Cartesian Subjectivity and the Question of Knowledge

Joyce Mgombelo
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta

Opening Thoughts

The collected works of English mathematics educator, Mary Boole, might be invaluable for education and curriculum research that attempts to understand the question: “what counts as knowing?” Even though it was written before 1916, Boole’s work allows curriculum researchers and teacher educators interested in the question to experience a significant shift in thinking. For example, in the following excerpt from the collected works, Mary Boole informs our view of education and provides us with an initial, though not so clear, orienting statement:

Education means the educing of faculty. Children need many things besides education; many things which can best be given and—some of them can only be given under a regime of orderly routine. Among these good things are discipline and training. But it would be well to remember that, during the time that these other good things are going on, education itself is not going on. Education proper is given by rare and episodical occurrences, which give to those dormant faculties which disciplinary routine is holding down and keeping quiet opportunity and stimulus to start into active life (Boole, 1972, p.16).

Mary Boole does not provide us with a theoretical language sufficient to deal with the question of knowledge in education. My contention here is that Boole’s work can be supplemented by other domains of intellectual practice interested in those elements of the formation of consciousness or identities that are central in understanding the question of knowing: Lacanian psychoanalysis, Buddhism, Neuroscience, Enactivism and so on. I believe that today curriculum and education concerns cannot be dealt satisfactorily without addressing the question of subjectivity. This is
especially important in this era of postmodernism and poststructuralism in which the decentering of the subject in many subject positions has raised numerous questions such as those of responsibility and ethics based on a hidden set of rules such as tolerance and acceptance of difference (Zizek, 1997).

Today, in academic and education research, it is commonplace to question the validity of Cartesian subjectivity and epistemological claims about the objectivity of knowledge that underlie this subjectivity. As Zizek, in his introduction to Ticklish subject: The absent center of political ontology (1999) puts succinctly, Western academia is haunted by the spectre of the Cartesian subject (Interestingly, David Jardine calls this Descartes’ Nightmare):

All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre: the New Age obscurantist (who wants to supersede the ‘Cartesian paradigm’ towards a new holistic approach) and the postmodern deconstruction (for whom the Cartesian subject is a discursive fiction, an effect of decentred textual mechanisms); the Habermasian theorist of communication (who insists on shift from Cartesian monological subjectivity to discursive intersubjectivity) and the Heideggerian proponent of the thought of Being (who stresses the need to ‘traverse’ the horizon of modern subjectivity culminating in current ravaging nihilism); the cognitive scientist (who endeavours to prove empirically that there is no unique scene of the Self, just a pandemonium of competing forces) and the Deep Ecologist (who blames Cartesian mechanistic materialism for providing the philosophical foundation for the ruthless exploitation nature); the critical (post-) Marxist (who insists that the illusory freedom of the bourgeois thinking subject is rooted in class division) and the feminist (who emphasizes that the allegedly sexless cogito is in fact a male patriarchal formation). (Zizek, 1999, p.1)

And “Where is the academic orientation which has not been accused by its opponents of not yet properly disowning the Cartesian Heritage?” (p. 1). According to Zizek, two things are worth noting. First, despite the strong criticisms against it, Cartesian subjectivity continues to dominate and to be acknowledged as a powerful intellectual tradition in academia (curriculum studies, teacher education etc.). Second, it is about time that the “partisans of Cartesian subjectivity should in the face of the whole world publish their views, their aims, their tendencies and meet this nursery tale of the Specter of Cartesian subjectivity with the philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity itself” (p. 2). This however as Zizek quickly notes does not mean that we return to the cogito as manifested in modern thought, the self transparent thinking, but rather reassert the forgotten and unacknowledged obverse of this cogito, the subject of the unconscious as articulated in psychoanalysis.
What Zizek’s contentions begin to make apparent in academia (education) is the following: There seems to be a ‘self’ or better yet counterpart of the Cartesian subject (the unconscious) that is not acknowledged in many of our criticisms of Cartesian subjectivity. This lack of realization of this other-self crystallizes to the apparent impasse in education and curriculum theory and research: How are we to return to the Cartesian cogito without falling into the trap of its manifestation in modern thought (self-transparent and self-awareness subjectivity)? How are we to locate our critic of the traditional view of knowledge in education and its correlate Cartesian cogito without falling into the trap of our nostalgia of things as they were before? As Jardine warns us, despite our effort to critic Cartesian subjectivity, we cannot return to ‘what Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1970) called a nostalgia for ‘our relationship to Being such as they were prior to self-consciousness.’ Since we owe our idea of and our taste for primordial ontology to just this self-consciousness’ (1998b, p. 12).

