Social Power and Education

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The focus of this essay is the concept of social power. The phrase "social power" has been used by political scientists and philosophers to refer to the power that is exercised by individuals or groups within society.[1] The question of power in the social context has troubled philosophers, off and on, for centuries. Ambitious attempts by several contemporary political theorists to rework liberal political thought have once again thrust this issue to the forefront of philosophical debate.

Appropriately, several recent philosophers of education have examined the issue of social power in the educational context. It is my contention that this issue must be thoroughly explored before any meaningful revision of liberal educational theory can be made. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the investigation of the important question of power in education. I will not, however, pursue the standard approach, which is to offer typologies of the various forms of power. This approach is limited. Dennis Wrong asserts that past attempts at classifying specific forms of power have rarely succeeded in dispelling confusion, but rather have revealed "at least as much diversity as uniformity."[2] Instead, I begin by looking at one educational theorist's view of social power, exposing an important weakness of this view, before describing my own alternative. Then, I draw from my view educational implications that seem important. Following this, I challenge the idea that power is always objectionable and show how my view of power supports such a challenge.

POWER AS CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

When developing a theory of social power in the educational context, Nicholas Burbules relies on Steven Lukes' well-known discussion of power. Lukes defines power this way: "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests."[3] Following this basic understanding of power, Burbules maintains that "power relations begin with a state of conflicting interests."[4]

A theory of power built only on the idea of conflicting interests is inadequate. Such theories are incapable of dealing with cases of paternalism. Paternalistic behavior is characterized by the use of power by one person over another person in an effort to advance the latter's best interests. A mother who forces her sick child to take his medicine when that child does not want to is acting paternalistically, and, it seems to me, is obviously exerting power over her child. However, according to Burbules' view of power, the mother is *not* exerting power over her child since she is not affecting her child in a manner contrary to the child's interests. This seems to fly in the face of the ordinary understanding of power.

In response to this problem, Burbules suggests that in situations like the one described above, the mother is meeting the child's *long-term interests*. When viewed from a short-term perspective, the mother and child appear to have conflicting interests. However, from the long-term perspective, it is clear that they actually do

not (*TPE*, 98). But this is patently false. I argue that just because the child's long-term interests are not in conflict with his mother's interests, this does not mean that his short-term interests are not in conflict with her interests. That is, his short-term interest of not being made to taste bad-tasting medicine is in conflict with his mother's interest to nurse him back to health. This raises an interesting problem. Based on the idea that power amounts to a conflict of interests, when certain cases of paternalism are viewed from the short-term perspective, paternalism appears to amount to power. But, when viewed from the long-term perspective, these same cases of paternalism do not appear to amount to power.

There is another problem with views of power that are grounded on the idea of conflicting interests. Such views seem to imply that power, because it occurs only when there is a *conflict* of interests, is something that is only a factor when a discrete action or event occurs between two individuals (or groups) that changes the manner in which these two previously interacted. If this is correct, then such views appear to deny an important intuition concerning power; namely, that power can exist as a complex structural feature of a normal, ongoing, social relationship. This intuition, it seems to me, is especially important for understanding the power relationship between teachers and students.

Now, views of power that are grounded on the idea of conflicting interests are clearly capable of accounting for situations in which a teacher's power over her student is the result of some "interventional" action she performs; an action which causes the student to alter his behavior in a way that changes the manner in which the teacher and her student previously interacted. Consider the example of a teacher who punishes a student who speaks out of turn by sending him out of the classroom. The teacher has performed an interventional action and has clearly exercised power. According to views of power that are grounded on conflicting interests, the teacher exercised power over her student when she sent him out of the classroom because she acted in a way that negatively affected his interests.

