Living with Existential Self-Doubt

Mordechai Gordon
Quinnipiac University

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's essay "Cezanne's Doubt" provides the reader a glimpse of what it must have been like for an artist to live one's life consumed with existential self-doubt. According to Merleau-Ponty, Paul Cezanne, the nineteenth-century French painter, spent about one hundred working sessions on each still life and one hundred fifty on a portrait:

> Painting was his world and his mode of existence. He worked alone without students, without admiration from his family, without encouragement from the critics. He painted on the afternoon of the day that his mother died. In 1870 he was painting at l'Estaque while the police were after him for dodging the draft. And still he had moments of doubt about this vocation.[1]

Merleau-Ponty goes on to describe how as Cezanne grew older: he began to wonder whether the novelty of his landscapes was due to the trouble he was experiencing with his eyesight and whether his passion for painting was actually tainted by this physical misfortune. Merleau-Ponty's account of the French painter analyzes the origins and the circumstances of Cezanne's existential uncertainty as well as what it was like to constantly confront it.

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of Cezanne's uncertainty, this essay explores what it means to live with existential self-doubt and how such doubt emerges in educational encounters. I begin my exploration of the phenomenon of self-doubt by revisiting the epistemic self-doubt displayed by Socrates and René Descartes. Then, I turn to an analysis of the type of existential self-doubt that Cezanne embodied while comparing it to epistemic doubt. Based on Cezanne's example, the case of the poet Rilke, as well as my own experience, I then describe what it means to live with existential doubt. In

the final part of this essay, I draw on the examples of some veteran teachers in order to envision how educators might approach the challenge of living with existential self-doubt.

EPISTEMIC SELF-DOUBT

Following Sherrylin Roush, I am using the term epistemic self-doubt to refer to "the special case where what we doubt is our ability to achieve an epistemically favorable state, for example, to achieve true beliefs."[2] Epistemic self-doubt occurs when we question the certainty of our opinions and the foundation of our knowledge claims. Given that human beings are fallible, it is natural to doubt both one's own beliefs and that of other humans. If we take Socrates at his word, we hear over and over the proposition that he did not know the answers to his most important questions. Roush writes that Socrates

> believed he did not have the answers, or the right kind of grasp of answers, that would be required for knowledge of what, for example, piety, virtue, and justice are. This recognition led him to avoid endorsing or believing particular answers to his questions, and motivated him to go around town asking others for their answers and making awkward observations about their replies.[3]

Take for instance the dialogue *Meno* in which Socrates has a spirited debate with Meno about the nature of virtue and in particular about the question whether virtue can be taught. Meno, a wealthy young nobleman, approaches Socrates and asks him the following questions: "Can you tell me, Socrates — can virtue be taught? Or if not, does it come by practice? Or does it come neither by practice nor by teaching, but do people get it by nature, or in some other way?" When Socrates hears these questions, he immediately stops Meno and says to him something like this: "Wait a minute, my dear Meno, how can I talk about whether virtue can or cannot be taught, when I don't even know what virtue is!"[4] In other words, Socrates is wondering: how can I talk about the qualities or attributes of something without first defining it, that is, before having a fairly clear understanding of what this concept means? In this interaction with Meno,

as in many other dialogues of Plato, Socrates is exhibiting epistemic self-doubt — an uncertainty about his own beliefs and lack of confidence in particular answers of his interlocutors.

While Socrates' mode of self-doubt was aimed at examining specific questions about which he was perplexed, he left open the possibility that he could eventually find answers to those questions, in part because his doubt was not directed at his faculties for gaining knowledge like rational thinking and sense perception. Other instances of epistemic uncertainty are more extreme. Thus, Descartes opens his *Meditations on First Philosophy* by asserting that, in order to alleviate his lingering epistemic doubt, he needed to "raze everything in my life, down to the very bottom, so as to begin again from the first foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences."[5] From that point, Descartes begins to question everything that he had previously considered true, starting from all of his opinions and then moving to objects that he perceives through his senses, since he acknowledged that the senses sometimes deceive us or we might actually be dreaming when we think that we are awake.