The thesis that I attempt to bring is that there “exists” a different or an other-self that is not the self transparent Cartesian cogito that we in academia are all against and that the rejection or unacknowledgement of this other-self in our criticisms of the Cartesian subjectivity correlates to the occulting of the kind of human knowledge or knowing that is at the center of our actions. It is within this frame that I discuss the question of “what counts as knowing?” by mainly drawing from two fields, Trungpa (Tibetan) Buddhism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, that have problematized the self transparence–ego self by bringing to light this other necessary other-self: I argue that it is this realization of this other-self that might shed light in understanding what Mary Boole’s work might contribute in education.

**Beyond Cartesian Ego-Self**

The problem of ego-self and the realization of the other-self have been discussed by Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1991) in *The embodied mind*. However it is Varela’s work in *Ethical know-how* (1999), that is of interest. In this work, Varela discusses the contribution of Eastern traditions on the pragmatics of knowledge that is at the center of human action, ethical know-how. In addition, Varela suggests that it is psychoanalysis, in Western tradition and its notion of an unconscious subject, that we must look to for understanding the pragmatics of this ethical know-how. To demonstrate how this notion of other-self as counterpart or obverse of the Cartesian ego-self is dealt in Buddhism and psychoanalysis, let us begin with what Varela (1999) offers as a way of realizing the other-self (virtual self) from an inaccurate sense of self (ego-self). Here Varela discusses the methodology offered by Tibetan Buddhist tradition of transforming of the constituents of our virtual mind (of self) into wisdom:

*Th[e] sense of transformation does not mean going away from the*
world and getting out of mental functioning, since the very constituents on which the inaccurate sense of self and world are based are also the basis of wisdom. The means of transforming mental constituents into wisdom is intelligent awareness, that is, the moment-to-moment realization of the virtual self as it is—empty of any egoistic ground whatsoever, yet filled with wisdom. (p.73)

Everything seems to be condensed in this paragraph. Is not this moment to moment realization of the virtual self as empty, what Boole calls episodical occurrences? More importantly is how the nature of this virtual self (other-self) or the relationship between the other self and ego-self is discussed; it is not that this other-self exists outside, or behind or beyond the ego in a transcendental way\textsuperscript{2]. The other-self is already present, it is not something that one attains—nor transcendental. It is important to understand this paradoxical nature of other-self or else we fall into a trap of falling back to the Cartesian (modern) self transparency subject or the nostalgia of things as they were before the Cartesian ego-subject. It is also important to understand this nature of the other-self since, in later following Lacan, I contend that the subject of the unconscious in psychoanalysis is the Cartesian \textit{cogito}.

To elaborate on the Buddhist method, let us take a brief detour through the work of Trungpa (1987) in \textit{Cutting through spiritual materialism}.\textsuperscript{3]}

According to Trungpa, the Buddhist approach to spirituality begins with acknowledging our confusion and suffering and work through unfolding their origin. The origin of this confusion and suffering comes from our inaccurate sense of self—a sense of self that is continuous and solid. “This sense of self is actually a transitory, discontinuous event”(p.5) which we confuse to be solid and continuous. Our confused view of this nature of the self leads us to the struggle to maintain it as solid and continuous when experience reveals to us its transitory and discontinuous nature. It is this struggle to maintain a solid or continuous self that is the action of the ego. The ego-self is the mental construction that gives us the illusion of a self-conscious or self-transparent self.

To demonstrate this action or function of the ego, Tibetan Buddhism invokes a metaphor of the three lords of materialism: the lord of form, the lord of speech and the lord of mind. The lord of form represents the ways we are preoccupied with looking for external things from our environment or physical surroundings for comfort, security and pleasure. These things might include any that are essential in our daily life such as food, work, drugs, books, television and so on. The problem is not the things themselves but our incessant preoccupation with them in order to escape from the raw and unpredictable aspects of our daily life.

