

On Good Authority or is Feminist Authority an Oxymoron?

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INTRODUCTION

After receiving my graduate degree a number of years ago, I recall that the title “Dr.” hung before my name like a detached and ill-fitting appendage. When making travel arrangements for a conference, I can today with a subtle smile remember my unyielding resistance to the suggestion that I refer to myself as *Dr.* Applebaum so that I would get better service. It was not only that I felt it undeserved in this particular situation to receive preferential treatment because I had a title in front of my name, but it was more that I felt uneasy about using the title because I held conflicting opinions as to what type of authority the title bestowed upon me. Most important, this situation raised serious questions for me about the different uses and abuses of institutional authority, and forced me to reflect upon what type of authority I wanted to possess as a feminist, as an academic and, especially, as a teacher.

Because some feminist educators have recently taken feminist pedagogy to task for its rejection of power and authority, I want to emphasize that my question is “What type of authority do I want to possess?” which assumes that there is a type of authority that as a feminist educator I can consistently claim. In a penetrating article entitled “Feminist Pedagogy Theory: Reflections on Power and Authority,” Carmen Luke exposes the alarming epistemological and pedagogical consequences resulting from a feminist pedagogy which eschews all claims to power and authority.¹ The bulk of the blame, Luke argues, is to be put at the foot of “good girl” feminists who, in their attempt to be loyal to their commitments to nurturance, relinquish all claims to authority.²

As I read Luke’s essay, I deliriously resonated with her description of the consequences of rejecting authority, yet I also found myself painfully disturbed by her stereotyping of feminists who attempt to reclaim nurturance and by her implicit dismissal of them as “good girl” feminists. According to Luke, feminist pedagogy assumes that nurturance and authority are mutually exclusive and that such pedagogy stands on the side of nurturance. It is this assumption, according to Luke, that leads to the reprehensible problems for the feminist educators that she describes. However, although she finds fault with those who advocate nurturance, in the end Luke remains, like the feminists she critiques, firmly entrenched in the same problematic nurturance/authority dichotomy. According to Luke, feminists have to stand on one side or the other of the dichotomy. Standing on the nurturance side of the dichotomy is dangerous for women; yet it is not clear whether Luke is implying that feminists who want authority have to give up their commitments to nurturance.

This essay is not meant to be a critique of Luke’s profoundly significant insights. My primary purpose is to recommend a reconceptualization of authority, which I refer to as “relational authority,” that can, I maintain, dissolve the sharp dichotomy between nurturance and authority that Luke and other feminists embrace. Such a task will require that feminist commitments to nurturance be re-examined

and that the undesirable characteristics of traditional authority be located and expunged. Fortunately, this is a task which I believe some feminists who recognize the importance of (and the problems with) nurturance have already initiated. In addition, the feminist authority that I am advocating is not only compatible with, but requires, a commitment to some sort of nurturance.

An important qualification about the claim I am making is that I do not want to make any pronouncements about what feminists *should* want but rather what they *can consistently* want. In terms of myself, however, my claims *are* normative and personally relevant. I am concerned in this essay to reflect upon the type of authority I can and should strive for as an educator committed to feminist principles. While there are many questions that arise at the intersection between authority and feminist pedagogy, the question of authority that I will address concerns the teacher's authority *as perceived by his/her students*. Let me stress that in this essay I am primarily concerned with the authority that I must strive for in my capacity as a feminist *educator*, not as a feminist academic, nor as an educational researcher. This is not to minimize or overlook the troubles with authority in other areas of academia, nor is it to disregard the interrelatedness of these issues, but, rather, to narrow my focus on only one part of this complex and thorny matter.