Yet, Descartes' epistemic uncertainty did not cease after doubting all of his prior beliefs and the ideas that he derived from sense perception. In fact, his assumption that he could be sleeping while believing that he was awake led him to question whether or not he even had a body including hands, a head, and eyes. Later in the first meditation, Descartes entertained the possibility that there exists an omnipotent God that is able to deceive us about all of our scientific and mathematical truths. This realization prompted Descartes to question the existence of the earth and space and even the fact that two plus three equals five. Not being able to refute the possibility that God is at once omnipotent and deceitful, he was forced to admit that

> there is nothing, among the things I once believed to be true, which is not permissible to doubt — not for reasons of frivolity or a lack of forethought, but because of valid and considered arguments. Thus I must carefully withhold assent no less from these things than from the patently false, if I wish to find anything certain.[6]

In his essay "The Concept of Philosophical Education," Steiner Boyum shows that Descartes' extreme epistemic uncertainty did not just happen abruptly and that years before the *Meditations* was published, he was already consumed by self-doubt. For instance, in *Discourse on Method*, Descartes wrote that "I was assailed by so many doubts and errors that the only profit I appeared to have drawn from trying to become educated, was progressively to have discovered my ignorance."[7] Citing from the *Discourse*, Boyum notes that Descartes' "long-lasting doubt does not take place in seclusion, 'shut up in the stove-heated room,' nor in studying books or conversing with 'men of letters,' but in 'frequenting other men' and 'wander[ing] here and there in the world.'"[8] The insight that he reached alone in front of the fire — *cogito ergo sum* — was a result of nine years of wandering the world and interacting with others.

Ultimately, it may be the case that Descartes' extreme epistemic doubt is untenable and self-defeating. This is precisely the argument that David Alexander is making about Descartes' epistemic skepticism, which he defines as skepticism regarding what one is justified in believing. For Alexander, what we are justified in believing depends on the strength of our epistemic positions, namely, the quality of our arguments. As a result,

> a Cartesian who is skeptical about his mental states ought to be equally skeptical about what he is justified in believing. This means he is forced to abandon the central Cartesian claim that he is *not* justified in believing claims about the external world. Cartesian skepticism is thus self-defeating.[9]

Alexander's point is that extreme epistemic skepticism or self-doubt is an untenable position, since the assumption that we *cannot* believe claims about the external world is equally suspect as the inverse view. Still, Boyum is correct in pointing out that the educational value of Cartesian self-doubt is that "we should all, from time to time, rethink the contents of our mind in order to establish anew the ground on which to build, freeing ourselves from tradition and authority in order to gain true independence and ultimate responsibility."[10]

EXISTENTIAL SELF-DOUBT

The term existential self-doubt is used here to refer to the type of un-
certainty that tormented the artist Cezanne who spent his entire life painting,
yet still doubted that he was meant to be a painter. Existential self-doubt is the
uncertainty that one experiences when one doubts one's calling as a human be-
ing, that is, the projects one has chosen for oneself, one's present vocation and
future goals. Merleau-Ponty concluded his account of Cezanne by noting that

> nine days out of ten all he saw around himself was
> the wretchedness of his empirical life and of his unsuccessful
> attempts, the leftovers of an unknown party. Yet it was in the
> world that he had to realize his freedom, with colors upon a
> canvas. It was from approval of others that he had to await
> the proof of his worth. That is the reason he questioned the
> picture emerging beneath his hand, why he hung on the glances
> of other people directed toward his canvas. That is the reason
> he never finished working.[11]

On this view, existential self-doubt emerges from our interaction with
the world, our longing to leave a stamp on this world, the failures we experience
in bringing a project to completion, and our dependence on the approval of
others to feel worthy.

In the case of Cezanne, we might be tempted to account for his exis-
tential self-doubt by appealing to his fits of temper and depression. However,
Merleau-Ponty insists that "Cezanne's uncertainty and solitude are not essentially
explained by his nervous temperament but by the purpose of his work."[12] To
be sure, heredity may have given Cezanne strong emotions, and he struggled
throughout his life with anxiety and anger. Yet, as Merleau-Ponty points out,
such emotions in themselves cannot create a work of art; nor do they have
much bearing on how to overcome the struggles one inevitably faces when
engaged in the act of creating. For Merleau-Ponty, existential self-doubt arises
not from a negative emotion, but from the realization that human beings are
often powerless to construct and change the world in the way that they would

want. Cezanne's existential self-doubt emerged from his awareness that great-ness comes not by simply creating an idea on a canvas, but by awakening the consciousness of others to that idea in a way that is impactful.