The lord of speech represents the ways we use our intellect in relating to our world. In particular, it involves the way we are preoccupied with our beliefs in all the “isms” such as political, ecological, psychological, and
Trungpa notes that the most definable products of this lord are ideologies or systems of ideas that we develop in order to rationalize our reality. Again there is nothing wrong with our intellect or ideas themselves; it is the ego’s preoccupations with these ideas in order to interpret anything that threatens or irritates it in order to neutralize the threat. The most developed products of this lord are narrow-mindedness and prejudice against other people’s ideas.

The third lord of materialism, the lord mind is represented in ways we try to maintain our self-awareness (awareness of our consciousness). In this case, this lord might be manifested in the way we are preoccupied with using psychological or spiritual disciplines and techniques such as prayer, meditation, drugs, and various psychotherapies to provide us with self-awareness.

We should note that even though the ego is a mental construct or false sense of self, this does not mean that it will dissolve once one is informed of its illusory nature. Trungpa notes that, the Buddha himself was troubled by the question of why our minds follow these lords and whether there is another way. He found out that the lords seduce us by creating the myth that we are solid beings. The word seduce here should be taken in its literal meaning. It shows how giving up the ego is not easy. The ego is capable of converting everything to its uses even the sense of transitory self. The Buddha noticed that the key to unravelling the myth and our suffering resulting from ego’s belief in it is to cut through ‘very elaborate defences erected by the three lords to prevent their subjects from discovering the fundamental deception which is their source of power” (p.9). The method that the Buddha discovered for cutting through these defences is meditation. According to Trungpa, meditation is neither a trancelike state of mind as some people think nor training in the sense of mental gymnastics. Rather, meditation involves just letting be—learning to see the lord’s defences for what they are and working with their pattern. That is to say, meditation involves learning to transform mental constituents into wisdom through realization of the gaps between the ego’s struggle that is moment-to-moment realization of the virtual self (no-self or selfless in Buddhism) as it is empty of any egoistic ground or solidity as discussed by Varela.

Let us now move to the Lacanian notion of the subject—Freudian unconscious. Lacanian’s notion of the subject is a difficult one. As Davis (2000) notes ‘Lacan perversely for (post-)structuralists includes both ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ in his model” (p. 7) of subjectivity. Put differently ‘Lacan attempts to grasp the paradoxical relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ rather than attempting to dissolve either one of them or both of them and in which the subject is the empty place in the structure” (p.7). It is within this empty place of the structure that Lacan locates the Cartesian cogito.
The Lacanian subject might be understood by comparing it with the Heideggerian notion of a being-in-the-world and the poststructuralist notion of subject positions. Following the tradition of phenomenology, Heidegger, along with others, elaborated on a conceptual framework that allows us to reject the notion of a rational (modern) subject as an autonomous agent who, excluded from the world, processes data given to him or her by senses in a computer-like computational way. In opposition to this notion of a disembodied agent, Heidegger developed the notion of being-in-the-world as an irreducible and unsurpassable embeddedness in a concrete and ultimately contingent life world. According to Heidegger, “we are always already in the world, engaged in existential project against a background that eludes our grasp and forever remains the opaque horizon in which we are ‘thrown’ as finite beings” (Zizek, 1999, p. 62).

Against this background, it is common to oppose consciousness and unconsciousness along the same lines—disembodied rational subject as the subject of consciousness and the opaque background that eludes us because we are already engaged in it as the unconscious. For Lacan the unconscious has nothing to do with this structurally necessary opaque background. “The unconscious stands for the rational subject in so far as it is originally out of joint, in discord with its contextualized situation: the unconscious is the crack that makes the subject’s primordial stance something other than being in the world” (p. 62). Like the Buddhist notion of no-self, Lacan subject is not outside the ego-self or beyond or behind, it is paradoxically within the same mental constituents that the ego uses to give us the illusion of a solid self.

