A New Discourse for a New Method:
"The New Digital Cartesianism"

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Megan Boler's essay offers a critique of the strand of Cartesianism focused on the mind/body dualism extended to online education. This raises several problems, as it assumes that Cartesianism represents a relatively homogenous concept, with a single point of view, supposedly Descartes's. Furthermore, it treats the problems arising from Descartes's philosophy as though such problems and philosophy had just recently appeared. It is somewhat more complex since Cartesianism was shaped over time through a variety of disciplines.

After a brief look at Cartesianism's trends, I shall address some questions Boler raises in her essay, questions which underscore several ethico-political issues concerning online education.

DESCARTES AND CARTESIANISM(S)

Descartes (1596-1650) lived and wrote in the first half of the seventeenth century, against the backdrop of the so-called "miracle of the 1620s" scientific revolution which founded the modern sciences. His "rationalism" was not much different from that of numerous *esprits libres* of that era for whom the world was increasingly becoming mathematically defined and cognizable. However, Descartes couched his reflections in such strong terms that, under the name "cartesianism," they won acceptance before the end of the century. Although few of his followers actually implemented his methods as he laid them out, they nevertheless endeavored to explain, defend, extol, and adapt his doctrines, particularly his metaphysical dualism of two finite substances, mind and matter, whereas the essence of mind is self-conscious thinking, and the essence of matter is three-dimensional extension. As Boler notes, this dualism raises serious problems concerning causal interaction and knowledge. But the issues are as complex as the various strands of Cartesianism developed from different answers to these questions.

Over the years, philosophers developed their own understanding of Cartesianism. For example Spinoza derived his rationalist metaphysics from Descartes and Leibniz gave a parallelistic answer to the mind/body issues. Berkeley elaborated a monistic system essentially phenomenalist where only minds and sensible ideas exist, whereas Hobbes's monistic materialism did away with mind altogether—only matter exists. The Cartesian theory of knowledge gained through representative ideas also influenced later philosophers. Hume went one step further than Berkeley, asserting that minds are nothing but a collection of ideas, a concept on which twentieth century philosophers built. Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, for example, made logical constructions of the world out of "sense data."[1] This line of influence led Husserl to attempt a science of phenomenology by describing sensible ideas, and Russell and James to propose constructing both mind and matter out of neutral monads. The influence of Descartes's concept of *cogito* developed in Part IV

of his *Discourse* was recognized as having influenced Hegel's notion of self as *ego* in his developmental idealism, Heidegger's stress on being and self, as well as the work on self of other contemporary philosophers (Sartre, Levinas, and so on).[2]

Descartes's influence is still apparent, and various strands of Cartesianism have found their way in recent literature. For example in Chomsky's assertion of humans' innate ability to learn languages, in Eccles and Clark's position that the mind is a nonmaterial entity, and in Popper's discussion of a dualism between the material and the ideational. Simultaneously, Cartesian dualism has been the target of sharp criticism, one of the staunchest from Ryle who attacked "the fallacy of the ghost in the machine," and, with Smart, asserted that the mind *is* the brain.[3] More recently, Rorty dismissed Cartesian philosophy as a sequel from the quest for God and a substitute for theology. Indeed, Western philosophers can no more deny the influence of Cartesianism than that of Greek philosophy, whatever their area of scholarship, whatever the brand of Cartesianism.

Currently, out of efforts to control nature, including humans, an understanding of "Cartesianism" has developed as "crassly materialistic, logical, unfeeling, and inhuman in science, technology, and society." Boler's argument seems to stem from such literature, overlooking the fact that Descartes himself wrote in defense of colonized peoples, for example, or, through his very notion of *cogito*, explicitly rejected prejudices in favor of the individual's subjective experience and perception of truth over so-called objective truth or commonly shared assumptions.[4] Going back to Descartes's original texts helps put secondary or tertiary critiques into perspective.

ONLINE EDUCATION: SOME ETHICAL ISSUES

Precisely because the Web is the first medium which appears to render frontiers—including mind/body—meaningless, this carries serious ethical implications in education. In *Atlas*, Michel Serres identifies several consequences of online communication which he calls "utopic."

Equal access, equal voices are represented by the AT&T and MCI ads claiming that all individuals, notwithstanding what may make them "different" (for example, handicap, color, gender) can now hear everyone and be heard, a characteristic noted by Boler. In this new universe, Serres sees no center, no periphery, the middle being everywhere, and "any-thing, any place, any individual, any group or any phrase occupies, at least by right, a focal site."[5] The conflict between local and global would disappear. However, in order to do so, the small number of privileged "citizens of the world" who own the integrality of the resources, must render the local sites indifferent or undefined. And by erasing singularity into globality, are they not taking away what makes each individual or place unique and singular? And by destroying their singularity, are they not in fact destroying them?

