

# Teachers' Existential Self-Doubt as a Form of Epistemic Self-Doubt

Fran Fairbairn

*Colgate University*

Mordechai Gordon's essay considers two central notions — epistemic self-doubt and existential self-doubt — and identifies an instance of the latter which occurs specifically for educators. I will use Gordon's framing to draw out interesting relationships between epistemic and existential self-doubt that help further analyze the interesting teacher-case that Gordon brings attention to. I'll begin by offering further analysis of the two central cases of epistemic self-doubt offered by Gordon and offering some further, distinct cases. I will then present some ways in which epistemic and existential self-doubt might be importantly related. Finally, I will suggest that the cases I have offered can help illuminate a way of further understanding Gordon's teacher-case, which makes it an essentially epistemic kind of existential self-doubt. I hope that this further analysis will help develop Gordon's analysis by exposing some ways in which existential self-doubt experienced by teachers *qua teachers* can be distinctive.

Gordon adopts Sherrylin Roush's understanding of epistemic self-doubt as "the special case where what we doubt is our ability to achieve an epistemically favorable state, for example, to achieve true belief."<sup>1</sup> The self-doubt exemplified by Socrates in the Meno is a form of epistemic self-doubt, which involves doubt regarding the truth of one's beliefs. In this example, Meno asks Socrates to explain whether virtue can be taught, and Socrates responds by saying "how can I talk about whether virtue can or cannot be taught, when I don't even know what virtue is?"<sup>2</sup> It is suggested that this case (and others) shows Socrates' lack of confidence in his abilities to answer his own questions along with an "uncertainty about his own beliefs and lack of confidence in particular answers of his interlocutors."<sup>3</sup>

I'd like to make two suggestions here. First, I'd like to suggest that

doubting one's ability to answer one's own questions is interestingly distinct from doubting the truth of one's beliefs. The core of the Socrates case appears to be an assumption about what the appropriate order of explanation is for answering certain questions. In the case of virtue, it is necessary to work out what it is before one can work out how to instill it. For sure, Socrates is skeptical of his ability to answer these questions, but that kind of doubt seems distinct from a lack of confidence in the truth of one's beliefs. For example, one might exhibit the latter without there being any relevant question-asking context. This might seem like a trivial difference, but I'd suggest that, in contrast with doubt regarding the truth of one's beliefs, a lack of confidence in one's ability to answer *one's own* questions is deeply existential. Being able to answer questions one poses for oneself, especially in Socrates' case, looks deeply related to a concern about one's own central projects and one's sense of oneself. Hence, the epistemic self-doubt exemplified in this case might be considered a case where epistemic self-doubt is intertwined with existential self-doubt. Second, I'd like to suggest some other cases which isolate epistemic self-doubt involving doubt in the truth of one's beliefs. Epistemic self-doubt seems to me central to cases of testimonial injustice, in which one is led to doubt the credibility of their own testimony because others systematically regard that testimony as unreliable. In cases where the doubt of others results from subordinating stereotypes, the resulting epistemic self-doubt might be both wrongful and unjust.

In comparison with the Socrates example, Gordon presents the skepticism exemplified by Descartes in the meditations as a separate variety of epistemic self-doubt in which one doubts not one's individual beliefs but one's epistemic *faculties* themselves. The operative feature is that Descartes seeks to tear down *all* of his beliefs, even the most fundamental of them, because of his general epistemic uncertainty. However, this seems to me more naturally described as an extreme version of doubt regarding individual beliefs. Descartes still doubts his individual beliefs, it's just that he is doubting all of them. Again, this is not to say that this variety of self-doubt doesn't exist at all. Here's an example I think illustrates it quite well: take a case of gaslighting, perhaps the now-classic example of Marge Sherwood in the talented Mr. Ripley.<sup>4</sup> In this case, Marge

comes to one of the central characters — a powerful white male — with the legitimate and, it turns out, accurate concern that her husband has been killed by his best friend. Marge is dismissed as being overly sensitive, emotional, and irrational. In cases like these, at least when they are systematic and persistent, a person can be led to distrust not only their individual beliefs and not even the whole of their individual beliefs, but their very belief-forming processes and their epistemic capacities.

This brings me to suggest a way in which we can use the relationship between epistemic and existential self-doubt to help illuminate Gordon's teacher case. Some virtue epistemologists, such as Miranda Fricker, have suggested that having epistemic agency is a central part of what it means to be a person.<sup>5</sup> Just as rationality is taken by some to be an essential part of personhood, *epistemic agency* is taken by some to be an essential part of personhood. This is to say, in being a person, it is essential that I am also a *knower* — a thing that can know. Given this, it seems that epistemic self-doubt can, at least in some cases, cause or even *constitute* existential self-doubt. In questioning one's epistemic faculties — one's agency as a knower — one encounters doubt over what they are on the more basic level: they encounter doubt concerning whether they are wholly a person. Hence, this kind of self-doubt is both epistemic and existential and, further, it is existential *because* it is epistemic (in the appropriate way).

My central thought here is not a critical one. My thought is that, in closing the gap between epistemic and existential self-doubt in this way, we might be able to further analyze the interesting case given by Gordon in his piece. I will end by suggesting that this observation might shed some light on the ways in which the existential self-doubt experienced by a teacher is distinctive.

The teacher who encounters existential self-doubt of the kind highlighted by Gordon questions whether they are (1) a good teacher and/or (2) whether they are 'supposed to be' a teacher. What's interesting and distinctive about this case, and what sets it apart from the Cezanne case, is that the teacher's vocation concerns the development and dissemination of *knowledge*. The teacher is the paradigm 'knower' (in Fricker's sense of that term). They are, or are supposed to be, *the* person that knows. So, in doubting their success as a teacher or in

doubting whether they are the kind of person who ‘should’ be a teacher, they inherently doubt not only their own individual beliefs — not only whether what they take to be true is in fact true — but also their status as an epistemic agent *of the kind they need to be* in order to be an appropriate and successful teacher.

I’ll finish with a final, speculative thought. The essay briefly mentions the following very interesting quote from Descartes: “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.”<sup>6</sup> This exemplifies the very common feeling that ‘the more you know the less you know.’ There’s room to argue that this variety of epistemic self-doubt is an important part of being a successful teacher, and perhaps even a successful learner. That is, perhaps one’s learning and knowing more must necessarily expose areas in which one lacks knowledge. If this is the case, then at least for the teacher/student successfully performing their calling *requires* some level of epistemic self-doubt. And if this is the case, then perhaps a way for the teacher/learner to assuage or live with existential self-doubt is for them to embrace this kind of epistemic self-doubt.

---

1<sup>1</sup> Sherrylin Roush, “Epistemic Self-Doubt,” in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/epistemic-self-doubt/>.

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

3 Mordechai Gordon, “Living with Existential Self-Doubt,” *Philosophy of Education* 78, no. 1 (2022).

4 *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, directed by Anthony Minghella (Paramount Pictures Studio, Miramax, 1999).

5 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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