

Reconciling Feminist and Socio-political Grounds of Classroom Authority

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“Masculinist” and feminist, forceful and nurturing, hierarchical, and relational “grounds” of classroom authority are portrayed as mutually exclusive, and the latter are now widely defended. Yet, the polarization along these axes arises in no small measure from a failure to distinguish three questions whose answers are indeterminately related: What gives a teacher a *right* to govern her classroom? What ethical constraints apply to the *manner* in which teachers exercise their authority? What *enables* successful teachers to govern their classrooms or enlist the cooperation of their students? The “ground” of a teacher’s authority might refer to what *enables* her to enlist her students’ cooperation — what accounts for her “having authority” with them — or it might refer to the foundation of her *right* to govern her classroom; and these may have little to do with each other. Similarly, the basis of her *right* may have little to do with the ethical constraints on the *manner* in which she governs her classroom, and it is her *manner*, not the recognition of her *right*, that matters more to how well she is *able* to govern it. Unfortunately, it is often assumed that the justification for a non-authoritarian *manner* of classroom governance is inseparable from the theory that only the consent of the governed can give rise to the *right* to govern. This assumption is fraught with error. More unfortunate still is the theory that teachers have a right to impose on students only what the students specifically consent to in honest negotiations. One problem with this is that it seems to rule out *imposing* things on students altogether, even when there is good reason to. Feminists, myself included, are not all ready to *completely* eschew reliance on the authority of educators to impose things on students, even to threaten or use force.¹ Sometimes, in the face of preventable harm, such authority must be exercised, and an adequate account of classroom authority will acknowledge and accommodate this fact, within the context of a broader reconciliation of feminist and so-called socio-political accounts. In what follows, I will attempt to outline such an account, and I will begin by recounting a pair of incidents that illustrate the need to reconcile feminist, non-authoritarian models of classroom authority with a limited right and responsibility to use force.

Observing in her high school class a student agitated with talk of the necessity of killing someone, a teacher might reasonably use her authority to remove the student for mandatory counseling, to do so by telling the student what is happening, to directly supervise the student’s removal to ensure that it happens, and to call in help if necessary. This will go more smoothly and with a greater prospect of a favorable outcome, if the teacher is not merely *in authority* — in a position of authority in her classroom, in the sense of having an institutionally conferred *right* to do these things — but *has authority* with this student, in the sense of being able to procure his cooperation through his belief that she knows what is best or, in John Kleinig’s terms, his belief that she “is in a position to know [what] is to be done.”²

Such authority will be perceived by the student as non-coercive to the extent that he perceives her as having not merely an understanding of the situation, a kind of knowledge if you will, but also *moral authority*. And he is likely to perceive her as having such authority — as knowing what is for the best all things considered — if his experience of her is that she respects him, cares about him as much as others, and manages her classroom in a way that aims effectively at the good of all its students.³

Lacking authority in this sense — as a new teacher at the start of the school year or a day-by-day substitute would — a teacher is nevertheless saddled with the responsibility to act for the good of this student as well as to prevent possible harm to his intended victim. If there are any interventions available to the teacher that are likely to do more good than harm, then it would be irresponsible for her not to intervene, even if she must rely on forceful measures — such as calling upon the services of a school “disciplinarian” to escort the student from her room. Her goal for this student should be educative or therapeutic, but an adolescent in the grip of simmering rage may not accept such help without a measure of force being applied.

Young children may similarly need to have structure externally imposed on them if they are to learn what will benefit them, because they are simply not ready to be internally self-regulating except within limits, and are overwhelmed by the responsibility to make more than a few choices for themselves. Adults, if they have been properly cared for, will generally possess the “enabling virtues,” such as prudence, patience, and diligence, that are crucial to managing their lives autonomously and well, but children are only at best in the process of acquiring those virtues.⁴ Much of the time it suffices to simply tell children what to do, having explained to them the reasons that make it a good thing to do, and having done so with the moral authority that a good caregiver will have earned. But this does not always suffice. One must then choose between giving up and not giving up; between abdicating and honoring one’s formative responsibilities to the child. In Diana Baumrind’s terms, the *permissive* approach of giving up and letting the child have his way when he is being unreasonable is demonstrably detrimental to the child, and the *authoritative* approach of not giving up is demonstrably superior in its developmental benefits, even if prevailing in such contests of will requires more than persuasion. In her terms, to use compelling means as a last resort is not *authoritarian*. Offering no good reasons, ignoring cogent reasons offered by the child, and using force or harsh commands as a first resort would be authoritarian.⁵

