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Interview

Interview with Professor Stephen J. Ball about ethics of intellectual work

Entrevista com o Professor Stephen J. Ball sobre ética do trabalho intelectual

Entrevista con el profesor Stephen J. Ball sobre la ética del trabajo intelectual

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Stephen J. Ball is a British sociologist of education, recognised worldwide as one of the leading figures in the fields of education policy and the sociology of education. He is Emeritus Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education (IOE), University College London (UCL). Ball's ideas and publications have a strong influence on education policy research in Brazil and Latin America¹, serving as theoretical contributions to research on the process of formulating and enacting education policies, as well as on the impact of neoliberalism, commodification, and privatisation on the configuration of contemporary education systems.

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¹ Regarding Stephen J. Ball's publications in Portuguese, see the collated list organised by Mainardes et al. (2026). In relation to Stephen J. Ball's biography and intellectual trajectory, see the text "What Is It That I Have Become? Some Fragments," published in the "Acquired Wisdom Essay" section of *Education Review* (Ball, 2026).

The question of ethics has been a recurring theme in his most recent work, which addresses, for example, the ethics of intellectual work, the ethics of extinction and continuity, education as an ethical activity, the ethics of errancy, and the ethics of responsibility. Inspired primarily by post-structuralist theories, especially the thought of Michel Foucault, Ball does not treat ethics merely as an abstract code of conduct but as a dynamic arena of dispute, subject formation, and the exercise of power. In this interview, we present some questions about the place of ethics in his research and his views on ethics today.

Jefferson Mainardes (JM): Ethics has been a recurring issue in your most recent work. When did ethics become an important element in your research? What role does ethics play in your work?

Stephen J. Ball (SJB): Ethics, like many other words used in the social sciences, is deployed in different ways for different reasons and purposes. Often it is used so loosely that we cannot make sense or communicate properly. There is, of course, the mundane form of research ethics and the various esoteric philosophical meanings, but my usage derives directly from the work of Michel Foucault. His deployment of ethics has little to do with the formulation of normative codes of behaviour and rather is focused on aesthetical self-formation. This is not a *positive* ethics, not a matter of asserting ideals, but rather an imaginative creativity. This is ethics as a practice rather than a plan, as the kind of relationship you have with yourself.

It is the cultivation of a self that is both a product of and a disruption of various discourses that requires one to practise the art of living well. It is creating a space, and thus a confrontation with power, within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable in a different way – to become other than how you find yourself. It is an attitude and practice of critical cynicism. This is an ontological politics set within and over and against networks of power, truth, modes of subjectification and government. The personal as political, if you like. The opening up of ourselves to different possibilities, to a proliferation of meanings and experiences. It can be a stepping over the limit, a way of seeing the arbitrary in the essential – a realisation of freedoms we already have, those murmurs that speak incessantly through the fissures of power.

This ethics has informed and inflected my work in various ways in recent years, as well as impinging upon my relation to my work and its form and purpose. I have become increasingly distanced from the rational realism of mainstream social science and more and more convinced of the need for epistemological analysis – an analysis which involves us turning back upon ourselves and upon the common sense of social science. I have tried to practise a form of critique that refuses the tropes and mantras of reformism and revolution. I have abandoned certainty, simplicity and coherence in an attempt to problematise the institutions we take for granted and the stances and dispositions we inhabit with such confidence and comfort. All of that is a struggle, a search for some kind of positive and constructive detachment without a resort to abstraction. My focus has always been on the immediate and the practical, and on identifying openings and possibilities. Most recently this has spilled over into a concern for the relations between education, climate change and environmental violence. The point in all of this is both to understand ‘the present’ and to violate it – a form of parrhesia, frank speaking. The will to know is the will to be different, a critical relation to one’s present. In other words, the purpose of critique is to make harder those things that we do too easily without thought, our ‘silent habits’. There is a dynamic interplay here between what it is one does not want to be and what one might become.

In these terms I have also tried to think about Mark Olssen’s idea of the ‘ethics of life continuance’ in relation to education as the formation of a different kind of subject, an ecological

subject, one that is oriented toward common interests and a common fate, a caring for others and for other species with whom we cohabit the world. An ethics of responsibility. This makes ethics very much a practical matter rather than one of abstract philosophical interest. That is, ‘a normative orientation to the future in terms of the quest for survival and well-being’ (Olssen, 2021, p. ix).

