

Is Disobedience Sin? Christian Perspectives on Problems of Classroom Management¹

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OBEDIENCE AS A TEST OF KUNZMAN'S WEAK FALLIBILISM THESIS

In his recent critique of Nel Noddings's book on religion in public school classrooms, Robert Kunzman explores the compatibility of critical thinking with religious commitment.² Critical thinking implies willingness to reevaluate our beliefs and give them up if they are mistaken. Noddings advocates extending critical scrutiny to fundamental tenets of doctrine, including (for Christians) sin, grace, and redemption. Kunzman, by contrast, follows Nomi Stolzenberg in maintaining that such a strong form of fallibilism cannot reasonably be expected of religious families whose children attend public schools.³ What *can* reasonably be expected of them, however, is a weaker form of fallibilism, which involves willingness to reevaluate "*application of core ethical beliefs to civic matters,*" presumably including educational policy and the operation of public schools.⁴

According to Kunzman, this weak fallibilism provides sufficient support for the burdens of judgment of citizenship in a liberal democratic society, and it does not necessarily conflict with deep and intense religious conviction, as strong fallibilism does. He argues that there is no "inherent contradiction" between unswerving commitment to ethical principles and willingness to reconsider how they apply to specific social circumstances. He acknowledges, though, that this arrangement may not be acceptable to "certain extreme versions of fundamentalism."⁵

This paper examines one area of school life — classroom discipline — in which the approach Kunzman recommends might profitably be employed. The Christian concept of disobedience, particularly emphasized by culturally conservative denominations, appears to conflict with many classroom practices growing out of such disparate research traditions as behaviorism, cognitive developmental models, and self-determination theory.⁶ Jack Hyles, for example, maintains that a child should be made to carry out the direction of a supervising adult without explanation and without objection.⁷ Most mainstream psychologists and educators would probably consider the "without" condition unreasonable and potentially counterproductive. It is easy to envision the debate generated by this clash of views. Parents expect teachers to demand strict obedience; teachers insist that explanation, discussion, and negotiation produce better results.

Is this the type of case to which Kunzman's thesis can be applied? Obedience at school is indeed a core principle for many Christian parents, following directly from the Protestant view of God's delegation of temporal authority to church, family, and civil government.⁸ Kunzman, then, should oppose Noddings on this issue: his thesis would lead us to conclude that calling into question the principle of obedience is unreasonable.⁹ It also implies, however, that it is not unreasonable to ask Christians to think critically about how the principle should be applied to specific

classroom situations and teachers' management decisions. But would this approach lead, as he suggests, to productive dialogue between secular educators and conservative Christians?

In exploring this question, the next section of the paper begins by examining the overlap of secular and Christian understandings of obedience. The principal area of divergence between these two understandings is found to reside in underlying theories of responsibility. The following section sketches two philosophical theories of responsibility aligned with social-scientific and Christian understandings. The implications of these two theories of responsibility for classrooms turn out to be surprisingly similar. From deep disagreement about fundamental principles, religious parents and secular teachers should be able to reason their way to common conclusions about how public school classrooms should be managed. The implications that result, both for Kunzman's thesis and for debates about public school discipline, are explored in the concluding section.

CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR INTERPRETATIONS OF
"OBEDIENCE," "DISOBEDIENCE," AND "SIN"

"Obedience," for Christians, is action in conformity with God's commands. What God commands is morally obligatory. Disobedience is sin.

To the above, few Christians would object. Many, however, believe that occasions on which we clearly discern God's commands are rare. Not so for conservative Christians who pose the challenge that Kunzman is addressing. They point out that, though direct divine orders are rare, God demands obedience not only to himself but also to parents and to legitimate civil authority, including teachers. Because disobedience is sin, it is essential for adults responsible for children to enforce obedience strictly. If they do not, the children will grow up unable to conform themselves to God's law and civil authority.¹⁰

Public school teachers, too, are concerned about obedience, though they might prefer to use terms such as cooperation or "on-task behavior." In a recent survey, three-quarters of a representative sample of public school teachers indicated that they could teach a lot more effectively if their students behaved better, and one-third either knew someone who had left the profession because of discipline problems or had considered doing so themselves.¹¹

These data suggest that public school teachers, at minimum, do not dismiss the conservative Christian concern for obedience. But, do they demand the prompt, exact, and unquestioning compliance Christian child-rearing manuals recommend?¹² Classroom management texts advocate strategies such as reasoning, "redirecting," democratic rule-setting, time-outs, and teacher proximity that avoid direct confrontation and demands for compliance.