As an illustration of this, consider another real incident. Rick, let us call him, is a day-by-day substitute teacher who has signed up to teach exclusively at the secondary level. Circumstances in the district result in him being assigned one day to a third grade class, and as it happens he is thoroughly inexperienced in managing small children. Things seem to go smoothly at first, but Rick unwittingly changes the order in which the morning subjects occur. The students find this departure from their normal routine unsettling, and before long they begin talking. Well, why shouldn’t they be able to talk a bit, thinks Rick? No harm in that. But the deviations from normal classroom decorum escalate. At what turns out to be a crucial turning point in the day, a girl, let us call her Clarice, approaches the desk and tells Rick “You

have to woop me.” When Rick asks what Clarice means, she picks up from the teacher’s desk a pair of metal-edged wooden rulers taped together, and holds out the other hand flat, palm down, averting her eyes. Her sense of justice, a common one in the south, demands that Rick “woop” her hand with the rulers, but he refuses. “I can’t do that,” he says. Clarice insists again that he must, but after determining what her infraction is, he gently admonishes her to be good and sends her back to her seat. Once the news of this failure of retribution has filtered through the room a scene of chaos ensues, and after stern but completely ineffectual lectures by the principal, the day ends as a child, Raymond, who has been leaning back in his chair, falls, pulling his desk over on his little chest, and dissolves in shrieks of pain and tears.

The lesson of this case is not that Rick should have “wooped” Clarice. The lesson is rather that in his inexperience, Rick failed to appreciate the extent to which third-graders require a familiar routine, an externally imposed structure, and that such structure has its benefits even if it occasionally has to be maintained with a heavy hand, as it might be when a student refuses to cooperate. The unsettling effects of changing the order of subjects contributed inestimably to the deterioration that brought Clarice to his desk, and to that extent it was his own fault that the price of renouncing corporal punishment was losing control of the class in a way that became unsafe for his students. A secondary lesson is that it is folly to imagine that teachers can liberate children by deciding to negotiate with them, as if the teachers’ authority — their right and responsibility — to do (within limits) what is best for their students were grounded in the students’ *consent*. This kind of consent or *authorization* theory of teacher authority would suggest that Rick, as a new arrival in the students’ class, should have begun by opening a conversation about how the day would be spent. It is not unlikely that by doing so he would have made the day even more difficult for all concerned, however.

Let these two cases suffice as illustrations of what most of us would agree upon, that in managing their classrooms, teachers are justified in not completely renouncing the options of imposing non-negotiable structure and using force of some kinds. How, then, can we accommodate this fact within an account of classroom authority or governance, and in doing so shrink the perceived chasm between “masculinist” and feminist perspectives on this topic?

In a paper presented at these meetings five years ago, Barbara Applebaum grappled with the perceived incompatibility of care and authority, argued that there is in fact a form of authority that feminists can happily endorse, and acknowledged that feminists have reason not to completely renounce the use of force as a last resort in schools. While acknowledging sympathy for the account of teachers’ “socio-political” authority or right to manage their classrooms developed by Richard Peters, and defended by Alven Neiman against attacks predicated on epistemic skepticism, she found such accounts deficient.⁶ The first deficiency she identified was that, “While Neiman grants that power or force may not be or should not be explicitly exercised, underlying this authority is always the threat, the promise, that such commands can be backed by force or coercive measures” (*OGA*, 309). The word “underlying” suggests a “ground” of authority, but while Peters and Neiman were

concerned with a teacher's *right* to govern her classroom, Applebaum imputed to them a view of the "ground" of authority in the sense of what *enables* a teacher to enlist the cooperation of her students. Despite what Neiman says, she took the Peters-Neiman account of "socio-political" authority to imply something about the *manner* in which authority over students would be exercised: that it "may silence and ignore the voice of students" and be exercised in the manner of "an authority father-figure enforcing his word by hierarchical control" (*OGA*, 309-10). And, she held, "One cannot consistently be both a nurturing mother providing her children with selfless, unconditional support and an authority father-figure enforcing his word by hierarchical control" (*OGA*, 309-10).