However, views of power that are grounded on conflicting interests cannot generally account for the fact that even when teachers do not perform interventional actions, students, nonetheless, behave in certain ways as a result of the teacher's power over them. For instance, under normal circumstances, a teacher does not need to threaten her students to get them to speak in turn. The mere fact that the teacher will grade the quality of their class participation is enough to cause them regularly to speak in turn. Power seems to be at the heart of this fact. But, views grounded on conflicting interests cannot account for this power, because this power is not here manifested as an interventional action. Rather, it is a structural feature of the normal, ongoing teacher-student relationship.

In order to account for forms of power that exist as structural features, one must have a view of power that is broader than one that is grounded on conflicting interests alone. Sensing this, perhaps, Burbules incorporates into his theory a Foucauldian idea regarding power; namely, that power should be viewed as "a *web*, as a system of relations: discursive, practical, material, intellectual, and psychological" (*TPE*, 104).

By incorporating Michel Foucault's view of power as a web-like system, Burbules begins to broaden his own view of power. The strategy of building on Lukes' view by incorporating one of Foucault's ideas about power is, in principle, a good one.[5] However, to my mind, Burbules does not carry out this strategy successfully. Part of the reason for this, I argue, is that because he remains securely wedded to the idea that power is, essentially, a conflict of interests, Burbules fails to draw out in a meaningful way what seems to me to be the most important implication of Foucault's idea that power is a web-like system; namely, that power can exist as a complex structural feature of a normal, ongoing, social relationship.

Like Burbules, I want a conception of power that accounts for the idea that relationships of power are shaped by the broader social context in which they exist. And, I want this conception to account for the view that power consists of something more than interventional actions that cause behavioral change. Therefore, in the next section, I promote a view of power that meaningfully accounts for the Foucauldian notion that power can exist as a complex structural feature of a normal, ongoing, social relationship. James D. Marshall warns, "Foucault provides us with no ready-made formula for analyzing power in education."[6] However, I believe that the conception of power presented below responds to Foucault's analysis of power in a way that sheds light on the question of power in education.

POWER-OVER AS CONTROL

Before presenting my view of power, I want to make one important conceptual clarification, regarding the meaning of power, that will help to focus this study. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives at least two different meanings of the term "power." The first is the "ability to do or affect something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing."[7] In this sense, power refers to a capacity or disposition which is not limited to humans. Hurricanes also posses power in that they have the capacity to do great harm to people and things. This meaning of power is often labeled "power-to." The second meaning is reflected in the following passage: "Possession of control or command over others; dominion, rule; government, domination, sway, command; control, influence, authority. Often followed by *over*."[8] It seems most natural to interpret this as restricting power to a specific kind of relationship between humans exclusively; one that highlights the issue of social inequality. This meaning of power can be called "power-over."

Although both meanings of power are important, here, I will focus on the notion of power-over. The reason is that I am concerned with analyzing social power or power which exists as (or in) relationships between humans.

Rather than relying on Lukes' perspective of power-over, as Burbules does, I rely on Thomas Wartenberg's understanding of power-over as it is developed in his book.[9] Although I modify his view, I think I maintain Wartenberg's basic idea of power-over when I express it this way; where A and B are social agents, A has *power over* B to the extent that A *controls* B's social situation. In order to clarify this idea three things must be explained: (1) what is meant by the term "social agents?" (2) what is meant by the phrase "social situation?" and (3) what is meant by "control?"

As it is used here, the term "social agents" refers simply to beings that are capable of acting (not merely behaving) in society. More specifically, the term "social agents" picks out beings that have a certain characteristic: the ability to be in a relationship where one agent has power over another. There are two kinds of beings that are normally thought of in this way: (1) individual humans and (2) groups of humans.

The term "social situation" refers to a social agent's available courses of action. By the phrase "available courses of action," I do not refer to all of the courses of action that may exist for an agent in reality. Rather, I am referring to the courses of action that are accessible to an agent, given the agent's objective situation and subjective assessment of that situation. It could be the case that more courses of action may exist than are available to an agent.

