Know What You Believe in and What You're Up Against

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The concerns that Kathy raises in her article reflect commitments about education, social justice, and philosophy of education that have characterized her work all the way back to when we were in graduate school together in Chapel Hill, and I am very grateful to have the honor of responding to the address. Like some previous philosophers who have concern for the care of the self in relations of disciplinarity and governmentality, Kathy is on a quest on our behalf for resistance to the neoliberalism in which we find ourselves as faculty. With just a twinge of nostalgia, Kathy longs for the time when the philosophic subject was freer to explore meaningful work, so that we can recover some of the joy and usefulness of philosophy (although as an aside, some playful, joyful, useless philosophy might need to be recovered also).

I am drawn to the frame Kathy uses from Stephen J. Ball's essay on K-12 teachers in the United Kingdom, the technology of performativity, and its implication in the constitution of the entrepreneurial subject.[1] My response works backwards through Kathy's article, starting with Ball then going back to what she says about philosophy of education. I explore some more of the implications of the entrepreneurial subject, drawing from Ball and others. I have some comments about the idea of negotiating a hopeful path between the entrepreneurial and philosophic subjects. I am reading these as two distinctly different ideas of what it means to be a subject, so I have some doubts, related to the difficulty of cutting a path between.

As Kathy mentions, I have done some work on educator professionalism and the tendency under accountability schemes for educators to fall into a position of being normalized in their roles and then normalizing others—students, their colleagues, themselves. Relevant for Kathy's article, educators enact the relations of power in which they find themselves, often paradoxically making

things worse for themselves, their peers, and their students. Kathy transposes these themes for higher education effectively, as she has an argument for how the policy technologies of neoliberalism—market, managerialism, and performativity—play out among faculty.

Ball's description of performativity in K-12 education in the United Kingdom provides a startling interpretation of educational policy in practice. In my reading, Ball establishes the conceptual problem that Kathy's philosophic subject needs to solve. Pragmatically, she wants to negotiate a hopeful path "through … the extremes," which includes addressing "contemporary social, political, and moral struggles," the real problems of our time, a "philosophy that matter[s]." But can these two kinds of subjects be negotiated? The entrepreneurial subject is marked by subjectivity as subjectification.[2] The philosophic subject is a combination of virtuous roles consistent with pragmatism: educator and collaborator, an inquirer on the question for a just and meaningful life, a collective actor working for collective goals. However, how does the philosophic subject deal with the entrepreneurial subjectivity as subjectivation? Can it resist entrepreneurial subjection? Or might we have other options?

Ball captures well the chaotic nature of the problem of accountability schemes. The entrepreneurial subject is a competitor, one who is positioned within neoliberalism to compete. Kathy picks up his analysis of the technology of performativity for faculty in higher education, supposing that the constitution of the entrepreneurial (or enterprising) self has shifted who we are—how we are being constituted as subjects.

Following Ball, the entrepreneur operates from a fearful stance. In the managerial system Ball describes, the entrepreneur is in a constant battle for control. Attempts to be rational—to act in one's own interest, to act in a collective interest—are at best guesses on how to act, based on information provided, and subject to change. The motivating force is fear—fear that we won't do what is actually going to be determined to have value when it comes time to make an accounting. Whether it is how to prepare children for high-stakes tests or how many articles to publish per year in what level of journals, it's not within our control.

As Kathy alludes to, colleagues' desire for control in a performative society consumes time, energy, and physical and mental health, for control is elusive. The struggle to control one's situation, one's destiny, is not supposed to make sense; following Ball, it defers the moral value of practices, or the importance of relation or community. Or even good work. The work may be valuable, but only as a commodity—it's not good, but a good. Or it's monetizable, sellable, scalable, fundable; maybe it's a brand.

I see Kathy having two related implications of what's wrong and what needs to be fixed. One is her take on what performativity means for philosophers of education and philosophy of education. Kathy implies that the neoliberal, performative academy is particularly hard on philosophy of education. One could argue, based on the various references in Kathy's article, that philosophy of education has come out on the ass end of several if not all educational reform movements over the last thirty years, a concern I return to in a minute.

The second implication for Kathy is a more general take on the effects of neoliberal performativity for faculty practice in general. The "killing of the spirit" identified several decades ago by Page Smith, has reached down into the professional schools.[3] In the late 1980s Smith was concerned the academic disciplines had lost the sense of their value for contributing to society and had instead become societies of careerist researchers looking to make names for themselves on the backs of their colleagues and graduate students, with little regard to the inherent value of their work or the responsibility of teaching. Kathy is similarly concerned with what has happened to the work of our colleagues in professional schools, which makes some sense, because shortly after Smith wrote his book, David Labaree predicted that the effort post-*Nation at Risk* to professionalize the field of teaching would probably not professionalize teaching itself but instead professionalize teacher education and teacher educators, who would have to first claim the right to claim specialized knowledge and training within the academy and finally claim the respect owed to us by other disciplines.[4]

In Kathy's corner of higher education, the killing of the spirit is lately happening by way of a thousand little darts in moments you and I can imagine, such as when colleagues look the other way when the work of the college—

teaching, advising, service, etc.—needs to be done but comes into conflict with their individualized practice (Ball might say fearful practice). The individualized goals seem to be the more compelling mission of schools of education, climbing in the *US News and World Report* rankings, or something similar.