The basis for Applebaum's objection seems to be the assumption, invited by the word "ground," that if the "ground" of the *right* to manage a classroom is institutional and involves reference to the teacher's credentials, then the "ground" of the effective exercise of authority or *manner* in which it is exercised must also be institutional and involve reference to the teacher's credentials. There is no good reason to make this assumption, because one can cogently insist that these are distinct matters: teachers take on responsibilities for children when they accept their institutional roles, and they are granted a corresponding limited *right* or *privilege* to manage their classrooms in the fulfillment of those responsibilities, but the *manner* in which they can best fulfill their responsibilities is through caring for students, communicating a genuine concern for their well being, showing respect for them as independent, developing thinkers and agents, and so on. I suspect Neiman and Applebaum would both agree with this, and that there is little if any real disagreement here.

In addition to this confusion associated with the word "ground," there is a false dichotomy buried in the *nurturing mother v. authority father-figure* motif. The language of maternal "unconditional support" obscures Baumrind's crucial question: When despite unstinting measures of love, patient explanation, and reasonable requests a child is inclined to be *unreasonable* in a way that burdens others, will the parent yield and let the child have his way? Or will the parent stand firm? Nurturing reasonableness requires standing firm in at least some important instances, so nurturing parents and teachers alike will sometimes have to stand firm. They will have to distinguish as best they can what the child needs from what the child wants or expects. The *nurturing mother v. authority father-figure* dichotomy is thus an unhelpful stereotype that distracts us from some of the important realities of sound parenting and teaching. It suggests a fundamental opposition where there isn't one.

In developing this first objection, Applebaum also notes that "the student's voice" plays no role in grounding the teacher's "socio-political" authority, though she does not pursue the idea suggested by this, namely that children are full-fledged autonomous agents who must transfer their rights of self-governance to an adult in order for that adult to acquire the privilege of governing that child. A decisive objection to this idea, which has been developed in great detail by Laura Purdy, is that children should not be regarded as full-fledged autonomous agents because they lack mature judgment, and until they acquire such judgment their interest in

developing it outweighs their interest in managing their own lives *when these interests conflict*.⁷ Those whose responsibility it is to promote the child's developmental interests do not require, then, the child's *authorization*, though of course, as I have been insisting, they ought to make every effort to proceed in a *manner* likely to procure the child's voluntary cooperation, and they should nurture the child's developing judgment by providing an appropriately expanding domain of choice in which he is not likely to do himself great harm.

The second deficiency that Applebaum finds in the Peters-Neiman account of authority is the role it assigns to the teacher's knowledge in the warrant or "ground" of her "socio-political" authority (*OGA*, 309, 315). The logic of this is analogous to that of the first objection, however — she objects that appealing to one's university degree is not a productive way to earn the cooperation of one's students — so the appropriate response would be to note again that the foundation of the teacher's right to manage her classroom implies nothing about *how* she should go about managing it.

How, then, does Applebaum carve out a form of authority that feminists can accept? The answer is that she borrows a page from Nicholas Burbules, who suggests, she says, "a reconceptualization of teachers' authority that is based on relationships and which is derived from the bonds of respect, concern, and trust that teachers and students develop among themselves" (*OGA*, 314).⁸ So far so good — or almost so good, since we are again faced with an undifferentiated notion of authority and its (singular) ground. But what does Burbules give us beyond this? Two things apparently: (1) a theory of teacher authority that grounds it in student *authorization*, transacted through ongoing conversation, and (2) the notion that an abandonment of claims to *certainty* entails an abandonment of traditional justifications of authority.

With respect to the first of these elements of his view, I have already laid out the basis of a response, which can be summed up in the observation that this view ignores the developmental differences between children of different ages and adults. Burbules "situates authority within an ongoing communicative relation of negotiation and reciprocity: a relation in which authority might be provisionally ceded, but in which it is continually open to scrutiny, questioning, and challenge."⁹ Although he does not elaborate on this theme, the idea seems to be that it is the children themselves who "cede" or transfer the authority to the teacher, making their act of *authorization* a necessary and also sufficient condition for the teacher's having authority over them.¹⁰ I have already argued that this does not make sense as a *necessary* condition, but it is worth adding that it does not seem *sufficient* either. If the consent of children were sufficient to give someone pedagogical authority over them, it would suffice to give any charlatan or Pied Piper who could charm or seduce them, such authority. The machinery of teacher education and selection — which is to say the efforts of the adult community to protect children's interests — would become irrelevant. One might try to correct this problem by making parental consent *also* a necessary condition, but this would generate a dilemma. If children *are* full-fledged free agents, then parents will have no authority over children either unless

the children grant them some, hence no authority over their education. If children *are not* full-fledged free agents, then parents will have some educational authority over them, but children will not have the moral capacity to transfer such authority to anyone.