Equal knowledge, equal freedom. Online education could mean freedom as a consequence of equal access to knowledge and to people. Distance learning, available anywhere, anytime on the global network, will add "universal" resources to knowledge which used to be available only locally, in libraries or universities. However, now, not only is it available everywhere, but in addition, asks Serres, "why

could not knowledge come to us instead of—reinforced with much inequality—only a [privileged] few can go to it?"[6] Online education promises freedom from ignorance, but again, contingent to availability. And there lies the second utopia.

Equal power. It seems that equal access would give equal power to everyone. But "All the power to all," is for Serres the "third utopia."[7] For we know that there is much disparity among and within countries concerning access to the tools of technology and the skills they require. Those who hold this kind of power, "[t]he universal accumulation, monopoly, and distribution of all soft data, signs and values…a small group to whom, moreover, belong the hard networks of circulation," cannot see the mass of those excluded.[8] In fact, those who own the knowledge and the tools are the privileged few who are reconstructing the world, redefining it and the means to know it on a so-called global scale.

<div align="center">ONLINE INSTRUCTION: A NEW TYPE OF KNOWLEDGE</div>

Serres stresses that the potential of immediate communication with the entire planet carries "consequences for knowledge and for the human community" which in turn transform our lives.[9] To discuss knowledge, we can no longer rely on the traditional concepts of mind/body or subject/object and on their duality. These terms have changed and so has their relation to each other. For Serres, the meetings in Rio and Kyoto on global warming revealed that a "new collective global subject" is progressively taking form in the face of a "new global natural object" (*RCN*, 17). Originally, objects had a local dimension in space and time, and the distance object-subject was used to define both them and our environment, and thus to structure our knowledge of this same environment. "Held by a subject," Serres explains, "a technical object can act upon [other] objects; all these elements remain in a spatio-temporal sub-ensemble, narrow and relatively stable over time" (*RCN*, 13). This notion of stability in space and time helped define the enduring Medieval concept of object: "*objectus*, what lies at an average distance before the body and its force to aid in our actions and thoughts" (*RCN*, 13). However, nowadays, as this stability is no longer, and the quantity of world-objects has increased, a world order of a new and different nature organizes itself through globalization, and the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object must be re-conceptualized—from a one-directional taking to a process of exchange suggests Serres.[10] Pedagogy then could become a "balanced and equitable exchange" or a "contract of exchange with its environment" (*RCN*, 23). In this exchange, the subject becomes the object "of that which we do not even know that they are objects: if we treat the world as an object, we condemn ourselves [as part of this world] to become, in turn, objects of this object" (*RCN*, 22).

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

The ethical issues emerging around online education point more sharply than ever to an acceleration of science and technology advances which seem to have outpaced both epistemology and ethics. With Boler, I believe that there is a dire necessity for choices to be made and decisions to be taken in the domain of online education in order not to reify previous stereotyped notions, calling more than ever for higher stakes responsibility and a rethinking of the nature of knowledge.

1. Locke's "sensible ideas" prompted in the mind by bodies' secondary properties which act on "sense organs," that is, size, shape, position, motion, or rest.

2. A concept Saint Augustine had already developed in his Neoplatonic philosophy (*Against the Academicians*): you exist, otherwise you would not be doubting.

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University, 1949).

4. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (New Haven: Yale University, 1996).

5. Michel Serres, *Atlas* (Paris: Julliard, 1994), 128.

6. Ibid., 139.

7. Ibid., 137.

8. Ibid., 139.

9. Michel Serres, *Retour au Contrat Naturel* (Paris: Bibliothéque nationale de France, 2000), 16. This text will be cited as *RCN* for all subsequent references.

10. In *Atlas*, Serres describes his theory of the three stages of development linked to the elements: solid, liquid, and gas. The industrial revolution prompted the third one by propagating heat technologies which "accelerated the rise of the local to the global" (*Contrat*, 12), heat of course being the result of molecular agitation and instability. Atomic energy is released by the ultimate instability, with deadly intensity of heat levels, and the potential of global destruction. Serres defined " world-objects" over twenty-five years ago; for example, ballistic missiles, satellites, nuclear wastes, objects whose dimensions, measured by speed and energy, are on a planetary if not universal scale. Internet is another example, measured by distance and velocity.