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Important: this is the penultimate draft of this publication, the final and published version of which can be found in the ‘Symposium on Tillson’s *Children, Religion and the Ethics of Influence*’ issue of the journal *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. Wherever possible please cite from the published version.

Dispositions and Influences

In chapter 4, as part of the wider investigation into how one might ethically influence children, Tillson considers the question of what exactly *formative* influence—influence over those features of an individual in virtue of which she is who she is—consists in. Formative influence here is contrasted with *behavioural* influence, where this latter is conceived in terms making a difference to what someone does. Presumably, formative influences can make this sort of difference too—by changing who somebody is, one presumably might thus also affect a change in the sorts of thing they do. But, where formative influence affects a change in behaviour, it does so by “influencing those malleable yet stable internal conditions which incline us towards our actual volitions and actions” (2019: 53). Behavioural influence, in contrast, takes a more direct route: it aims to make a difference to specific behaviours via methods such as promises of punishment and reward, leaving the influencee herself relatively unchanged.

Formative influence, Tillson says, essentially involves *dispositions* (e.g. 2019: 52 or 67)— this claim is both intriguing and, it strikes me, deserving of closer attention. Dispositions are a topic of increasing interest in metaphysics. I aim to briefly outline some central questions concerning the nature of dispositions, highlighting how these questions might bear on the topic of influence. I won’t be advancing any specific theses or positions—rather, the aim is to open up potential avenues for further work and discussion.

Dispositions

As understood in the contemporary metaphysics literature, dispositions are features or properties of things in virtue of which things do what they do. Individuals with just the same dispositions will (or will tend to) behave in the same way when placed in exactly similar circumstances. Individuals with different dispositions will (or will tend to)

behave differently, and this difference will be due to their instantiating different dispositions. Dispositions are essentially directed *towards* something or other. That is, their nature involves being directed towards some *manifestation* or *set of manifestations*; and they bring about these manifestations in *suitable circumstances*. Canonical examples of dispositions include fragility, which could be roughly characterised as ‘the disposition to break when struck’, or solubility, ‘the disposition to dissolve when in contact with a suitable solvent’ (and indeed, Tillson deploys precisely these examples, 2019: 53).

There are several controversies concerning the nature of dispositions. One concerns whether dispositions are ‘single-’ or ‘multi-track’. Single-track dispositions have only a single manifestation, or perhaps a single manifestation type. Whenever a single-track disposition manifests, and in whatever circumstances it does so, the way it manifests is the same. Proponents include Lowe (2010) and Bird (2007). Conversely, multi-track dispositions are directed towards a range of different manifestations, and so on two different occasions, when such a disposition manifests, it may manifest in different ways, depending on the circumstances in question. Heil, a prominent proponent of the multi-track view, writes:

“Consider a simple case, the sphericity of a particular ball. The ball’s sphericity, in concert with incoming light radiation, structures outgoing radiation in a definite way. The very same property of the ball disposes it to produce a concave depression in a lump of clay or to roll... one disposition, many different kinds of manifestation.” (2003: 198–199).

Multi-tracking allows that a given disposition might have a relatively restricted number of tracks, or might have a very large, maybe even infinite, number of tracks—C. B. Martin (2008) holds the latter view.

Another issue concerns how dispositions come to manifest, that is, how they operate. One account is the ‘stimulus-manifestation’ model. According to this account, a disposition will only give rise to a manifestation when galvanised into action by some trigger or stimulus. For instance, in the case of the *fragility* of a vase, the stimulus might be ‘being struck with a force greater than X’. The manifestation is produced by the target disposition alone, although it will not be produced until the occurrence of the stimulus. An alternative account is the ‘mutual manifestation’ model. According to this view, for some manifestation to occur, there must always be at least two dispositions—and very often many more—working together to bring it about. When they do so, there

is no sense of priority such that one could be considered the operative disposition, whilst the other is held to have merely stimulated or triggered it. For instance, in the case of the production of a particular vase's shattering, this view would hold that this is not the result of the 'fragility' of the vase alone, but rather of a whole host of features of the vase, of the object that struck it, and perhaps more besides.