I take ethics as a form of politics, as a way of rethinking education itself and our relation as subjects to truth. That is, education as opposed to schooling. Education as oriented to how not to be governed, as a heterotopia, a cultural and discursive space that is somehow “other”: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory and transforming. An education that entails diverse challenges and risks, that is agonistic rather than didactic. I tried to adumbrate this ‘other’ education in *Foucault as Educator* (Ball, 2017) and in *Against School*, written with Jordi Collet-Sabé (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2025). And in the latter, we argue for education as transgression and for a pedagogy of the self, as encouraging an attitude or disposition to critique.

The production of an active rather than a passive subject. The education of the soul. Education, the teacher and pedagogy articulated not as skills and knowledges but as the formation of moral subjectivity and a relation to ethics rather than to truth. Education in these terms is a set of relations, not an institution. Such a counter-imaginary and its practice would need to begin with a different humanity and concomitantly a different form of living and of social relations. This is a form of ethics and a set of techniques of living as a concrete practice of freedom with a focus not on concepts or the abstract or ideal, but on forms, modes and styles of life.

JM: In some publications and conference presentations, you have used the term “ethics of intellectual work”. How do you define the ethics of intellectual work? What does it involve? What are its implications for knowledge production today?

SJB: The ‘ethics of intellectual work’ was a phrase used by Graeme Burchell (1993), drawing on Foucault. The primary concern is to confront the obscure operations of political violence and challenge the limits of our intelligibility. It is part of an ‘attitude’, a perilous act requiring the courage and the ‘will *not to be governed thusly*’. This rests on curiosity, critique and innovation. Foucault talked about addressing things in his work that seemed to me to be ‘cracked’, and that has been the position I have taken in my work – writing ‘against’ rather than ‘for’. A stance and a method. Something like what Foucault called ‘pessimistic activism’. An effort of denaturalisation. An ethics based upon renunciation, exile, homelessness, disengagement – although those terms perhaps exaggerate somewhat, they make the point. So, this raises profound questions for social scientists about what our knowledge is for.

If we face up to those questions, it means acting back against our Enlightenment sensitivities, our un-reflexive commitment to order, reason and its co-conspirator rationality. We must give up on the myths of progress and embrace the analytical value of absurdity and stupidity as ways of thinking about the world and how it works. We need to become weapon smiths, as Foucault put it. This also means questioning our reliance on Western knowledge and recognising that this form of knowledge underpins our modern-colonial ways of being. Recognising that this knowledge was complicit in the determination of certain bodies as dispensable and tradeable. The modern ‘educated’ subject has its philosophical and historical materiality in the patrimony of colonialism. Over and against this, we need to accept that our knowledge, modes of understanding and representational economy are parochial rather than universal. Doing that can begin to open things up and demonstrate our contingency and the ways in which we have been made up by modernity.

This then raises questions about the role and purpose of academic writing, and particularly the importance of writing as self-formation, as critique and as truth-telling. It entails writing outside and against the republic – distanced from and seeking to undo the ready-made paradigms and sensibilities of our discipline. Writing can enable the opening up of ourselves to different possibilities, to a proliferation of meanings and experiences – a rewriting of ourselves and our social relationships and responsibilities, a form of ontological politics – or it can close down those possibilities. Writing in the former sense involves an ethical commitment to what exceeds language and discourse. It can sometimes call upon our moral courage and always our sincerity. Ethical work is a dynamic and continuing activity.

JM: In your view, what are the main issues and challenges concerning the ethics of intellectual work today? What are the implications of artificial intelligence (AI) for reflections on the ethics of intellectual work?

SJB: I think there is a concatenation of factors which impinge upon the ethics of intellectual work. The most obvious are the pressures and effects of changes to the economics and politics of Higher Education (HE). The reform of HE is framed much more fully than ever before within the logic of marketisation, commodification and financialisation. This is a way of being and thinking that saturates the entire field of HE. HE is now immersed directly within the logic, language and practices of the general economy. Universities are in the service of national economies and defined and determined as a saleable product rather than as a public good with a fundamental social and moral purpose.

Research is a fast-fact production line on which all knowledge has its price. We address ourselves to questions derived elsewhere and administered by others. This is substantively changing the social and subjective forms of knowledge, habits and language that make up HE and is part of a general change in the contemporary form of government as applied to HE and other educations. There is a reworking of the experience of the academic that is set within the conceptual framework of performance management and related to the changing forms of space and place in HE. Overworking is normalised. The space for and possibilities of research and writing are changed concomitantly. Our writing is also now distributed across a variety of websites – downloads, reads and citations are recorded and displayed.