THE "AVOID POWER-OVER ARGUMENT":

NURTURANCE AND AUTHORITY JUST CANNOT MIX

Although expressed in somewhat disparate ways, there is one prominent and recurring argument against authority within the feminist pedagogy literature which reinforces the contradictory nature of feminist authority. I will refer to this argument as the "avoid power-over argument." The "avoid power-over argument" is noted for its criticism of "the hegemonic authoritarianism subtending male author-authority in Western thought" and advances the position that feminist educators who in principle are committed to being nurturant must avoid masculinist power and control.³ The force of this argument, however, depends on specific notions of nurturance and authority which are in unalterable opposition. Thus, it is important to have a clear understanding of what notions of nurturance and authority this argument is based upon.

Motherhood is often seen as the paradigm for nurturance and caring that a feminist teacher must display. In particular, this symbolic motherhood is diametrically opposed to and presumed to counterbalance the power and control of the symbolic father. One main element of this type of nurturance is illustrated in what many students expect of their feminist teachers and in what feminist educators expect of themselves. In an often-quoted essay, entitled "Authority in the Feminist Classroom: A Contradiction in Terms?" Susan Stanford Friedman indicates that feminist educators are perceived by their students as "the all-forgiving, nurturing mother whose approval is *unconditional*."⁴ A similar type of immobilizing expectation that many students have regarding the feminist teacher troubles Kathryn Pauly Morgan. Morgan describes the type of selfless support and unlimited quality of devotion feminist educators are expected to provide their students. "Moreover," Morgan contends, "this support is expected to be there in an *unconditional form*."⁵

The idea of maternal nurturance is only one side of the argument that leads feminist educators to believe that they must reject authority. The other side of the argument depends on a particular understanding of authority based on power, control, and enforcement. Jo Anne Pagano describes traditional masculinist approaches to education as perceiving the business of teaching to be akin to “a football skirmish ... [whose] exercise of authority amounts to subduing the other’s body.”⁶ What Pagano is pointing to regarding the masculinist tradition of education has similarities to what Alven Neiman, following R.S. Peters, describes as a necessary feature of education, namely, the socio-political authority of the teacher.⁷ Although I am extremely sympathetic with his attempt to argue for the role of knowledge in teachers’ authority, there are two features of Neiman’s account that highlight the type of the authority feminists have traditionally sought to avoid. The first feature concerns the power element underlying socio-political authority. The second involves Neiman’s claim that such power is partially justified by the teacher’s epistemic authority, epistemic authority which is *institutionally* bestowed upon the teacher.

The socio-political authority of the teacher, according to Neiman, is analogous to the authority that the police or that judges possess, and it is closely related to power or coercion. In order to do their jobs effectively, teachers, like the police or judges, “require a recognized right, simply by virtue of their role within a social framework of rules, to have their decisions and commands obeyed and at least some of their pronouncements accepted as binding.”⁸ While Neiman grants that the 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. Moreover, Neiman argues that such authority is partially justified by the presumed superior knowledge of the teacher and that what warrants the attribution of superior knowledge to teachers is the status they earn institutionally.

So what is masculinist/paternalistic about this conception of authority? First and foremost, the strong focus that this conception of authority places on control and power betokens its association with masculinity and patriarchy. An amusing, and perhaps somewhat satirical, portrayal of the type of male authority traditionally found in the classroom is found in a quote by Jerry Farber as cited by Friedman,

teachers *are* short on balls... the classroom offers an artificial and protected environment in which they can exercise their will to power. Your neighbours may drive a better car... your wife may dominate you; the State legislature may shit on you; but in the classroom by God, students do what you say — or else. The grade is a hell of a weapon. It may not rest on your hip, potent and rigid like a cop’s gun, but in the long run it’s more powerful.⁹

I am certain that this is not what Neiman had in mind when he claims that socio-political authority is necessary if any education is to succeed. In citing Farber, my point is merely to underscore the perceived masculinist sense of power that is often associated with traditional notion of authority. Yet even, as in Neiman’s account, when power is not abused, this traditional notion of authority is strongly focused on power and control, and it is such authority which, I maintain, is in direct opposition to maternal nurturance. The strong and central focus on control and power, even when implicit, can be understood to be oppressive as it may silence and ignore the

voice of students and, thus, may not be conducive to learning. In the unidirectional dimension of power that underlies such a conception of authority, it is teachers who are the active ones; students are to absorb passively what they learn from their teachers. Moreover, this unidirectionality is also absolutely hierarchical; power resides in the teacher and, consequently, the students are significantly disempowered.