Lacan’s subject can also be understood as a subject of language. Put differently, in Lacanian terms, the subject is that which is represented by the signifier; is produced by the failure of representation; the subject is the excess which escapes signification and this excess is produced by the very attempt at signification. Against the notion of Lacanian subject as a subject of language, it is common to see the appropriation of Lacan’s notion of decentred subject in Poststructuralism. However, the Lacanian subject is not the subject position(s) as articulated in poststructuralism and postmodernism. As Zizek (1997) elaborates:

‘Decentrement’ thus first designates the ambiguity, the oscillation between symbolic and imaginary identification—the undecidability as to where my true point is, in my ‘real’ self or in my external mask, with the possible implication that my symbolic mask can be ‘more true’ than what it conceals, the ‘true face’ behind it. At a more radical level, it points towards the fact that the very sliding from one identification to another, or among ‘multiple selves’ presupposes the gap between identification as such and a void of $ (the ‘barred subject’) which identifies itself—serves as the empty medium of
identification. In other words, the very process of shifting among multiple identifications presupposes a kind of empty band, which makes the leap from one identity to another possible, and this empty band is subject itself. (p. 141)

Is not what Zizek elaborates above similar to the notion of the self as transitory and discontinuous and the moment to moment realization of the no-self in Buddhism?

Earlier we saw that the realization of the no-self or selfless in Buddhism involves wisdom to cut through the workings of the ego. Likewise, Lacan (1998) in his seminar *Encore* elaborates on the knowledge that is involved with the subject of the unconscious. This is the knowledge that is at the centre of the subject’s subjective truth. This knowledge involves no inherent relation to truth and no subjective position of enunciation, not because it dissimulates the subjective position of enunciation but because it is itself non-subjectivised. Sometimes Lacan refers to this knowledge as the knowledge that does not know itself (it just knows). It is Ram Dass (quoted in Nisker, 1999) who summarizes the kind of knowledge or wisdom that is involved in both Buddhist and Lacanian sense of other-self and ego-self:

> You can either be wise or you can know knowledge. But you can’t know wisdom, you have to be it. Wisdom has simplicity to it. What the spiritual path offers is a way to come back into balance, to develop our intuition and the wisdom of our heart, so that the intellect is no longer the master, but instead is the servant of our heart... the part of us that brings us to unity with our selves and all others. (p. 118)

That is to say the knowledge or knowing that results in our realizing this other-self is transformative as opposed to being informative. It is at the centre of our action as opposed to the reactive mode of the ego-self. It is at the heart of our cognition as opposed to the recognition mode of the ego-self. What then are the implications of this kind of knowledge for education?

**Implications for Education**

Felman (1987) provides us with a starting point: "As a question in which practice, rather than theory, is at stake, the unconscious, in Lacan's view, is grounded not so much in an ontological as in ethical experience" (Felman, 1987, p. 69). In Buddhism this ethical experience is grounded in, among other things, compassion and generosity that are a result of wisdom brought by the experience of meditation (Trungpa, 1987).

The question of ethics in social practices is not limited to Lacanian or...
Buddhist view. Zizek (1997) elaborates on three options of a philosophical approach to ethics. First, that which attempts to ground ethics on some substantial notion of supreme Good. Second, that which challenges the substantial and the universalism of the first and giving its universalism a proceduralist twist, and third, the postmodern option which urges us to be aware of the fictitious nature of truth and therefore not to impose our rules to the rules of the others. Zizek further notes that, despite their challenge to the substantial and universalism of the first option, the second and third options continue to function in the same way, that is they continue to privilege a certain positive content. For example, the postmodern option continues to impose some rules albeit at a second-level, rules such as those of tolerance, rules of accepting the irreducible difference and so on.

Elsewhere (Mgombelo, 2002) I discussed how this last postmodern option is manifested in the kind of the dilemma that teachers face when applying a constructivist approach in teaching. To elaborate on this, I used an example from a class of grade three (Ball, 1994). In this particular class, Ball’s students drew pictures of 4/4 and 5/5 correctly but believed that they did not represent the same amount. Ball describes the reasoning of one student (Sheena) as follows:

> It was important to me that Sheena—a student of colour, a quiet girl—displayed confidence in herself and her ideas to defend them in the face of classmates’ objections. And she is right, given the question she has framed (“Which way of cutting the cookie—into fourths or fifths—will serve more friends?”). (p. 9)

Here we have a sense of dilemma that Ball faces which she notes as a moral dilemma: how to help Sheena realize that the two amounts are the same without interfering with her confidence. Is not what Ball faces here the rules of tolerance, acceptance imposed by a constructivist approach itself albeit at a second level? How then might ethics grounded in a Lacanian and Buddhist approach help us to break from postmodern ethics?

