

Reasonable Pluralism and the Politics of Dialogue

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Without a doubt, tension between conservative Christians and Secularists with regard to public school policies abounds. Christian conservatives tend to argue that public schools are held captive by secularist policies that serve to misrepresent reality (science curriculum), eliminate parental involvement in educational decision-making (school choice), and, in general, make public schools Godless institutions. The tension between these two groups makes dialogue about these and other controversial matters difficult. Generally speaking, when Christian conservatives raise issues, secularists close their ears and minds while the reverse is also the case — Christian conservatives have little if any patience for secular ideas of education. While it is true that these two groups have difficulty hearing one another, making dialogue about educational policy almost impossible, it is also true that these two groups must find ways to interact and communicate since policy still has to be formed and enacted affecting all of their children.

It is in this context that Charles Howell skillfully attempts to broaden the parameters of dialogue between Christians and secularists. He does so by focusing on one specific domain — classroom management. Howell's project is to see whether Robert Kunzman's thesis of weak fallibilism is useful in helping open up the conversation about classroom conduct. Howell wonders whether the Christian view of obedience as strict conformity, that is, disobedience as sin, can be reconciled with a more permissive secular approach that involves reason and negotiation. He rightly points out that the chief point of disagreement emerges from different understandings of responsibility. Christians tend to argue though circumstances might be unfortunate, an agent is always responsible for his actions and thus schools must take appropriate action when a student misbehaves. Many Secularists, however, think that mitigating circumstances, such as family life, background, and emotional stability, are legitimate grounds to temper the response to student misbehavior. Given the disagreement between these two groups, Howell asks whether dialogue between these two groups is possible. Ultimately, he concludes that dialogue is indeed achievable if we invoke Kunzman's thesis of weak fallibilism. That is, while Christians and secularists might disagree on the underlying reasons for their beliefs and policies, it is only the actions — the policies that may be called into question, not the principles which undergird them. Howell believes both Christians and secular educators can engage in a dialogue that focuses on how fundamental principles are applied to practical problems of classroom management if both groups are willing to consider the effects of the application of these principles. Howell concludes by stating that, as long as both groups are willing to engage in such critical inquiry, particular worldviews will be downplayed and common ground will be realized.

Developing a mechanism by which groups as divergent as Christian fundamentalists and secular educators can communicate so effectively that common ground

on contentious policy issues can be sought is indeed a worthwhile project. In fact, with so many important policy issues at stake, it would be wise, for the benefit of public school children, to develop rules of engagement between these groups. Yet I am not as convinced as Howell that Kunzman's weak fallibilism is the appropriate mechanism to bring about this culture of dialogue. My skepticism emerges for two reasons; the first is an epistemological concern on the appropriate use of the principle of fallibilism, and the second is based on an assumption that both Kunzman and Howell make — that it is possible to separate the personal and the public. That is, that it is possible to separate one's core metaphysical beliefs from action.

According to Kunzman, weak fallibilism need not mean calling into question one's most fundamental beliefs, but rather, in light of disagreement, "revisiting their application of core ethical beliefs to civic matters."¹ Kunzman argues that citizens in a pluralistic, democratic state must recognize the "interpretative distance between their central metaphysical convictions and the way they seek to have those commitments manifest in our civic life."² Kunzman, in developing this idea of weak fallibilism, seems to shift its understanding from propositional claims to the realm of ethics. In a traditional sense, fallibilism, as a normative principle of reason, states that we must be open to the possibility that our beliefs might be false. How do we determine whether our (or others') beliefs are false? We submit these beliefs to assessment and evaluation by some agreed upon standard, that is, some standard of falsifiability. In the material realm, we might submit these beliefs to the scientific method, for instance, and determine the veracity of a claim by measuring it against scientific standards. While discipline-based standards are not foolproof, and human subjectivity and interpretation can certainly present disagreement regarding conclusions, by and large reasonable people accede to standards and the conclusions they render.

Two problems emerge in the realm of religion and morality. The first is that there is not a clearly identifiable standard by which to measure religious and moral claims. The second concern, more problematic to Howell's project, is that it does not seem that the principle of fallibilism, conceived in its traditional sense, was ever meant to assess the realm of actions and values. Applying a principle of fallibilism to religious or moral questions is problematic because in this realm — the realm of action — it is less clear what we are evaluating.

In the case of religion or morality, the standards by which to measure beliefs or claims are not in any way standard, if by standard we mean normative, extending to all reasonable people. Quite the opposite, the standards by which religious and moral beliefs and claims are examined, to the degree that they even are assessed, are internal to the given religion or moral view. From an epistemological sense, while I do think it is possible to extend the principle of fallibilism to the moral realm, I am not sure it can be done, even in a weak fallibilistic sense, without some standards governing what is an appropriate application of one's own moral values.

The second concern I have is not particularly original since it is one that resides firmly in political philosophical discourse. This is the question of whether it is possible for one to separate his personal core beliefs from public action. Eamonn

Callan in particular takes up this issue in the early going of *Creating Citizens*. In his response to John Rawls's requirements for public reason, Callan wonders what happens to the person who cannot or who has not learned to accept the burdens of judgment. In fact, Callan points out that the success of Rawls's political liberalism lies in "an ethically pluralistic audience to whom an argument of justice and other norms of public reason can be persuasively presented."³ The problem, of course, is when members of this pluralistic audience cannot be persuaded to accept the burdens of judgment. This makes dialogue about public virtue difficult, if not impossible. While Rawls asks that we shelve our comprehensive religious and moral doctrines to arrive at some agreeable public reason, Callan points out that for some this may not be possible. Rawls and Howell presume that there is a willingness and ability to separate one's core beliefs from one's actions. If disobedience is truly sinful, and with sin come certain consequences, then it would seem that it is a Christian imperative to prevent children from being sinful, and in this respect conform to adult mandates on behavior. Contrary to Howell, if we are speaking of conservative Christians with a particularly rigid moral compass, then I am not as confident that dialogue between them and secular teachers will be particularly fruitful. Consider that the basis for the secular view of responsibility hinges on reason, while the religious view rests on a divine prescription. To the Christian conservative, God's commandment will always trump human reason. To the degree that human reason is in concert with divine law, Christians and secularists have much to discuss and agree upon. To the degree that their views diverge, dialogue seems hopelessly lost.

The difficulty in reconciling these two positions with a theory of weak fallibilism might be that weak fallibilism, as Kunzman employs it, seems much more congenial to curricular issues. That is, weak fallibilism is a valuable standard by which to facilitate classrooms discussions about moral and religious matters and less helpful with respect to making educational policy decisions. Yet Howell's argument is a reminder of why it is critical that we develop principles and standards by which to make educational policy decisions in an increasingly diverse polity with an increasingly vocal religious subculture.

1. Robert Kunzman, "Educating for More or Less Than Intelligent Belief or Unbelief: A Critique of Noddings's Vision of Religion in Public Schools," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005), 6.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 29.