Analyzing an individual's social situation consists of examining two fundamental aspects: (1) his objective situation and (2) his subjective assessment of his situation. The objective situation of a social agent is characterized by his social and natural circumstances. Financial status is a good example of an aspect of an individual's objective situation. My financial status can determine the courses of action that are open to me. For instance, if I am well off, the option to travel to other countries is available to me. However, if by chance I were to lose a large sum of money, my available courses of action may change. I may no longer have the option to travel.

The second aspect of an individual's social situation is his subjective assessment of his social and natural circumstances. People interpret the circumstances with which they are faced. To a large extent, the character of their interpretation shapes the courses of action that are available to them. This interpretation can, in turn, be broken down into two categories of assessment; (1) *understanding* and (2) *evaluation*. The first type of assessment is directed toward comprehending exactly what an individual's circumstances are. Such assessments can range from being quite accurate to quite inaccurate. For instance, I may have an inaccurate view of my financial status because I misunderstand how much money I lost. As a result, I do not *know* that I actually have the money to travel, and thus, in a very real sense, this course of action is not *available* to me.

The second type of assessment involves a process of evaluation rather than comprehension. Here, one may have an accurate view of his options and has decided that he values one option over another. For example, I may accurately understand how much money I lost and know that I still have the financial means with which to travel. However, because I have recently learned that my child is very ill and needs hospital care, I never consider using this money for travel. Thus, travel is simply not among my *available* courses of action.

The concept of a social situation allows both an individual's objective situation and his assessment of it to change. Such change can take place by accident or it can be the result of another agent's intentional actions. It is the latter scenario with which I am concerned.

What does it mean for one person to *control* the social situation of another? In the discussion above, I dissected the idea of the social situation into two notions: "objective situation" and "assessment of situation." And, I stated that both work to shape the courses of action that are available to an individual. By doing so, I have provided a way of identifying exactly what is being controlled when one controls the social situation of another. That is, in order for an agent to control another agent's social situation, the first agent must control some aspect(s) of the second agent's objective situation and/or subjective assessment of his situation.

There are several ways in which the first agent can do this. For example, the first agent might control the second agent's objective situation by acting in a way that alters the second agent's financial status. Or, the first agent may control the second agent's assessment of his situation by altering the second agent's understanding or evaluation of his financial status. Or finally, the first agent need not *act* at all in a way that alters the second agent's objective situation or subjective assessment of his situation (or, for that matter, his previous manner of interacting with the second agent), in order to control some aspect(s) of the second agent's social situation. Instead, he may control the second agent's social situation by means of a structural feature of their normal, ongoing relationship. Consider the following scenario. A trusted accountant is trying to determine her client's financial status. Upon finishing her work, the accountant does not make it clear to her client that although he has lost money from one investment, he is no worse off because he has made money from another investment. This is not unusual as the accountant has a policy of not informing her clients of changes that do not significantly impact their financial situations. Here, the accountant is controlling a specific aspect of her client's subjective assessment of his situation, namely the level of his understanding of his financial situation. However, the accountant has not acted in a way that has altered either his objective situation or his assessment of his situation (or her previous manner of interacting with her client). Rather, the accountant has control over her client via a structural feature of their ongoing social relationship, namely a specific business policy. This form of control is the focus of the next section.

The Power of Grading

The last form of control described above begins to reveal how my view of power is able to account specifically for structural forms of power. The "accountant" example illustrated how a structural feature might enable an individual to control an aspect of another individual's *subjective assessment of his situation*. In this section, I will incorporate my view of power in an analysis of a structural feature that enables certain individuals to control other individuals' *objective situations*, as well as their *subjective assessments of their situations*. I will analyze a fundamental structural feature of the teacher-student power relationship mentioned earlier, namely grading. We concluded earlier that teachers do not need to perform interventional actions in order to exercise power over their students. Rather, they have power over their students simply because they grade them.