Based on Merleau-Ponty's depiction of Cezanne, what is at stake in existential self-doubt is not uncertainty about the ordinary problems or deci-sions that we encounter every day, but rather about those deep questions and predicaments that touch the core of our being. That is, existential self-doubt arises when we call into question *who* and *what* we are as human beings. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger refers to this type of existential uncertainty as "the indefiniteness of one's potentiality-for-Being,"[13] suggesting that the self-doubt arises from the fact that our future possibilities are always open and cannot be determined in advance. For Heidegger, existential self-doubt is an essential part of being human, since human beings are striving to live their lives authentically yet often falling short and calling into question the path that they have chosen for themselves.

At this point, we can begin to make sense of the differences between epistemic and existential self-doubt. Epistemic self-doubt arises when we are uncertain about specific opinions and ideas (Socrates) or about the entire foun-dation of our beliefs and knowledge claims (Descartes). It can be narrower or broader in scope, as the examples of Socrates and Descartes illustrate, but it always pertains to doubts about the firmness of our knowledge. As such, epis-temic self-doubt can be at least partially alleviated if we discover irrefutable evidence to support our opinions or when we establish a stable foundation of knowledge that can no longer be questioned. In contrast, existential self-doubt involves doubting not what we believe or know, but our vocation in life, that is, what we are called to do or be. As the case of Cezanne illustrates, existential uncertainty arises in the course of pursuing our vocational projects and when we realize that others may not view the products of our creation in the same way we do.

To be perfectly clear, my analysis is *not* meant to suggest that epistemic and existential self-doubt are mutually exclusive or unrelated modes of uncertainty. In fact, I suspect that Descartes' extreme form of epistemic uncertainty included

some existential self-doubt, since one who for years engages in questioning all of one's prior beliefs is also doubting one's ability to think coherently and make cogent arguments (i.e., Descartes' vocation). Nonetheless, the distinction I am making between epistemic and existential self-doubt is designed to highlight the point that each mode of uncertainty is aimed at something different. The former is directed at what we presume to know while the latter focuses on who we are and how we define our existence in the world. Moreover, while epistemic self-doubt can be eased when we discover new information and evidence, existential uncertainty is not something that can be alleviated by discovering more data or fresh ideas. As the example of Cezanne shows, existential self-doubt can only be *managed* or *lived with* rather than resolved by continuing to pursue our vocations and working to complete our projects.

LIVING WITH EXISTENTIAL SELF-DOUBT

So, what does it mean to manage or live with existential self-doubt? Once again, the example of Cezanne as portrayed by Merleau-Ponty is instructive. In his essay, Merleau-Ponty notes that the painter's childhood friend, the writer Emile Zola, was one of the first to recognize Cezanne's talent and refer to him as a "genius gone wrong."[14] In 1852, Cezanne entered the College of Bourbon at Aix to study painting, but he was uncertain for a long time that he could actually be a painter. Merleau-Ponty writes that,

> seven years later, having decided to become an artist, he doubted his talent and did not dare to ask his father — a hatter and later a banker — to send him to Paris. Zola's letters reproach him for his instability, his weakness, and his indecision. When finally he came to Paris, he wrote: "The only thing I have changed is my location: my ennui has followed me."[15]

Later, according to Merleau-Ponty, after settling in Paris in 1859, Cezanne's life was turbulent, periodically characterized by violent, tormented, and overwhelming passions that no one could make sense of or predict. At age fifty-one, Cezanne withdrew to Aix, returning to the world of his mother and sister because he believed that landscape was best suited to his genius; yet he

would often say that "life is terrifying" and refuse to associate with his friends. Toward the end of Cezanne's life, "after his pictures had begun to sell in Paris at twice the price of Monet's and when young men like Joachim Gasquet and Emile Bernard came to see him and ask him questions, he unbent a little. But his fits of anger continued."[16] Thus, in Cezanne's case, it is clear that he never *overcame* or *resolved* his existential self-doubts. Perhaps, as he grew older, Cezanne learned to better tolerate or manage his insecurities and uncertainties yet, as Merleau-Ponty insists, they were always part of him.