This is perhaps further supported if we note that in regards to the warrant that backs such authority, the student's voice is absent. Neiman maintains that the teacher's right of command is validated simply by virtue of his or her institutional status and that the teacher's authority is partly justified by his or her superior knowledge. Justified to whom? Neiman implies that students accept the teacher's authority when they accept his or her superior knowledge. But Neiman seems to make a huge leap of faith when he refers to students accepting teachers' authority on "trust," but says nothing about how this trust is established and cultivated *between the teacher and student*. Although Neiman does not mean to imply this, one may infer from the relative silence regarding the personal relationship between teacher and student that in terms of justifying authority, this relationship has secondary status. Similarly, because of its minimal reference to relationships, such a notion of authority implies a highly individualistic ontology of self.

Whether exercised by male or female teachers, this type of authority is based on control and power. It is similar to what Kathleen Jones refers to as "authority as sovereign control" and the traits that it depicts as paradigmatic of the teacher (for example, the disposition to exercise control based on hierarchical and impersonal relationships, or to foster individualistic competitiveness) are traits which society values as masculine.¹⁰ Moreover, as Joan Cocks explains, such totalizing conceptions of power "as something wielded from a single center, in an absolutely monolithic and intentional way" epitomizes for feminists "the patriarchy" that they are committed to dismantling.¹¹

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. Thus, while patriarchal modes of pedagogy are characterized by "hierarchy, canonical authority, objectivism and competitive individualism," feminist modes of teaching strive to engage in non-hierarchical, non-coercive, open and equitable relations with students.¹² Although the "avoid power-over argument" has been powerfully constructive for feminists in their attempts to overthrow patriarchy and to emancipate students from all forms of oppression, reliance on this argument has ossified the binary logic of masculinity and femininity that contributes to women's subordination. In the "avoid power-over argument" the father and mother are always opposed; authority and nurturance can never be reconciled. Feminist authority, a vital requirement for women, is not possible and denied.

NURTURANCE REVISITED

My next move is to trace contemporary feminist critiques of nurturance and caring with the aim not only to attend to the powerful insights these critiques have advanced, but also to underscore that these critiques do not reject the value of nurturance. Although they may not clearly articulate what good nurturance is, they

certainly tell us what it is not. And what it is not, is the type of maternal nurturance presupposed by the “avoid power-over” advocates.

The maternal image of nurturance plays a crucial role in the nurturance-authority dichotomy. Yet many feminists have argued that this image has been harmful to women, and they reject the mother-child paradigm. Unconditional giving and selfless support are two features of the maternal image of nurturance that has been found to be problematic for women.

Recognizing the harms to women that maternal nurturance engenders, early feminists advocated rejection of such nurturance, claiming that it threatened the development of autonomy in women and crushed their sense of self.¹³ For example, in order to author her works, Virginia Woolf speaks about having to kill “the angel in the house.”¹⁴

But many feminists do not dismiss nurturance, although they are careful to describe it without self-abnegation as a hidden foundation. The most influential of feminist advocates for an ethic of care, Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, do not explicitly advocate the value of self-sacrifice and unconditional support.¹⁵ Gilligan argues that at the higher levels of caring, self interests and other interests are balanced, and that if one does not see oneself as also having rights, one falls into despair, anger, and resentment. Noddings maintains that the one caring is justified in abstaining from giving care when her caring will diminish her ability to further care, or if in giving care she poses a threat to her own physical or ethical self.

