvation is more momentous than the knowledge of soccer or good sexual practices? I have no doubt such a call can be made in authoritarian political regimes. It is just not compatible with political liberalism.

Supposedly, it could be the professional community of educational experts. However, there is no reliable political mechanism *within* the educator community to achieve consensus on what knowledge is more momentous than others. The way experts achieve consensus regarding yes-knowledge is through the use of scientific method and in considering preponderance of evidence. There is nothing like that in place for maybe-knowledge. There is no momentousness test. Even if educators were trusted to make that call, I do not believe they can.

Tillson's perfectionism may be a logically coherent construction, but it has very little relevance to the actual situation on the ground. The acceptability argument, on the other hand, is very pragmatic, even though it is messy from

the abstract rationality point of view. Consider the actual history of cultural wars as they are fought on curricular battlefields. Those wars play out slightly differently in different countries, depending on which political bodies control curriculum. However, their outcomes are pragmatic compromises achieved through a perpetual political conflict. Some of the non-expert knowledge is thrown out of curriculum as too extreme. For example, neither open creationism, nor common conspiracy theories are taught in any democratic country. The groups agree to leave alone knowledge they cannot agree on, for example, religion, certain periods of history, and so on. The resulting compromise is often bland and boring, but that is beside the point.

I am not convinced that some unproven knowledge is so momentous that we must include it in curriculum. In general, curriculum is not that important in shaping individuals. At least, no evidence of its importance has been presented yet. We cannot even establish a direct link between school achievements and workers' productivity, not to mention any sort of measure of meaningfulness. Therefore, I find the claim of momentousness not only impractical, but also greatly exaggerated. Nothing in the maybe-knowledge world is so momentous that it would merit overriding a political consensus, even if such overriding was achievable.

It would probably be wise to revisit the whole history of the separation of church and state doctrine. The reason for its existence was not that people at the time hated religion or were especially atheistic. Rather, they could not figure out a way of resolving their religious differences short of killing each other and agreed to take it out of the public affairs altogether. They could not agree on momentousness of their versions of faith. Tillson also cites an author who believes that religious claims about God, salvation, and life after death are supported by evidence. That is not true. No such evidence exists, and most theologians would agree that such evidence is unobtainable by design. Who needs faith when we have evidence?

There are also issues with the epistemic argument, for we do not include in curriculum all the knowledge experts have a consensus on. For example, in many American high schools, all the emphasis is on algebra, and very little on

statistics, although it is reasonable to believe that statistics is much more useful than algebra. The epistemic criterion is not fit to make these kinds of choices.

There is a limited role for more limited momentousness criterion. However, I want to emphasize that it may function very differently regarding the two distinct bodies of knowledge.

1. Momentousness criterion may be used to select from the pool of yes-knowledge. It is a pragmatic call on what is more likely to be important for students. Since the entire pool of yes-knowledge is validated, the selection is not a difficult political process. Education authorities may be trusted to select, because political consensus is more or less irrelevant here. The democratic consent works through trust to experts. The contemporary liberal state does recognize the authority of experts as an important source of authority beyond the democratic political process. The acceptability criterion does not directly apply to yes-knowledge, which Tillson expertly demonstrated.

2. To maybe-knowledge, the acceptability criterion does apply. If there are no experts, the regular political process takes its place, and consensus is rarely achievable. Maybe-knowledge deals with values, and those are outside of the expert purview. Within the much smaller pool of acceptable maybe-knowledge, again, educators may apply the momentousness criterion any way they understand it. Educators are experts in a limited sense and can make a call on what may be more or less important for students to learn.

My corrections to Tillson's argument call for a more limited, humbler, but more pragmatic perfectionism. It is prudent to consider educators' place in a democratic pluralistic society and not overestimate the degree or trust we can count on from the larger political entity. I suspect Tillson's intent is to claim professional authority over the entire education, and to escape accountability. While I am sympathetic to the intent to some degree, I also see no realistic chance of achieving it. Public education consumes 6-8% of GDP and is largely funded by direct or indirect public subsidies. Under no circumstance will taxpayers tell us: "Here is some money, educate our children any way you like." It

would do us all a service to recognize how unlikely such an event is. No clever philosophical argument will make it any more likely.

We all would be better off adopting a more realistic attitude. It is hard to be a perfectionist in an imperfect world, and I thank John Tillson for asking us to think about it.