Cezanne's ongoing struggle to cope with his doubts is certainly not the only way to live with existential self-doubt. Other artists have approached their uncertainties differently. Take, for instance, the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who at the beginning of the twentieth century published his *Letters to a Young Poet* in response to a series of letters he received from a nineteen-year-old military student named Franz Kappus. In one of the letters in this collection, Rilke wrote:

> Have patience with everything unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, far in the future, you will gradually without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.[17]

Rilke wrote this letter and the others included in this collection during a major turning point in his professional and personal life. Professionally, he was beginning to move away from the early pieces that, according to Mitchell, were "too easy, too harmonious and self-indulgent, at their core,"[18] to poems that were much more powerful and mature. In his personal life, there was the failure of his marriage to Clara Westhoff in 1901 and the subsequent birth of their child. Not long before he wrote the first letter to Kappus, Rilke abandoned the two in favor of the solitude that the creative life necessitated for him. Hence, when Rilke was writing the letters to Kappus, exhorting him to embrace his doubts,

he must have been reflecting on his own experiences, dilemmas, and decisions. Baer echoes this view when he asserts that *Letters to a Young Poet* was written "during a period when Rilke was still searching for his way as a poet and had barely begun to live the life that would lend his correspondence its poignancy, intensity, and weight."[19] Hence, much of the advice that he shared with Kappus — regarding the need to be patient and embrace one's insecurities about one's true calling — point to issues with which Rilke himself was grappling.

Unlike Cezanne who often struggled to manage his existential insecurities and lashed out at others, Rilke's approach involved trying to accept our doubts, confusions, and uncertainties as integral parts of who we are. Since human existence, he held, is mysterious and inexplicable, there is no way to avoid facing uncertainty and self-doubt during our lives. In his letter, Rilke called on Kappus to embrace his doubts as conditions that are valuable in themselves, which need to be cherished and protected. Our questions and doubts are valuable experiences because facing them can often lead us to develop intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Rilke's point is, therefore, to cherish and celebrate those moments in our lives that are perplexing or even incomprehensible just as much as we do the clear and coherent ones. In contrast to Cezanne who needed to exert much effort to resist his lingering self-doubt, Rilke approached his uncertainties less antagonistically, as an existential challenge that ought to be embraced.

The comparison of Rilke's and Cezanne's approaches to living with self-doubt is not meant to suggest an either/or dichotomy, as though one needs to choose between embracing and resisting uncertainty. In fact, I have exhibited *both* types of responses to self-doubt when writing most of my books. During some moments of self-doubt, I immersed myself obsessively in the writing, working seven days a week for months and months (à la Cezanne). At other moments, I tried to ignore the insecurities with the hope that they would go away or subside. Occasionally, it helped to recall Rilke's counsel to "have patience with everything unsolved in your heart" and trust that if I work steadily, step-by-step, the project will eventually turn out well. The challenge I face when writing a book is that I usually start with only a vague notion of how the project will develop and what it will include when completed. That

is a disconcerting place to inhabit, one accompanied by plenty of existential self-doubt and questions regarding whether I can create a worthy project and whether others will appreciate it. Taken together, the experiences of Cezanne and Rilke as well as my own suggest that there are several ways of living with existential self-doubt when engaged in creative activity.

TEACHING WITH EXISTENTIAL SELF-DOUBT

Existential uncertainty plays a major role not only in creative activity but in educational encounters. To conclude this essay, I highlight the lessons that can be gleaned from two veteran teachers who experienced self-doubt in their work. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer vividly describes how, as a veteran teacher, he still confronts existential doubt:

> Not long before I started this book, a summer took a slow turn toward fall, I walked into a college classroom and into my third decade of teaching. I went to class that day grateful for another chance to teach… But I came home that evening convinced once again that I will never master this baffling vocation. Annoyed with some of my students and embarrassed by my own blunders, I pondered a recurring question: Might it be possible, at my age, to find a new line of work, maybe even something I know how to do?[20]

Palmer goes on to portray the dynamics of the two sections of classes he taught that day, which prompted his existential self-doubt. The first group of students were silent as monks and, despite his shameless pleading, he could not get them to talk. Palmer writes that "I soon found myself sinking into one of my oldest phobias: I must be very boring to anesthetize, so quickly, these young people who only moments earlier had been alive with hallway chatter."[21] The students in Palmer's second section were livelier, but their conversations quickly turned into conflict as one student reproached another for having trivial concerns. Palmer tried to hide his irritation and urged open listening, but at that point the damage had been done and the dialogue died down. The fact that the conversation in his second class ended prematurely sank Palmer into another

existential angst: "how awkward am I at dealing with conflict when my students decide to start talking!"[22]