The lesson in this is that an adequate account of classroom authority will make reference to *responsibilities of care and instruction* owed by the adult community to children, and to the necessity of exercising or *taking care* in fulfilling those responsibilities. The exercise of such care would surely include the establishment of a public system that takes reasonable precautions to ensure that children have good teachers. Such a system would amount, then, to a mechanism for transferring collective adult responsibility for children to individual educators, and granting them the authority necessary — and only as much as is necessary — to fulfill that responsibility. I take the *responsibilities* to be normatively prior, and the *authority* to act in fulfillment of those responsibilities to be derivative, and I take the precautions or elements of good practice definitive of *adequacy* in the fulfillment of the responsibilities to be expressible as *standards of care*. This is surely part, but only part, of an adequate account of educational authority, and it shrinks the distance between “traditional” and feminist accounts in two ways: by elaborating the notion of care through a notion of *taking care* or satisfying reasonable *standards of care*, and by deriving authority from *responsibility* and limiting it thereby.

The second element of Burbules’s view, the one that finds in epistemic uncertainty a basis for rejecting “traditional” accounts of authority, points us back toward earlier episodes in the literature of classroom authority: to the role of knowledge in Peters’s account, the role of assaults on that account grounded in epistemic skepticism, and Neiman’s response to the skeptics. Burbules writes that,

The quest for certainty underlies...the belief that teacher authority is justified by the ends it produces. This kind of authority ultimately rests upon the foundation or “knowledge base” sought by a great deal of educational research.¹¹

There is some truth, but also some confusion, in this diagnosis. Neiman spells out and endorses Peters’ conceptions of the role of teacher knowledge in justifying the teacher’s right to manage her classroom. The argument seems to go like this:

Pr. 1: To educate is essentially to initiate students into the forms of knowledge.

Pr. 2: To initiate students into the forms of knowledge requires knowledge.

Hence C. 1: An educator requires knowledge.

Pr. 3: Only an educator should be granted the socio-political authority accorded a teacher.

Hence C. 2: Only someone with knowledge should be granted the socio-political authority of a teacher.

This makes the possession of knowledge a *necessary condition* for appropriately obtaining the authority to manage a classroom. Why should we accept premise three? The answer, apparently (and according to Neiman), is that what justifies the granting of classroom authority is the *value* of the education that only an educator can provide students.¹² Burbules is essentially on target, then, in saying that on this

view it is the end, or benefit, that an educator can achieve that justifies the granting of the right to manage a classroom, except that we must qualify this by noting that the benefits of education are said not to *justify* authority, but rather merely to provide one *necessary condition* for properly granting authority. It also remains unclear why a commitment to certainty need have anything to do with this. Pursuing our ends in the face of uncertainty is what we all must do, and recognize we do, all the time. Taking care to protect what we care about involves taking precautions to *reduce* risk; it does not presuppose certainty or the possibility of *eliminating* risk.

Now that we see what this knowledge-oriented account of authority amounts to, however, what seems remarkable is how incomplete it is. First, as just noted, it doesn't even pretend to identify *sufficient conditions* for a person having the right to run a classroom; rather merely one *necessary condition*. Second, no account of the justification of classroom authority is complete without some account of when the authority *runs out*. It is an authority over children and not over adults, except in a limited form arising from specific consensual arrangements. If an appeal to the value of knowledge suggests any account at all of when educative authority runs out, the answer in Peters' terms would evidently be "when the student has been adequately initiated into the forms of knowledge" or has achieved *epistemic competence*. This won't do; by this standard educative authority might never run out, since it could be argued that few college graduates grasp the forms of inquiry and evidence that constitute the various disciplines. Third, this account suggests a greater distance between parental and educational authority than is plausible. Teachers stand *in loco parentis* and have responsibilities, hence authority, associated with that status, but parental authority does not seem to rest on any ability to initiate children into the forms of knowledge. Thus, there are features of the authority of teachers that seem to be parasitic on parental authority and not explained by the value of being initiated into the forms of knowledge. Fourth and finally, this account of the place of knowledge in classroom authority does not give us any answer to the question we started with, namely how we might account for the legitimacy of resorting to force as a last resort in managing classrooms.