The issue is not merely pragmatic: there is an underlying difference of principle concerning the nature of responsibility. For public school teachers, the problem of rigid enforcement is that it takes no account of the child's background, family life, emotional state, and other circumstances that contribute to classroom behavior, and over which the transgressing student may have no control. From the perspective of

Christian advice literature, however, this reasoning is mistaken. Short of accident or disability, there is no circumstance in which a child may not be held responsible. As Hyles comments succinctly, “The child should be taught that ‘ought’ and ‘can’ are synonymous.”¹³ Whatever the child ought to do, she can do, and thus the circumstances of a transgression are irrelevant to the child’s culpability.

Conservative Christians and most secular educators, in short, appear to have a philosophical disagreement about the scope of legitimate excusing conditions, and this explains their divergent views about enforcement of rules. The Christian view can be summed up by the free-will tradition: the doctrine that God gave human beings free will, so that they can appropriately be held responsible for every voluntary action. The educational view grows out of a version of determinism rooted in social science research on effects of social institutions on human behavior. To the extent that action is influenced by factors beyond a person’s control, it is not appropriate to hold her responsible. Since the effects of family, social class, and community on children’s conduct in school are well established, there would appear to be many circumstances in which it is inappropriate to hold children responsible for misconduct.

School discipline, in short, presents precisely the scenario Kunzman envisions. There is disagreement both about underlying principles and about actions and social policy that result from their application. The Kunzman thesis says that it is reasonable to call into question the latter, but not the former. The implication is that the conservative Christian and the secular educator can find something to talk about on the subject of rules enforcement even though they hold divergent views of responsibility that they have agreed not to call into question. Is such a dialogue plausible? That question is explored in the next section, which examines philosophical theories of responsibility representative of these two views.

TWO THEORIES OF RESPONSIBILITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

THE REASON VIEW: SKEPTICISM ABOUT RESPONSIBILITY FOR WRONGDOING

Social scientists agree that behavior is strongly influenced by family and social environment. Since children have no control over these factors, it makes sense that they not be held responsible for their effects. But, if we excuse conduct influenced by an agent’s background, where do we draw the line? Every action bears the imprint of the agent’s background and social circumstances. How are we to avoid wholesale denial of responsibility?

Susan Wolf’s “Reason View” provides a rationale for admitting excuses based on an agent’s background without ruling out responsibility altogether.¹⁴ Wolf contends that an agent is responsible for intentional actions despite causal influences provided she does not lack a specific capacity: namely, the ability to recognize and act on moral reasons. Thus, responsibility for good action is preserved, while agents from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack empathy or control over angry impulses are shielded from blame.

The Reason View, as Wolf recognizes, implies that responsibility does not depend on a person’s will being free, or even on such a thing as free will being

possible. Even if a person's whole life is preordained, she would still be responsible for intentional actions, provided she had not been denied moral understanding and motivation. This approach closely tracks educators' intuitions that children, in general, are responsible, but they cannot be blamed for shortcomings attributable to the influence of their background. Thus, for example, the Reason View easily accommodates Ruby Payne's suggestion that students from backgrounds of intergenerational poverty have difficulty complying with teachers' expectations because they don't understand or accept the middle-class norms that permeate school.¹⁵ It also fits John Ogbu's view that African-American students cannot be blamed for lack of effort because "community forces" influence them to see academic achievement as appropriate for white students but not for themselves.¹⁶

Would Wolf's view lead teachers to apply a double standard in the classroom, demanding compliance from some students while accepting the apathy and resistance of others as the inevitable result of the influence of social background? Teacher expectations research and the literature on deficit thinking suggest that it would, and some have argued that "disadvantaged" students' background is only a liability because teachers fail to appreciate it. This reasoning might lead one to conclude that, for such students, apathy and resistance are a justified response to social inequity rather than merely excused by it.

This conclusion, if widely accepted, would undercut prospects for the kind of rapprochement Kunzman advocates. Justified resistance directly conflicts with the conservative Christian principle of obedience to civil authority. Granted, conservative Christians must recognize rights of civil disobedience under some circumstances, but not those of concern here.

Fortunately for Kunzman, however, this view is not dominant. Most educators, including Payne and Ogbu, are indeed committed to an underlying principle of obligatory academic effort and view social factors that discourage effort as excuse rather than justification. Does this view, which Wolf's account clearly supports, lead inevitably to a double standard and lower expectations for disadvantaged students?