There is a profound shift in our relationships to ourselves, our practice, and the possibilities and purposes of writing and research. Disintegration is the logic at work here and is the consequence in one sector of education of the ‘fatal conceit’ of neoliberalism. That is, the colonisation of HE by an economic model that is destroying the social fabric of academia. Opportunities for curiosity, critique and innovation are being closed down or colonised by the necessity of ‘impactful’ research. The opportunities that remain are being confined, ironically perhaps, to elite institutions more sheltered from the vicissitudes of funding. Writing in the income-driven university produces its propositions primarily in relation to the initiatives of government and its multiple tactics. We social scientists become technicians, managers of the population, policy advisers, reformers mired in the ‘policy implications’ of our work, looking for ways to raise levels of performance, close gaps, increase inclusion or boost the economy.

AI plays into all of this in various ways. Most dramatically, as Phil Brown (2024) puts it, AI ‘takes the thinking out of thinking’. Thinking is the heartland of HE and is threatened with redundancy – both for students and academics – the machine will do it for us. Journals now see the need for submitting authors to ‘own up’ to the contributions of AI to their writing. Together, IT hardware and software constitute a material environment that has produced a new configuration

of the experience of the self in HE. Much social interaction in HE is now focused on or intermediated by digital technologies and, increasingly, AI is reworking the ontological conditions in which human development and intellectual activity take place.

AI also functions to produce conditions of pace compression, in which the space for reflection, hesitation, and relational judgement is closed down. The computer, various software and, increasingly, AI bots become our most significant work companions. We suffer a loss of joy and experience loneliness and gloomy isolation. The stimulation of debate, disagreement and social exchange is being replaced by AI answers and prepared text. The originality of academic writing becomes muddled or blurred by statistical modelling and the clichés of AI writing. And in all of this it is the metrics of publication that ‘count’; not what we have to say but how many people download it. Substance is irrelevant. Agency, creativity and autonomy are discarded as the scholar becomes part of the collective consciousness of a data-generating machinery. The author is disappearing while authorship is proliferating. One sort of romance about being an academic is no longer available in neoliberal universities.

I was reading recently an article by the philosopher John Gray (2026), who wrote about AI leading to the immiseration of the ‘knowledge classes’ – an impact akin to that of farm machinery on the lives of farm labourers in the 19th century. ‘Would you want your child to become a university lecturer?’ he asks.

JM: How do you define the ethics of extinction and the ethics of continuance, mentioned in the chapter “The School Is Irredeemable: Proposing Discomfort for a Different Future for Education” (Collet-Sabé & Ball, 2024)?

SJB: In each case, these systems of ethics (extinction and continuance) articulate a relation to oneself, to others and to the planet. More generally, a relation between the individual and the future of humanity. At school and elsewhere, *the ethics of extinction* is fostered and made common sense and inescapable; in this, the relation to oneself is articulated as restlessly individualistic and acquisitive; the relation to others is competitive and comparative; and the relation to the environment rests on ignorance (or ignoring or complacency), and on consumption, waste and unfettered growth. In contrast, *the ethics of life continuance* begins with a recognition of interdependency, shared problems and fate and the value of diversity, diverse knowledges and relations of tolerance. The question posed and answered in each case is ‘How are we to live?’ Literally. And in each case the answer is different. The former rests primarily on self-interest and interest maximisation as the core drivers of human behaviour and relationships – *homo economicus*.

This was captured perfectly in an often-repeated quotation from Margaret Thatcher; she said, ‘There is no such thing as society, just individuals and families’. This divorces individual decision-making from any sense of shared purpose or global public interest. Mark Olssen’s idea of life continuance is about going beyond universalism to consider contingency and cultural difference as important contextual considerations. Rather than a competition between my education and well-being and those of others, this other form of ethics requires practices of cooperation and mutual care and respect. These different forms of ethics, as practices, establish contrasts between individualism and connectedness, accumulation and well-being, inclusion and segregation, life and death.

