

## Kierkegaard or Sisyphus? Education's Meliorative Despair

Kip Kline  
*Lewis University*

Cornel West has said that the best kind of education is one in which a student realizes that his or her “worldview rests on pudding.”<sup>1</sup> He is also fond of describing the same notion as a necessary and good kind of “unhousing” of parochial beliefs. This seems to be related to what Peter Roberts has in mind in his description and defense of despair’s role in education. He says, “Education promotes not greater certainty but greater doubt — and with doubt can come despair.” Roberts’s essay, “Education, Faith, and Despair: Wrestling with Kierkegaard,” successfully examines this seminal notion of Kierkegaard’s in light of philosophical thought in education. That there is some kind of relationship between education and despair that is worthy of exploration is made clear through the essay. Ultimately, Roberts makes three arguments related to despair and education: (1) Contrary to a common belief, despair is not a problem requiring a solution. (2) Education, rather than assisting us in averting despair, can be a force that deepens it. And (3) this is not a reason to avoid education. On the contrary, it provides an impetus for pursuing education all the more.

Roberts suggests that the despair associated with education is a kind of despairing of the self. He says, “In becoming educated, it is expected that we will come to question much that was hitherto taken for granted, such that we will never be the same again. Education renders the world problematic; it treats not only the objects to be known but knowers themselves as subjects for investigation,” and later he asks, “What ... is at risk when we submit ourselves to the process of education? It is, as Kierkegaard recognized, *ourselves*.” In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard states, “The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.” The idea here is that the self comes onto the scene as an activity of relation. We might say that the self is not so much a thing, but an action. When there is an imbalance in this activity, we experience despair. And this imbalance (here I am taking the liberty of steering around God or “the power which posited” the self as Roberts and Michael Theunissen claim is permissible) refers either to desire for too much finitude or desire for too much infinitude. As Theunissen describes,

We do not want to be what we are as human beings who are defined by both necessity and finitude as well as possibility and infinitude, and we want to be what we are not, that is, a pure possibility and infinitude, which in its purity is inhuman, or a pure necessity and finitude, which alienates us from our being human.<sup>2</sup>

Roberts says that there is a sense in which “we risk it all” in the educative process because “we can never go back” to not knowing what we now know about the world and about ourselves. “Our despair resides, then, in the imprisonment we face as hostages to our own memories, our own heightened awareness of injustices that were hitherto obscured for us, our own minds full of accumulated knowledge,” he claims. Perhaps this is related to our not wanting to be ourselves in that awareness of

injustice and newly accumulated knowledge leave us with a distaste for the facticity that truncates our responses to the world's problems that we become clear-eyed about through education; and also for the transcendence that burdens us with the possibility of acquiring the knowledge in the first place. The despair of not wanting to be ourselves becomes so enveloping that Theunissen claims, "we do not even begin to want to accept ourselves," and that all Kierkegaardian despair is the despair of wanting to be *rid* of ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

But it might be possible that this is going a bit too far for Roberts's educational despair. The despair that education brings through the accumulation of doubt is valuable and productive according to Roberts and this must mean that it cannot ultimately center on wanting to be rid of ourselves. The kind of despair education produces, for Roberts, is generative in two ways. First, it provides us with a kind of coping mechanism. Education may be risky because it opens us to an existence of perpetual unease, but it also offers compensation in the form of a way to navigate the despair into which it leads us. Roberts says that in addition to creating or deepening despair, "education also allows us to *work with* our despair in new ways. Education can assist us in understanding the despair we experience, allowing us to identify, consider, and discuss its different forms." Education works both to deepen our despair *and* help us embrace and manage it. Second, it provides us with the capacity to distinguish between *addressing* problems and completely *solving* them. Roberts uses the notion of commitment to illustrate this. We educated humans may be despairing, but this does not preclude us from engaging in forms of commitment. He says, "Commitment does not overcome despair; it responds to it and in this respect addresses it. We can address a problem without having to 'solve' it, recognizing that through the act of addressing the problem, it may be transformed, creating further problems to be addressed." This, then, is liberatory in the sense that we disabuse ourselves of the desire to "seek constant 'doses' of commodified happiness, often marketed to us as a necessary tonic in an otherwise unbearable world."

Finally, in Roberts's version of despair associated with education, we do take a leap of faith, though it is quite different than Kierkegaard's. For Kierkegaard, the constant repetition of an avowal of faith in the power that posited the self is constitutive of such a leap. For Roberts, the leap is more Sisyphean in that it is constituted by "going on" in the face of defeat and absurdity. This "going on" can be understood as a kind of hope; not the pie-in-the-sky version of hope, but something more like what West calls an "earned hope" or a "blood-stained hope" that sits in contrast to blind optimism. Roberts claims that this is what allows us to see despair that comes through education not as something to be avoided, but as something to pursue. In so doing, we can understand the relationship between despair and joy and experience both more fully.

Exploring the relationship between despair and education has merit exclusive of an evaluation of particular conclusions about that relationship. This is an important discussion. Yet, while I am sympathetic to Roberts's conclusions and his version educational despair, I am somewhat troubled by claims made along the way. If we go back to the originary scene of Roberts's educational despair, we see a human

being “risking it all” in the process of becoming educated. She will “never be the same again.” On its face, this may resonate with those of us whose vision of education centers on the development of critical faculties and the capacity to accumulate knowledge of and reflect on complex problems in the world. But, I think this may be overstating the case. Most of us who have spent at least some amount of time working with graduate students have likely experienced the phenomenon of a student who begins down the path of developing a more sophisticated worldview and critical facility, only to at some point be exposed to new ideas that are so challenging and overwhelming that the student retreats back into her or his parochial cocoon. Perhaps Roberts might say that this person has not really experienced *education*, but I think many of us have witnessed students who have actually accumulated new knowledge, developed critiques of the status quo, and then decided that the stakes were too high to continue on in that direction. This suggests that one *can* be the same again after education, or at least return to a safer and more familiar place.

In an essay about Kierkegaard’s despair, the differences between Kierkegaard’s concept and the author’s are noteworthy. I am more than sympathetic to the notion that one need not take up Kierkegaard’s commitment to faith in God in order to appropriately use his ideas. One can certainly understand despair outside of Kierkegaard’s religious context — the despairing self is possible without God. But what exactly does Roberts’s despairing self have in common with Kierkegaard’s? As mentioned, it does not seem to be the wanting to be rid of one’s self, which is the linchpin of Kierkegaard’s self in despair. Roberts’s despairing self continues to pursue educational despair for the benefits it provides. It turns out that despair is meliorative. Without it, we end up falling for cheap antidotes to our problems and sufferings. With it, we press on like Sisyphus, willing to commit ourselves to noble ends even though we never reach them. It also helps us to not confuse our *inability* to fully solve problems in the world with our *ability* to address them. Roberts’s version of despair, I think, is apt and helpful for education. Anyone who has worked in the field for any length of time understands that policies in education more often than not reflect the perception that problems can be easily and summarily solved without fully exploring their depths. It is for this reason that Roberts’s notion of despair in education is attractive and useful. I am, however, not convinced that it needs Kierkegaard.

---

1. Cornel West, “Cornel West’s Opening Remarks,” Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum, 2000, [http://old.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/fforum/2000/speeches/west\\_00.html](http://old.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/fforum/2000/speeches/west_00.html).

2. Michael Theunissen, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Despair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18–19.

3. *Ibid.*, 20.