One possible way to avoid this result is Wolf's suggestion that agents can be partly responsible, presumably because the relevant moral capacities are impaired but not wholly lacking.¹⁷ If so, social background might provide a partial excuse, and resistant students can be held partly accountable to the standards for which others are fully accountable. This approach, however, may not solve the problem, since it still implies a lower level of responsibility for disadvantaged students. In any case, it is not clear how deep Wolf's commitment to partial responsibility in such cases really runs. Elsewhere she suggests that a fair assessment of responsibility requires considerably more knowledge about an agent's motivation than most teachers have access to.¹⁸ As a practical matter, a teacher's inference that a child is less than fully responsible would block any assessment of responsibility whatsoever.

A more likely prospect is the possibility that those who assess responsibility (in this case, teachers) also contribute to agents' ability to recognize moral reasons and act on them. Wolf does not mention this possibility, but she does not rule it out either,

and it is consistent with other literature in this area. Peter Strawson, for example, famously characterized responsibility attributions directed at children as “rehearsals” that “insensibly modulate towards true performances.”¹⁹ Blaming, scolding, praising, and rewarding thus serve not only to assess but also to teach moral behavior.

Teachers, then, can evidently bridge the responsibility gap simply by helping students recognize and act on moral motives. How do they do so? Research shows that children’s internalization of prosocial values is promoted by such factors as explicit teaching of values, emphasis on their importance, clarity and consistency of adult messages, empathy, moral reasoning, and a warm relationship between adult and child.²⁰ A number of these factors, it turns out, are also closely aligned with the recommendations of Ogbu, Payne, Ladson-Billings, and other researchers who have investigated factors that promote the achievement of student groups most commonly viewed as subject to excusing conditions.

This analysis shows that recognition of excuses based on family and social influences need not lead to the kind of permissive environment and tolerance of disruption conservative Christian parents criticize in contemporary public schools. The Reason View accurately reflects secular educators’ intuitions about responsibility, but it does not invite toleration of disobedience, as some may fear; it merely implies that for some students, obedience must be systematically taught rather than merely demanded. If secular educators fail to maintain orderly classrooms, then Christians would be entitled to argue that educators have erred in applying their own theory.

A discussion of this kind, eschewing rejection of a deeply-held principle and focusing instead on how it is applied, satisfies the requirements of the Kunzman thesis. Evidently this approach does not lead to an impasse. The two sides do have something to say to one another, at least if one begins by entertaining principles espoused by secular educators. But what about the Christian view of responsibility? Does that afford the same kind of purchase for secular educators who want to respond to Christian constituencies in the manner Kunzman recommends?

ULTIMATE RESPONSIBILITY: BEING THE AUTHOR OF ONE’S FATE

Christians can accept application of the Reason View in public schools, but they cannot be expected to embrace the theory itself. According to Wolf, responsibility does not depend upon a person’s will being free, but rather on her will, free or not, being shaped by the right sorts of influences. Anyone who believes responsibility is inextricably linked to free will must look elsewhere for a theory that fits their convictions.

Robert Kane sets out to supply such an account. His principle of Ultimate Responsibility is offered to show how agents can be responsible for an action even when psychological and environmental factors leave them no alternative.²¹ Kane contends that we exercise free will despite these factors just in case the causal history of what we do now can be traced back to some prior intentional and avoidable action. By these “self-forming actions,” he maintains, an agent sets her life on one course

instead of another, recognizing that she has reasons for either course, and accepting responsibility for the consequences of choosing one over the other. An experience of psychological conflict, of being able to choose this way or that way, projects responsibility into the future whenever the decision contributes causally to subsequent action.

What are the implications of this account for school discipline? Critics of disorder in public schools believe that a child's background does not excuse misbehavior. So, presumably, conservative Christians would expect Kane's account to validate their intuition that students who voluntarily disrupt class or defy teachers' instructions should be held responsible. On the other hand, Kunzman's thesis will be vindicated only if there is some flexibility in application: if core principles rigidly dictate practical policies, conservative Christians considering these issues will be left with nothing to think critically about. How, then, would Kane's theory handle cases in which secular educators believe that, because of social influences, students do not deserve blame for misbehavior?

To address these questions, we start with Payne and Ogbu's contention: family background and community forces do discourage achievement. Disruptive behavior and lack of effort reflect a disinvestment in school to which the student can see no real alternative. How would Kane respond to secular educators' inference that in such cases, it would be unfair to hold students responsible?

Kane will reject the implied premise that, if students can see no real alternative at a particular time, their actions then are unfree and they do not deserve blame. Free will, he contends, does not always mean being able to do otherwise now. A person's current options may be limited by her own prior decisions. If these decisions were uncoerced — that is, if real alternatives were available in the past — then her present actions may be part of a causal chain that she herself voluntarily initiated, and she does not escape blame. If students who experience a compulsion to misbehave feel this because of something they did willingly in the past, and which they could have avoided, then the teacher is entitled to blame, scold, and punish.