Noticing the limitations of this account does, however, bring us to the threshold of a better answer, which would hinge not on the student's *epistemic competence*, but on his *decisional competence*, his ability to make decisions that are competent. Decisional competence requires a background of knowledge and understanding of how to investigate a variety of matters, but goes beyond this and bears on the actor's ability to form and act from reasonable judgments that protect his own interests. With this as our starting point, what we need in order to determine when educative authority over children runs its course is some reasonable proxy, such as chronological age, for the point at which it is better as a matter of general policy to presume that a person who has enjoyed the benefits of an adequate education will have achieved a sufficient capacity to make competent judgments on her own behalf.

At the root of this suggestion is an ethic of respect for persons as rational beings, or beings of developing rationality, who have a natural claim to manage their own lives to the extent that they are rational. But it is also an ethic that can recognize that

children and their reasonableness must be nurtured if they are to develop well, and that care and a concern that children's needs be met is a fundamental condition for the initiation of a child into the moral life of a community. Because it respects the reason in human beings, values the development of that reason, but also recognizes the limits of that reason, it can insist that care and the giving of honest reasons come first as much as possible, but that a conjunction of recalcitrance, unresponsiveness to reason, and the prospect of harm may sometimes be met with force. Sometimes sound nurturing itself – the nurturing of reasonableness – demands this.

This, all too quickly, is the moral orientation I would ask us to consider. It suggests educational *aims* focused on the nurturing of reasonableness, and corresponding constraints on the *substance* of the education offered. It suggests a *manner* of teaching that is nurturing, respectful, but also geared to cultivating autonomous good judgment. Our topic would be far better understood, I suggest, if we were to begin by enriching our vocabulary with the distinction this provides between the teacher's *right* to govern or manage her classroom, a right conferred in conjunction with the responsibilities she accepts, and the various distinct dimensions of her management of it: her *aims* in doing it, the *manner* in which she does it, and the *substance* of what she communicates, imposes, or induces her students to accept.¹³

1. See, for example, Barbara Applebaum, "On Good Authority or is Feminist Authority an Oxymoron?" in *Philosophy of Education 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000), 315. This article will be cited as *OGA* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Kleinig identifies authority as a form of influence resting in the perception that someone knows what is to be done (in some sense), in *Philosophical Issues in Education* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 213.

3. For evidence bearing on this claim, see R.M. Ryan and J. Stiller, "The Social Contexts of Internalization," in *Advances in Motivation and Achievement*, vol. 7, ed. M.L. Maehr and P.R. Pintrich (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1991), 115-49.

4. On the enabling virtues and the emergence of self-control in children, see Laura Purdy, *In Their Best Interest? The Case Against Equal Rights For Children* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 45-50.

5. See Diana Baumrind, "Authoritarian vs. Authoritative Parental Control," in *Contemporary Issues in Adolescent Development*, ed. J. Conger (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

6. See R.S. Peters, *Authority, Responsibility and Education*, 3d ed. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), 43-55 and Alven Neiman, "Education, Power, and the Authority of Knowledge," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 1 (1986): 64-80.

7. Purdy, *In Their Best Interest?*

8. Citing Nicholas C. Burbules, "Authority and the Tragic Dimension of Teaching," in *The Educational Conversation: Closing the Gap*, ed. James Garrison and A.G. Rud, Jr. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29-40.

9. *Ibid.*, 39.

10. *Ibid.*, 36. A reference at p. 32 to "reciprocity with our students and their parents" makes it unclear, however, whether Burbules has made up his mind about this.

11. *Ibid.*, 33.

12. Neiman, "Education, Power, and the Authority of Knowledge," 66.

13. I distinguish these aspects of governance and articulate a related ethic of respect in *Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), at pages 23ff and 63ff. In doing this, I overturn the common assumption that consent can only play a role in theories of legitimate rule through the modern notion of authorization or a transfer of right.