Contemplating the dynamics of these two classes, Palmer observed that despite his years of experience teaching thousands of students, attending numerous seminars, watching others teach, reading books and articles about good education, and reflecting on his own teaching, when he walks into the classroom the possibility that existential self-doubt will intrude is always present. Palmer notes that "after three decades of trying to learn my craft, every class comes down to this: my students and I, face to face, engaged in an ancient and exacting exchange called education."[23] He emphasizes that when he walks into a new class, the techniques he has acquired over the years do not disappear, but neither are they sufficient to guide him in awkward situations like the two described above. Face to face with his new students, his existential self-doubts emerged since he realized that neither techniques nor experience could rescue him, and that the only genuine response is to approach such encounters with integrity and his authentic self.

Jane Tompkins' memoir, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*, provides another example of a teacher who experienced existential self-doubt. In her book, Tompkins vividly describes the pleasures and pains of a unique teaching experience that she had with fifteen graduate and undergraduate students. Struggling with teaching throughout her career, especially with the fears that it evoked in her, Tompkins had gradually come to relax more and trust herself as a teacher. This particular course was experimental, purposefully designed by Tompkins with very few boundaries for the students and a great deal of personal involvement, risk-taking, and creativity:

> The name of the course was American Literature Unbound, and the idea was that we would use the texts we read, *Moby-Dick* and *Beloved*, to wallow in and be drenched by their beauty and profundity… The books were to be used as avenues into the world, rather than a retreat from it. The books would lead us into all kinds of experiences, especially sensory, imaginative, and emotional experiences — the kinds

that usually get left out in school.[24]

For Tompkins, this course was the best one she had ever taught; it fulfilled all of her dreams about what good teaching and learning was all about. The shock came to her on the last two days of the semester, when the students shared their evaluations of the course. Tompkins expected the students to celebrate, to express their joy and gratitude for the privilege of taking part in this unique learning experience. Instead, what she got was criticism:

> Lack of structure, said New York Sarah; unfocused discussions, said Hilary; too much time spent planning and arranging things, said Bernard; too much time spent talking about evaluation, said two or three others; not enough disagreement, said someone else; it was utopian to think we could become a real community, said Sonya.[25]

Understandably, the criticism devastated Tompkins and left her with genuine doubts on whether the students were talking about the same course that for her had been such an intense emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience…

Most teachers that I know or have read about have experienced moments with their students that resemble the ones that Palmer and Tompkins lived through, moments that triggered our existential self-doubts and moved us to question whether we will ever master this highly complex, nuanced profession. The fact that educational encounters are full of unexpected occurrences, confusions, and uncertainties ensures that existential self-doubt is always lingering in plain sight or just below the surface. Yet, like the painter Cezanne who struggled his entire life with self-doubt, teachers would benefit from learning how to manage or cope with their existential uncertainties rather than trying to suppress them. And like Rilke, instead of working to overcome their self-doubts, teachers would be better served by striving to embrace them as an integral part of who they are.

---

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," in *Sense and Non-Sense* (Evanston: IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9.

2 Sherrylin Roush, Epistemic Self-Doubt in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/epistemic-self-doubt/.

3 Roush, Epistemic Self-Doubt.

4 See the dialogue Meno in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), 28-29.

5 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 13.

6 Descartes, *Meditations*, 15-16.

7 René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Other Writings*, trans. F.E. Sutcliffe (Penguin, 1968), 29.

8 Steiner Boyum, "The Concept of Philosophical Education," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 5 (2010): 552.

9 David Alexander, "Unreasonable Cartesian Doubt," *Philosophia* 45 (2017): 504.

10 Boyum, "The Concept of Philosophical Education," 553.

11 Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," 25.

12 Merleau-Ponty, 19.

13 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 356.

14 Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt," 9.

15 Merleau-Ponty, 10.

16 Merleau-Ponty, 10.

17 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1984), 34—35.

18 Stephen Mitchell, "Foreword," in Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, ix—x.

19 Ulrich Baer, "Introduction," in Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Poet's Guide to Life: The Wisdom of Rilke*, ed. and trans. Ulrich Baer (New York: Modern Library, 2005), xi—xii.

20 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco, CA:
Jossey-Bass, 1998), 9.

21 Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 9.

22 Palmer, 10.

23 Palmer, 10.

24 Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1996), 164.

25 Tompkins, *A Life in School*, 176.