This is precisely the point conservative Christians are pressing, and Kane's insistence on it confirms their affinity for the Ultimate Responsibility principle. But where does this leave secular educators? Will they resort to a direct attack on free will, a core Christian concept — the very strategy Kunzman counsels us to avoid?

Two elements of Kane's account make this unlikely. The first is the prominent role of choice and what it means to have real alternatives. Kane identifies choice with the experience of psychological conflict — of being pulled in two different directions at once and choosing one instead of the other. In the Christian conservative scenario, resistance and apathy reflect a student's prior decision to disinvest. According to Kane, for this to be a real choice, the student must have been attracted enough to school and achievement to experience inner conflict. This is precisely what educators like Ladson-Billings and Nieto seek to achieve — to make school important, appealing, and meaningful to students who might not otherwise see it that way. Now Kane is offering them arguments that could appeal to conservatives, who

might otherwise be inclined to object. If a school makes what Flores-González calls “school-kid” identity attractive to students, then adopting a “street-kid” identity is an uncoerced choice.²² A school that does this can hold students responsible for resistance and apathy; a school that doesn’t cannot.

Kane’s Ultimate Responsibility principle, in short, provides resources for secular educators. But the real-choice requirement does not entirely dispose of their worry, for now a new difficulty arises. Does Kane’s theory imply that the attractiveness of school at one point in time projects responsibility indefinitely into the future? What about the child who loves kindergarten but becomes alienated in sixth grade? Are conservative Christians committed to the view that having a choice at age six justifies blame for disillusionment throughout the rest of their lives?

A second element of Kane’s account, the causal chain, addresses this issue. The secular educator is worried about the child whose initial enthusiasm is leached away by some combination of factors outside her control — loss, deprivation, or a horrible school, for example. Do optimism and effort start the causal chain that leads to despair? Clearly not: they lead in the other direction. Other factors that she could not control led to where she is now. According to the theory most representative of the Christian conservative outlook, the secular educator is right: the discouraged student does not deserve blame.

The free-will approach, in short, does not project responsibility for a single choice indefinitely into the future. For children influenced by social forces that discourage achievement, school must pull continuously in the other direction. When it does this effectively, disengagement and resistance are not forced on students, but are freely chosen. Only then do they deserve blame. Efforts to make school attractive and hospitable to students of color and students from poor families ensure responsibility rather than subverting it, as conservative Christians may fear.

Ultimate Responsibility plays a role in the thinking of religious conservatives very similar to the role that the Reason View plays for secular educators. In both cases, the theory integrates conflicting intuitions about responsibility and non-responsibility across a wide range of circumstances. Although the theories dictate different conclusions in cases involving adult responsibility, they nonetheless generate very similar recommendations for the orderly conduct of schools. Thus, the rhetorical clash over issues of school discipline, individual responsibility, and societal influences conceals a large area of agreement about what schools need to do to keep order and encourage achievement. The approach that Kunzman recommends — avoiding direct criticism of core principles and focusing instead on their application to practical problems — is ideally suited to the discovery of this common ground between conservative Christian families and secular educators and the establishment of the kind of close working relationship between competing groups that is needed for a school or any other social institution to function effectively.

CONCLUSION: FALLIBILISM, FLEXIBILITY, AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Fallibilism, weak or strong, implies a willingness to learn from someone else and an admission that one’s own view may turn out to be wrong. Can we realistically

expect such an admission from religious conservatives, even for the restricted domain designated by the Kunzman thesis? Do religious families distinguish between core beliefs, to which they are resolutely committed, and practical applications where there is room for discussion?

In Hyles's case, this seems unlikely. His comments on corporal punishment describe a doctrine that leaves little room for discussion, disagreement, or negotiation, even about details of application.²³ But many other Christian authors display a flexibility and pragmatism that suggest receptivity to this approach. Jay Adams, for example, recommends that children provide input on family rules and consequences.²⁴ Kathi Hudson advocates open communication between children and parents, active listening by adults, and encouragement of moral reasoning.²⁵ John MacArthur warns parents against emotional harm to children through discouragement and overprotectiveness, and urges that adult censure be balanced with nurture.²⁶ Summarizing this trend, James Hunter notes a subtle but distinct shift among conservative Protestants away from authoritarian conceptions of child-rearing and toward the more flexible, egalitarian stance preferred by the general population. This phenomenon, he contends, reflects a more general tendency within this group to adapt their thinking to the cognitive norms of modern culture.²⁷