The question I will address here is, "how, exactly, do teachers have power over their students via grading?" As it was explained earlier, grading is an ordinary aspect

of the ongoing teacher-student relationship; it is not an interventional action. Therefore, we cannot rely on views of power grounded on conflicting interests for an answer to this question. However, we can rely on a view of power grounded on the idea of control, such as the one I just described. Teachers have power over their students via the grading process because through this process teachers control an important aspect of their students' objective situations, namely the kinds of colleges for which they will be eligible. That is, through the grading process teachers control whether students will have the option of a attending a prestigious college.

In order to understand exactly how the grading process controls the kind of college education students are allowed, we must look beyond the teacher-student relationship. We must understand that this relationship is situated in a larger social context, a context that consists of other people who play a critical role in constituting the power relationship between teachers and students. Specifically, we must look at the role played by university admissions counselors.

The mechanism at work behind the grading process is a subtle form (or "web," or "net") of cooperation between high school teachers and university admissions counselors. Teachers assign various grades to their students, and admissions counselors cooperate with teachers by selecting students according to these grading assignments. In effect, this subtle cooperative behavior works to control students' objective situations by controlling the kinds of colleges for which students will be eligible.

In addition, teachers have power over their students via grading in that grading enables them to control an aspect of their students' subjective assessments of their situations, namely their self-images as students. Teachers offer, in the form of grades, respected or legitimate appraisals of their students' academic abilities. This appraisal, in turn, works to shape their students' *own* evaluations of their academic abilities, their self-images as students.[10]

While it is obvious that controlling the kinds of colleges students will be eligible for amounts to control of their available courses of action, it is less obvious how controlling students' self-images amounts to such control. Perhaps an illustration will help to make this clear. Consider the young man who thinks of himself as "only a 'C' student." This kind of self-image could work to limit the kinds of colleges to which he will apply. That is, because he views himself as possessing merely average academic ability, he is not likely to consider a prestigious college education as one of his available courses of action.

Is Power Always Objectionable?

I shall argue, perhaps counter-intuitively, that exercising power over others is not always objectionable in education. Moreover, I argue that the exercise of power is a necessary (though not sufficient in itself) aspect of the educational process. This understanding of power is essential, I believe, if we are to understand power in education.

Against this, Patricia White states, "the exercise of power is always…objectionable and always to be regretted," especially in education.[11] In

addition, she says, it would be ideal if power relationships could be eliminated from human life, but that this is impossible. Burbules expresses a similar sentiment when he says, "power is a kind of social pathology that exacts a definite price and makes a variety of more consensual and egalitarian relations impossible." And, once "power relations are…instituted in the habits of society [they are] unavoidable" (*TPE*, 105).

It is not insignificant that both of these writers rely on Lukes' view of power. From the view that power is essentially a conflict of interests, it seems natural to conclude that power is always objectionable. After all, it is hard to imagine a situation where having one's interests conflict with another's interests is not objectionable.

Now, if White and Burbules are right, and if the teacher-student relationship is one of power, it would seem to follow that relationships between teachers and students are always objectionable, always something to be criticized. But this seems odd.

One possible reason for concluding that power relationships *per se* are always objectionable may be that one assumes that such relationships must always be relationships of domination (that is, relationships where one agent uses his power over another agent in a way that harms the second agent). Burbules, who seems to hold this assumption, writes, "[b]asic to power is the idea of *domination*" (*TPE*, 83). However, I believe that this assumption is incorrect. For instance, in paternalistic relationships, one individual is using power over another individual in an effort to benefit the second individual. Such relationships of power are not properly thought of in terms of domination. Instead, the power used in paternalistic relationships might be thought of as a positive form of power, or as power that is designed to benefit the individual over whom it is being exercised.[12]

There is, I think, a second form of positive power which is closely linked to that used in paternalistic relationships but is different in one fundamental respect. This form of power is used specifically to transform individuals in such a way that they no longer need the protection and guidance of another, to be under the power of another. Paternalistic power is not normally thought of as directed toward this specific aim.