Nevertheless, some contemporary feminists maintain that even such notions of care are still problematic for women. Ironically, the criticisms challenging an ethic of care that have been most “ontologically shocking” are based on the claim that an ethic of care *is* based on women’s experience.¹⁶ Such experience, this critique contends, is already gender-tainted. “Woman as nurturer” is a role that has been historically defined in response to the needs of patriarchal institutions, not necessarily something women freely choose, and thus may be a reflection of a “slave mentality.”¹⁷ Thus, women’s experience of caring is *a response* to gender hierarchies and divisions, and may even replicate them. To accept the view that women’s experiences illustrate that caring is a value unique to women risks perpetuating a restricted view of the role of women — that they are best suited for nurturance. In a circular kind of way, sexist stereotypes and sexist discriminations are reinforced.

But caring may replicate oppression and harm women in yet another way. Caring may support women’s subordination not in only confirming how *others perceive women* but also in profoundly influencing how *women perceive themselves*. Sandra Lee Bartky presents a most powerful indictment against women’s caring.¹⁸ When caring occurs in unequal relationships, its emphasis on unconditionality and unselfishness and its concern to maintain relations at any cost result in unreciprocated and uncompensated caring by women. Bartky maintains that in relationships in which the balance of power is scaled against women, women’s caring is inevitably exploited. In other words, because the emotional support that women give to men far outweighs the emotional support they receive from men in

return, the ideal of “woman as nurturer” exploits women. Yet Bartky’s condemnation of caring goes further in that she claims that the consequent harms women suffer go to the core of women’s identities.

Unequal benefit in itself is not necessarily harmful to women. Many things women do involve unequal benefit (caring for children, for example) and yet they do not necessarily have to be disempowering. The unreciprocated caring that occurs in heterosexual relationships, however, *in itself* “disempowers us even while it seduces us.”¹⁹ The nurturing women give to men (“feeding egos and tending wounds”) is an affirmation of men’s importance. Unreciprocated nurturing within heterosexual relationships is in itself disempowering for women because nurturing accords status. We nurture someone we think has some significance to us and the point of our nurturing is to convey to the one we are nurturing that he is, indeed, worthwhile. When the according of such status accord is not reciprocated, there is a refusal to recognize the carer’s importance. Consequently, as Bartky argues, “by failing to attend to her in the same way she attends to him, he confirms for her and, just as importantly, for himself, her inferior position in the hierarchy of gender.”²⁰ By caring in their heterosexual relationships, women eventually are not only *seen by others* to be inferior but become convinced that *they themselves are inferior*. They do not receive the nurturing and recognition they require to develop healthy self-esteem and they are given the impression that they are worthless. This perpetuates and increases their dependence on those who belittle them.

Why do women not see how caring harms them? How do the values of a system that subordinates women, as Bartky puts it, “take up residence inside our minds?”²¹ Bartky correctly attributes the seduction of caring to a system in which women are subtly coerced into being dependent on men. However, I maintain that part of the reason that women can be seduced by something which so disempowers them is that caring is also inherently good.²² Women are doubly seduced into caring. Through their gender socialization, they are seduced into valuing a potentially detrimental type of care. But the reason they are so easily socialized to believe caring is good is because caring, in certain contexts, *is* good.

Even given the harms to women that feminists have exposed as a consequence of valuing care, for the most part, these feminists do not reject caring as a value. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin discuss some significant, “*but we think not defeating*,” objections which have been brought against an ethic of care.²³ Concerning care, they resolutely maintain that, “Caution, but not outright rejection, would appear to be in order.”²⁴ It is *because* women recognize the importance of caring that they are doubly seduced by it, and this makes it all the more urgent and difficult to work on ways to distinguish “good” caring from “bad.” Feminists should not give up caring because tainted versions of it have informed their experiences. Moreover, some suggestions have been made regarding how caring can be reconceptualized so that it is not damaging to women.