It appears, in short, that discipline issues are a promising topic for dialogue between religious conservatives and secular educators. This essay suggests that such a dialogue is most likely to be fruitful if it proceeds along the lines that Kunzman has proposed. Secular educators will get nowhere contesting the principle of free will to which many Christians are committed. Christians will get nowhere challenging the social influence principle that informs much education scholarship. To find areas of agreement, the parties must examine how each other's core principles are applied to practical problems of classroom management. They must be willing to reconsider the implications of their own principles as these are applied to the real-life situations teachers have to deal with. If they are willing to engage in this process of mutual inquiry and reflection, the two sides will find common ground, and differences in their philosophical orientation will become less important. Kunzman's model, in short, does hold out the prospect of a constructive mutual engagement for the two groups. The proposal of weak fallibilism as a means to accommodate religious dissent is a useful contribution to the politics of public schools in a contentious era.

1. Bill Fonseth, a student at Minnesota State University Moorhead, provided invaluable assistance in clarifying conservative Christian views of obedience and school discipline.

2. Robert Kunzman, "Educating for More (and Less) Than Intelligent Belief or Unbelief: A Critique of Noddings's Vision of Religion in Public Schools," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2005*, ed. Kenneth Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005); Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

3. Nomi Stolzenberg, "'He Drew a Circle That Shut Me Out': Assimilation, Indoctrination, and the Paradox of a Liberal Education," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 3 (1993): 581–667.

4. Kunzman, "A Critique," 7 (emphasis in original).

5. *Ibid.*, 8.

6. Implications of self-determination research for classroom teaching are discussed in Johnmarshall Reeve, "Self-Determination Theory Applied to Educational Settings," in *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*, eds. Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 183–204.
7. Jack Hyles, *How to Rear Children* (Hammond, Ind.: Hyles-Anderson Publishers, 1972), 144. Conservative Christian approaches to child-rearing are reviewed in James Berliner, "Educational Psychology Meets the Christian Right: Differing Views of Children, Schooling, Teaching, and Learning," *Teachers College Record* 98, no. 3 (1997): 381–416; and in George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), chap. 21.
8. For discussion, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Theological Foundations for an Evangelical Political Philosophy," in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy: Political Strategies for the Health of the Nation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005), 140–162.
9. Noddings criticizes Christian "submission and childlike acceptance" of God's commands and recommends that public schools scrutinize the social and psychological needs motivating this stance. Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief and Unbelief*, 25–28, 41–44.
10. Christopher Ellingson and Darren Sherkat document conservative Christians' emphasis on obedience in "Obedience and Autonomy: Religion and Parental Values Reconsidered," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 32, no. 4 (1993): 313–329. John Bartowski and Christopher Ellison pick out obedience as a consistent theme in conservative Christian child-rearing manuals. See Bartowski and Ellison, "Divergent Models of Childrearing in Popular Manuals: Conservative Protestants vs. the Mainstream Experts," *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 1 (1995): 21–34.
11. *Teaching Interrupted: Do Discipline Policies in Today's Public Schools Foster the Common Good?* (New York: Public Agenda, 2004), <http://www.publicagenda.org>.
12. See, for example, James Dobson, *The New Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992), and Charles Swindoll, *The Strong Family: Growing Wise in Family Life* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1991). Bartowski and Ellison provide an overview in "Obedience and Autonomy."
13. Hyles, *How to Rear*, 15. Presumably he intends "ought implies can" but not the reverse.
14. Susan Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
15. Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Tx.: Aha! Process, Inc., 2001).
16. John Ogbu, *Black Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).
17. Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, 86.
18. *Ibid.*, 87.
19. Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962), 11.
20. For a concise overview of internalization research, see Joan Grusec and Jacqueline Goodnow, "Impact of Parental Discipline Methods on the Child's Internalization of Values: A Reconceptualization of Current Points of View," *Developmental Psychology* 30, no. 1 (1994): 4–19. A more comprehensive and up-to-date survey is found in Joan E. Grusec and Leon Kuczynski, eds., *Parenting and Children's Internalization of Values* (New York: Wiley, 1997).
21. Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
22. Nilda Flores-González, *School Kids/Street Kids: Identity Development in Latino Students* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002).
23. Hyles, *How to Rear*, 97.
24. Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).
25. Kathi Hudson, *Raising Kids God's Way* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1995).
26. John MacArthur, *Successful Christian Parenting: Raising Your Child with Care, Compassion, and Common Sense* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998).
27. James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 46, 108.