It is here that I would like return to Mary Boole’s work. In a certain case, Boole (1972) responds to the concern raised by a Professor: “students of engineering and electricity cannot use their mathematical knowledge to facilitate their study of real forces to anything like the extent which they would do if their knowledge of so much arithmetic or other mathematics as they have learned were real and vital” (p. 20). Boole argues that, this concern raises the following question in mathematics education: “What are the conditions which favour a vital knowledge of mathematics?” (p. 20). To answer this question, Boole contends that: “It may surprise some readers to be told that those conditions are almost entirely moral and spiritual rather than intellectual” (p.20). I would like to argue that what Boole is asking is a kind of knowledge or wisdom from educators that results from our realization of other-self as exemplified by both Lacan and Buddhism. To demonstrate that Boole’s work maintains this ethics of fidelity to the other-

http://www.ccfi.edu.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v08n02/contextualexplorations/sumara/mgombelo.html (8 of 11) [12/31/2003 8:30:11 PM]
self, let us examine her discussion about what she calls ‘teacher’s lust’.
The teacher … has desire to make those under [her] conform to [her] ideals. Nations could not be built up, nor children preserved from ruin, if some such desire did not exist and exert itself in some degree. But it has its gamut of lusts, very similar to those run down by other faculties. First, the teacher wants to regulate the actions, conduct and thought of other people in a way that does no obvious harm but is quite in excess both of normal rights and practical necessity. Next [she] wants to proselytise, convince, control, to arrest the spontaneous action of other minds, to an extent which ultimately defeats its own ends by making the pupils too feeble and automatic to carry on [her] teaching into the future with any vigour. Lastly, [she] acquires a sheer automatic lust for telling people to ‘don’t’, for arresting spontaneous action in others in a way, which destroys their power even to learn at the time what [she] is trying to teach them. What is wanted is that we should … not go on fogging ourselves with any such foolish notion as that sex-passion is a lust of the flesh and teacher-lust a thing in itself pure and good, which may be legitimately indulged in to the uttermost.

Few teachers now are so conceited as not to know that they have a great deal to learn, and that their methods need revising and improving, but the majority are seeking for improved methods of doing more of what they are already doing a great deal too much of. The improvement, which they most need is to see their conduct, their aims, their whole attitude towards pupils … in the light reflected on them from those of the drunkard and the debauchee. (Boole, 1972, p. 11)

Notice the choice of words that Boole uses. Everything is in these paragraphs: From the Buddhist notion of lords of materialism and their seduction of the ego to transformation as the only way to cut through workings of the ego. Does not Boole show us how the function of ego might be manifested in our practices such as teaching? What is important to note is that the ego can convert even the day to day activities that the teacher does in the classroom and that it is possible for the teacher to be addicted to these activities by being preoccupied with them in the same way that one can be addicted to drinking. Perhaps this explains why teacher change is such an enigma in professional development such as those informed by curriculum changes. Perhaps now we can note that the key for teacher change is not how convincing curriculum changes are but how might we touch this teacher other-self.

Concluding Thoughts

I have attempted to argue that the key to our criticism of the Cartesian cogito in education and curriculum research is not to reject nor get rid of it
but rather to acknowledge or reassert its forgotten obverse or other the other-self. Drawing from Buddhism and Lacanian psychoanalysis, I have tried to show how this other-self is acknowledged as the center of human action: the source of wisdom or knowledge that drives our actions, and cognition. Finally, I have argued for an ethics of fidelity to this other-self in education as illustrated through exemplary work in education by one of the 20th Century’s first mathematics educators, Mary Boole.

References


[1] For the purpose of my arguments I will call this self the other-self as opposed to ego-self of Cartesian modern subject.

[2] This paradoxical nature of the other-self can also be understood in Kant’s notion of phenomenon and the thing in itself. The fact that phenomenon fails to represent the thing in itself does not mean that the thing in itself is outside phenomenon, but the failure itself is inscribed in the phenomenon and this thing in itself is empty. See Zizek (1993) work in Tarrying with the negative.

[3] This is a collection of the series of talks that Trungpa gave in Boulder, Colorado in the fall of 1970 and the spring of 1971 at the time of the formation of the meditation center