For example, Claudia Card makes it lucidly clear that in any understanding of an ethic of care, the social context in which *caring as a virtue* became important for women must not be ignored. In addition, Sarah Lucia Hoagland advocates that

mothering be disowned as the paradigm for caring.²⁵ Relations are essential to ethical theory, and an ethic of care is to be applauded for underscoring this. But, as Hoagland emphasizes, there must be at least two selves in the relation. If the self of one of the parties in the relation ceases to exist, then the *relationship* is not ontologically basic; rather, the *other* is.

The caring that these contemporary feminist scholars advocate is not the maternal caring which comprises one side of the “avoid power-over argument.” The caring that many contemporary feminists promote values relations and connectedness, but without implicit demands for selflessness and unconditionality. It is not the nurturance that is necessarily opposed to authority. Given this interpretation of nurturance, the prospect of one end of the nurturance-authority dichotomy coming closer to the other becomes conceivable, but we are not there yet. What these critiques highlight is that an essential element of caring and nurturance will always be relationships. Can authority be compatible with this?

RELATIONAL AUTHORITY

Authority and nurturance, even in this revised version, may still seem as though they just do not mix. Even when nurturance does not imitate the maternal, it is invariably focused on the personal, and takes connections and relationships as ontologically basic. In contrast, traditional authority, focused as it is on power and control, emphasizes the impersonal, and being impartial and detached. Moreover, the grounds of such teacher authority is often assumed to depend, at least partly, on a third person, group or institutional certification. While students are assumed to have trust in the teacher’s authority, we hear almost nothing about how such trust is established.

Indeed, the ontology of persons underlying the nurturance and traditional understandings of authority are radically different. The ontology of persons which is assumed by traditional understandings of authority, is akin to that which is at the basis of conceptions of autonomy. Persons, according to this approach, are discrete, individual atoms for whom intimate relations are not given central concern. Moreover, when this individualist approach to persons is seen to guide authority, the persons who are subjected to the authority are considered to be (by the one in authority) interchangeable units of consideration with all particularity and difference disregarded. The assumed sameness and interchangeability of those under authority encourages a focus on impartiality and neutrality by the one in authority. In terms related to teaching, students are treated as indistinguishable; relationships between student and teacher are not of primary importance.

The cornerstone of nurturance, however, is “second personhood” not the individualist ontology assumed by the traditional authority.²⁶ Second personhood captures the idea that people develop through engagement with other people and, most significantly, that people care about the quality of that engagement. Social intercourse is not the result of impersonal dealings with other people but, rather, is based on relationships and connections. Second person thinking, which is demonstrated in nurturance, takes the specificity of persons as important and relationship itself as valued.

Authority, however, does not have to be based on an individualist ontology of persons. In the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary there are two primary categories of definition for the term "authority." The first, focused on the control and command aspect of authority, is "the power to enforce obedience." The second, in which relationship is implicit, is "the power to influence action, opinion, belief. The power to inspire belief." While both "the power to enforce obedience" and "the power to inspire belief" may be concerned with relations involving power imbalances, the former implies unidirectional encounters while the latter intimates reciprocal experiences and relationships. While the "control and command" model of authority assumes only one active party, both sides of the relationship in the "influence/inspire" prototype of authority are active. In order to influence action, opinion, and belief, and especially to inspire others, there must be a bilaterally active relationship; someone who inspires and someone who is inspired. To be inspired is not a passive state but, rather, a transaction in which the one inspired actively relates with the one who inspires and, moreover, is altered in a deep sense by the relationship. Working from the assumption of the "tragic dimension of teaching," Nicholas Burbules, suggests 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.²⁷ Extending Burbules's reconceptualization, I will try to describe a relationally based form of authority which, I maintain, feminist educators can strive to attain in their classrooms without inconsistency.

According to Burbules, authority cannot be justified on the basis of institutional roles or knowledge alone. He contends that justifying authority on the basis of institutional factors reifies potentially problematic positions of status and privilege and runs the risk of assuming objectivity and universality while denying diversity. Most significantly, such justifications "focus on the qualities of the individual teacher as the criteria of legitimate authority, rather than on the quality of the teaching and learning *relation* which can be forged by a teacher and student together, and which can evolve over time."²⁸ The importance of relationship for Burbules's understanding of authority is clear. In addition, Burbules argues, teacher authority that takes relationship seriously does not silence students' voices but, rather, respects them.