Dispositions and Formative Influence

Philosophers interested in influence who conceive of it in terms of dispositions, thankfully needn't aim to definitively settle these debates. Metaphysicians contending these battlegrounds are typically concerned with the nature of the most *basic* or *fundamental* dispositions. But it is at least open to adversaries in this arena to be pluralistic about non-basic, non-fundamental dispositions—allowing, for instance, that some 'higher-level' dispositions might be multi-track and operate on the stimulus-manifestation model despite their preferred account of fundamental dispositions involving single-tracking and mutuality. And plausibly, those dispositions implicated in formative influence number amongst the non-basic, non-fundamental.

1. The orthodox conception of dispositions is that they are single-track and operate according to the stimulus-manifestation model (e.g. Bird 2007). On this view, a disposition disposes its bearer in just one way and will reliably produce this single manifestation whenever the appropriate stimulus is present. It strikes me that such a model of dispositionality doesn't seem to fit very well with the model of formative influence Tillson has in mind, for it seems to follow that what it would be to influence someone would be to instil in them a disposition to reliably produce a particular behaviour in the presence of a suitable stimulus. Such a picture seems reminiscent of Pavlovian-style conditioning, and much closer to the *behavioural* conception of influence to which Tillson contrasts *formative* influence. If this line of thought is right, then those who wish to conceive of formative influence in terms of dispositions may need to look beyond the orthodox conception.

2. If dispositions are multi-track—such that a single disposition is directed towards to (perhaps very wide) range of distinct manifestations—then an interesting epistemological challenge presents itself. Consider two distinct dispositions, A and B, whose manifestation-profiles largely, but not perfectly, overlap. In most circumstances, these dispositions dispose their bearers towards the same sorts of manifestations. But in certain circumstances, S, in virtue of instantiating A rather B, say, a bearer will

manifest X-ly rather than Y-ly. If circumstances S are rare or difficult to reproduce, it might be very hard to tell A from B, and to know which of these a given individual instantiates. This epistemic challenge seems to take on an ethically salient dimension when considering formative influence. If exercising influence involves making a difference to the dispositions of the influencee, then it seems that one precondition of doing so ethically is *knowing what disposition one is imparting* to the influencee when one exercises one's influence. (Suppose that whilst X-ing is innocuous enough, Y-ing would cause great harm to the individual who so manifests, and that S has a high enough chance of coming about that it is deemed a salient possibility. It seems then at least plausible that an influencer ought to know that they are instilling A rather than B, if they are to wield their influence ethically).

3. In discussing Elmer Thiessen's claim that one significant kind of formative influence is via socialisation into a particular community (2011: 10), Tillson says: 'somewhat problematically for me, Thiessen draws attention to influence over social grouping; a respect in which we can be influenced, which does not seem to be anything like a disposition' (2019: 64). I think that Tillson's conclusion is natural when one thinks of dispositions under the stimulus-manifestation conception, as internal states of an individual, waiting primed to act. But the alternative view—that dispositions operate according to the mutual-manifestation model—takes dispositions to deeply mutually interdependent states, essentially implicated in a holistic 'power structure'. So conceived, I think one can gloss the kind of influence Thiessen discusses in dispositional terms—not as direct influence over *which* dispositions the individual instantiates, but rather over which partner-dispositions for mutual manifestation the individual finds themselves embedded amongst.

4. When Tillson lists the proposed respects of formative influence, the first category on his list is one's *abilities* (2019: 65). Indeed, it seems natural to associate abilities with dispositions. However, whilst there isn't space here to discuss the details, Barbara Vetter has recently argued that a dispositional account of abilities should be rejected (2019). If abilities are central to influence in the manner their prominence on the list suggests, then a proponent of a dispositional conception of influence may need to engage carefully with Vetter's arguments.

Concluding Thoughts

The necessarily brief discussion in 1-4 is intended to motivate the thought that conceiving of formative influence in terms of dispositions opens several interesting, substantial and fertile avenues for further consideration (and doubtless there are further questions that deserve attention than those listed above). That there is scope for productive interaction between some relatively technical aspects of contemporary metaphysical research and the philosophical investigation of formative influence may be a surprising result, but I hope it is also a welcome one!

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