If fearful practice occurs because we're not sure if we're doing the right thing to be successful in the entrepreneurial age, the vague aims actually make them that much more powerful. The chief relations in such accountability schemes, as Gert Biesta argued in 2004, are vaguely between the institution and the state—a mysterious, largely anonymous economic relation that takes attention away from the pedagogical relation, which Biesta argues should be the primary relation and protected; further, it is philosophically more appealing and ethically more defensible.[5]

Aside from their lack of carrying their weight in institutions, Kathy is rightly concerned with what these colleagues are doing to themselves and the conditions they create for others. For Kathy, the changing expectations are not coming fully from above in our institutional hierarchies, but from the faculty themselves through their entrepreneurial actions. This is what makes the performativity frame so compelling to me. Kathy's endnote thirty-four gives us a sense of what specifically she is up against in her current situation that may be leading to her present concern—that her colleagues are producing staggering numbers of publications, and at the same time she's aware that some of her colleagues are working way too hard at this, at the expense of their health, and it's not clear that it matters or sets the right priorities. Following Ball, it cultivates self-doubt among those who aren't working the metrics.

As Kathy argues, it's neither healthy nor sustainable. Mental health is a serious concern, and bad disciplinary behavior by colleagues in leadership positions can make conditions worse—moving the goalposts, as they say, and other gaslighting behaviors. The mental health challenges can be exacerbated by our intra-disciplinary competition, and we should talk about that as a PES phenomenon also, although maybe now is not the best time.

Back then to the first part of Kathy's article about the implication

in philosophy of education. Kathy proceeds consistently with her continual work as a philosopher of education in anti-oppressive work. What the work of philosophy is, she names for herself as "to think clearly, to listen openly, and to act ethically," all "valuable in the quest to be of use." She draws from several depictions of philosophy, each in turn getting closer to the project of anti-oppression (from John Dewey, systematic questioning; Nick Burbules, revisiting persistent questions for new wisdom; Cris Mayo, holding concepts in tension to examine for exclusions; Audrey Thompson, "listening at an angle"; Ann Diller, the willingness to be torpefied; Lisa Delpit, turning upside down and letting others' realities enter in). As this unfolds, I see Kathy talking about a particular kind of philosophy—a philosophy across difference—which is a site of contention in philosophy.

The point is that this is the kind of work—working across difference to create pockets of decency and justice—she wants (and wants us) to be doing as opposed to the more individualistic, entrepreneurial work the academy increasingly asks us to perform. The contrast is indeed stark. What our more senior colleagues told us our job was to do—figure out ideas, try to resolve what's troubling us—was always tempered by the banality of managers attempting to count us into their rubrics, so they can achieve their goals of improving our ranking in *US News and World Report,* or whatever else their goals may be. Serving as an associate dean the last five years I have come to appreciate how difficult it is to solve problems without creating new, worse ones.

For Kathy, there are small and medium-size moments when as faculty we can make a difference. Arguing for sanity in evaluation decisions is an important duty. We do need to be of use to our colleagues, and the cultural work Kathy names is quite important. We need to open up possibilities to change the academic cultures, which is the larger work. Especially relevant for me (and I know also for Kathy) is the work we can do to make the academy a stronger and more sustaining home for people of color and first-generation college students. Those are real things that we can do. For Kathy, it seems that this is what she has in mind about negotiating a hopeful path between the two subjects.

But I wonder is that going to be enough to make a difference? I'm

concerned (perhaps fearful) about whether a pragmatist philosophic subject (by itself) can respond to entrepreneurial subjectivity. Kathy's philosophic subject (which is "open-minded, wholehearted," and responsible) is supposed to resist performativity. Won't neoliberalism just shape-shift and co-opt the philosophic subject? Probably, but as Eve Tuck argues, neoliberal logic is incomplete and "does not account for many exceptions," so there is reason to hope.[6]

How might we create some exceptions to the entrepreneurial subject? Can pragmatism forge a hopeful path between, and what would it mean to do that? The philosophic subject is powerful as a set of ideals; can it negotiate the power relations game that the entrepreneurial subject is playing? What I propose is that we need to know what we believe in but also know what we're up against. It is most important to know what constraints we are operating under and how difficult it can be to work against the larger cultural patterns that are operating beyond the walls of our meeting rooms. Specifically, I would like us to think about sustainable ways that we can participate in the work of the institutions of which we are a part and create collaborative spaces that are engaged in meaningful work, community engagement, and devoted educational experiences for our students.

So that is my title, "Know what you believe in and what you're up against." In closing, I want you to know I printed that title in color and taped it on my office door a week ago. So far no one has noticed.

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1 Stephen J. Ball, "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity," *Journal of Educational Policy* 18, no. 2 (2003): 215-228.

2 Ball cites Teresa de Lauretis for the concept of subjectivity; Ball, "The Teacher's Soul," 227n2.

3 Page Smith, *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (New York: Viking, 1990).

4 David Labaree, "Power, Knowledge, and the Rationalization of Teaching: A Genealogy of the Movement to Professionalize Teaching," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (1992): 123-154.

5 Gert Biesta, "Education, Accountability and the Ethical Demand: Can the Democratic Potential of Accountability Be Regained," *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3 (2004): 233-250.

6 Eve Tuck, *Urban Youth and School Pushout: Gateways, Get-Aways, and the GED* (New

York: Routledge, 2013), 27.