It is not that a teacher's knowledge has no role to play in his or her authority. A teacher with inadequate knowledge but who is nurturing is, as one of my colleague's students said, "a nice person but not a good teacher." In contrast to traditional conceptions of authority in which students are assumed to trust and depend upon some third-person, institutional party that certifies the superior knowledge of the teacher, authority that takes relationships seriously is warranted by first-person evidence grasped by the students themselves. Teachers have to demonstrate to students that they have something of value to teach them that the students trust will benefit them at some point down the line.

Yet if the student initially does not have the knowledge how can he or she estimate the teacher's superior knowledge? How can he or she know to trust the teacher? Does not the student have to rely on institutionally bestowed certification? That is where the trust that is built around nurturing, caring, and mutually respectful

relationships is necessary and significant. The trust that the student develops in his or her teacher encourages the confidence the student has that withholding judgment now will probably be warranted later on. The student's reliance on the teacher's apparent knowledge does not stem from any university, but, rather, arises from the relationship they have formed which shows promise that being inspired is a good probability. Moreover, this trust does not mean that the student accepts on faith everything the teacher says. Rather, this trust encourages temporarily withholding judgment until understanding kicks in. The authority that Burbules describes, and that I am trying to expand upon, depends not only or primarily on what the teacher knows, or, more specifically, what institutions say he or she knows, but also, and, significantly, on *who he or she is*. Moreover, nurturance and caring are not only necessary for developing such authority, they are also conducive to the learning process.

Burbules describes in some detail what authority based on relationships entails. His insights demonstrate the importance of nurturance or caring in developing such teacher authority. The relational notion of authority implies that teachers must ask "Who am I?" and "Who are my students?" and, most significantly, must answer these questions dialogically *with* their students. Such authority is also fluid, not unidirectional. It shifts back and forth and is not affiliated only with the teacher. Students have what is required to teach teachers, too.

Feminist authority is not an oxymoron and can be identified by employing these reconceptualizations of nurturance and authority. In many respects, this notion of feminist authority is similar to what some feminists have referred to as *authority with* as opposed to *authority over*, with one important difference.²⁹ The type of authority that Burbules describes does not ignore the social privileges that the teacher has, nor the institutional authority that he or she inevitably brings into the class. No matter how egalitarian the teacher is, such authority, power, and privilege, as Ellsworth has exposed, cannot be circumvented.³⁰ At most, such power imbalances can only be raised as an issue for critical scrutiny in the classroom, but may not be possible to avoid.

Given this interpretation of authority, a feminist authority is possible and the nurturance-authority dichotomy dissolves if not entirely. One final question must be raised for further consideration, however. Is this the only type of authority that feminists can ever assume? Are there times when the power-over notion of authority, inimical as it may be to commitments to nurturance, must be taken? Although I cannot elaborate on this point, given the injustice that structures the institutions within which feminist educators do their work, exercising a "power-over" authority may sometimes be warranted and not incongruous. I think this issue must be deliberated assuming a strong distinction between the questions "What type of authority can feminists consistently want?" and "What type of authority do feminists need to exercise, for pragmatic reasons, but which may or may not be consistent with their principles?"

I have tried to describe a feminist form of authority that feminist educators can consistently strive for. In the movie *Braveheart*, William Wallace declares to the

future king of Scotland, "It's not your title that makes you who you are but your courage." This reminds me of the time one of my students introduced me as Dr. Applebaum to her friend. In my classes, my students always refer to me as "Barbara." It is my hope that the title my student put before my name is not the result of institutional courtesy but, more significantly, an expression of who she understands me to be. In other words, I will feel I have succeeded somewhat as a teacher if my students call me Dr. Applebaum on good authority.

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