Although an extensive exploration of this second form of positive power would go beyond the scope of this essay, a few words can be said that may help to get the general idea across. Two very different writers have touched on this form of power: conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton, and feminist theorist and philosopher, Eleanor Kuykendall. When referring to the parent-child relationship, Scruton writes, "it is only in recognizing the existence of an objective power over what it will do that the child is pulled out of its self-immersion."[13] I do not think I stretch Scruton's point too far when I suggest that here he is talking about the power that is used by parents to transform their children. However, he may not be talking specifically about a form of power that aims to transform children so that they no longer need to be under their parents' power.[14] Kuykendall, on the other hand, does talk specifically about this form of power. She states, "power exercised by the

nurturer toward the nurtured (as by mother toward child) [is] not merely dominant or controlling, but primarily healing, creative, and transformative."[15] Moreover, Kuykendall says that such relationships of power are potentially "symmetrical," "mutual" and "reciprocal." The teacher-student relationship incorporates this form of positive power to the extent that teachers use their power over their students in the effort to transform them into people who are no longer in need of their teaching.

If the above analysis is correct, it seems that there are at least two forms of positive power which are not *ipso facto* objectionable. My view of power accounts for both forms. By viewing power in terms of the *control* that one individual has over the social situation of another individual, we are able to see that power need not automatically produce negative consequences for subordinate individuals. The concept of control is broad and flexible enough to allow for the fact that one individual may use power over another individual — may control another individual's social situation — in a way that benefits the second individual. Moreover, the concept of control allows for the transformative use of power described above.

Finally, to the extent that education *requires* that teachers control the social situations of students in the effort to benefit them (for example, education may require that teachers assess and provide constructive feedback on student work), power is not only a positive but also a necessary aspect of education.

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1. See Thomas E. Wartenberg, *The Forms of Power: From Domination to Transformation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Alvin Goldman, "Toward a Theory of Social Power," *Philosophical Studies* 23, no. 4 (1983); and Dawn Cartwright, *Studies in Social Power* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

2. Dennis Wrong, *Power* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 65.

3. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 27.

4. Nicholas C. Burbules, "A Theory of Power in Education," *Educational Theory* 36, no. 2 (1986): 97. This article will be cited as *TPE* with page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.

5. Several other writers have taken a similar approach. See David Couzens Hoy, "Power, Repression, Progress: Foucault, Lukes, and the Frankfurt School," *Tri Quarterly* 52 (1981): 43-63 and Peter Digeser, "The Fourth Face of Power," *Journal of Politics* 54, (1992): 977-1007.

6. James D. Marshall, "Foucault and Educational Research," in *Foucault and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

7. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 259.

8. Ibid., 259.

9. Wartenberg, *Forms of Power*, 71-88.

10. This point is consistent with another Foucauldian idea; namely, that power produces subjects or individuals. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 194, "The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by [a] specific technology of power." If what he means by this is that power works in subtle ways to shape the way individuals view themselves and are viewed by others, then grading, to the extent that it shapes student's self-images and the images others have of them, may be a good example of how power produces individuals.

11. Patricia White, *Beyond Domination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 24.

12. I recognize that this characterization of paternalistic relationships is slightly problematic. For one thing, paternalism can be used as a justification for domination. For instance, in an attempt to justify an act of domination, one individual may rely on the claim that he knows what is good for the second individual. However, I contend that if the first individual is not actually using his power over the second individual in an effort to benefit him, then they are not in a paternalistic relationship at all.

13. Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism* (Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980), 32.

14. Scruton's statement on power is part of an attempt to explain the bond between parents and their children. If he envisions this bond as requiring that parents always have power over their children, then he is clearly not talking about the exact same form of power that I am.

15. Eleanor H. Kuykendall, "Toward an Ethic of Nurturance: Luce Irigaray on Mothering and Power," in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. Joyce Trebilcot (Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 264.