In terms of a relation to the planet and to the environment, the modern school produces *unsustainable subjects*; subjects who are actively involved in processes and practices which diminish Earth’s biodiversity and contribute to climate change. In producing these individualised,

competitive, entrepreneurial subjects, the school produces students who are against the world rather than ‘in’ or ‘of’ it, and students who think ‘for/of’ themselves rather than ‘for’ others and ‘for’ the planet. Subjects that are the praxis of extinction; defining and relating to nature as infinitely exploitable.

JM: In this chapter, you and Collet-Sabé propose another model of education — that is, an education understood as “self-formation, as the care of self, others, and the world as a political activity more related to ethics than to truth”. Could you elaborate on this idea?

SJB: Jordi and I set out to propose a form of education that might contribute to fostering the ethics of life continuance and produce ecological subjects. That is, the care of the self as an onto-epistemological recognition of ourselves as part of a social and ecological collectivity. Self-formation assumes the open-endedness of the future as a project and freedom as a process of struggle. The locus of action is the unfathomability of the subject. Freedom is the capacity and opportunity to participate in one’s self-formation, and ethics is the practice of this capacity in relation to oneself and others; a ‘politics of the self’; a continuous practice of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside, what Foucault calls ‘reflective indocility’.

We begin with the idea of a critical learnership focused on *repoliticising* reality and learning and practising the care of oneself, others and the environment. A kind of unlearning, an address to mistakes, individual and collective, and to life problems, rather than any kind of training or formal curriculum. Not describing the world but changing it. Not learning ‘about’ but learning ‘to be’. An education focused on the aesthetics of living, life as a work of art, and processes of co-learning, decision-taking, limit-testing, and conflict resolution in real contexts in relation to actual problems, portending an uncertain future and our extinction. Here education is neither oriented to the celebration of the past nor a means toward a future of ineluctable growth.

This is an active engagement with various impossible futures. Justen Infinito (2003) and Frank Pignatelli (2002) provide some examples of what such a ‘pedagogy’ might look like in practice. We might also draw from Amartya Sen’s capabilities and *functionings* and John Dewey’s idea that curricula should centre on authentic, complex challenges mirroring actual life situations in which students must analyse, test, and process their direct experiences in order to turn raw action into meaningful knowledge. An active, hands-on interaction with the environment.

This would involve an intensification of social relations, care for others as part of the care of the self and the care of the self as part of taking care of others. This is not simply a matter of what to do but also, crucially, what to be. The construction of a political and social framework in which modern subjects attend to the way they live with others, in the world; an empathetic positioning. This would require us to transgress the limits of the modern episteme and imagine an education for the constitution of ‘planetary citizens’. Which would mean relinquishing our exceptionalism as humans, no longer seeing ourselves as *apart from* but rather as *part of* the natural world and engaging with and making creative responses to ecological crises.

JM: In several countries, ethical review processes are strongly based on the principles of biomedical research. As a result, researchers in the Humanities and Social Sciences have sometimes distanced themselves from ethical issues. In your view, what is the role of research ethics in the Humanities and Social Sciences? What is the relationship between ethics, ontology, and epistemology?

SJB: As unquestioning Enlightenment subjects, we submit ourselves to the certainties of science and scientific practice, even if some scientists are not so certain. Ethical guidelines do tend to be modelled on those of science and, as technologies of control, those guidelines become performative and pre-emptive. What I mean is that we all too often recognise the many gaps between guidelines and real-world ethical problems but fill in the forms anyway, in order to get the funding. We are in effect discouraged from engaging in ethical reflection and just tick the boxes. The bureaucracy of ethical approval acts on behalf of the researcher and the researched to define their roles and needs and defend 'rights' which are determined elsewhere. Once approval is obtained, the research 'is' ethical as long as the guidelines are adhered to. But such guidelines do not ask for whom the researcher speaks or their position in relation to the communities they study.

The research relationship is a power relation of some sort, often but not always to the advantage of the researcher. Such guidelines certainly do not consider the authority of the researcher's text, the forms of representation adopted, the language used, the assumptions of universality that are brought to bear. As researchers, we assert our epistemological privilege, drawing on the knowledge culture of our discipline to 'know' and 'understand' and 'explain' the researched. We rarely consider the possibility that our ontology and the distinctions upon which it rests may be an inadequate basis for such understanding. Indeed, without some kind of radical reflexivity that opens our ontological practice to question, it may be that we are incapable of understanding or even glimpsing something different from us and instead impose our world on the worlds of others – an ontological disenfranchisement.

JM: Many thanks, Professor Ball.

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