

## The training of doubt

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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One hears a lot, these days, about the virtues of doubt. There is much talk about creating space for doubt, encouraging doubt, dignifying doubt, about how doubt is preferable to the illusory certainties of faith, about how doubt can even be an important *part* of faith. We have doubts about whether or not there is a God, whether freedom is real and meaningful, about the possibility of things like absolute truth and objective value. This is all fine, as far as it goes. It is good to acknowledge that we don't know as much as we think we know or as much as we would like to know. I think that at its best, a willingness to live with doubt can engender a humility and patience with others that is quite obviously preferable to the wearisome alternatives that we are all too familiar with.

But one of the things that we do not seem as eager to doubt is, well *doubt*. Doubt is often portrayed as something like an unqualified virtue—both outside and even inside the church. Doubt is a badge of honour, a heroic disposition to be boldly embraced, a restless proclivity that separates us from the unreflective and uncritical herd. Doubt is cool. Doubt means that we are smart and thoughtful and fearlessly unique. Or so we are pleased to think. Yet it seems to me that doubt is often implicitly viewed as an end rather than a means toward some other human end. It is seen as a stopping point or a definitive marker of our identities rather than as a tool for the journey toward a better land with more fruitful options and possibilities regarding what it means to be a human being.

I recently read a delightful little book by Rainer Maria Rilke called [Letters to a Young Poet](#). In one of his letters to a certain “Mr. Kappus,” Rilke offers these wise words about the nature and purpose of doubt.:

And your doubt can become a good quality if you train it. It must become knowing, it must become criticism. Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, why something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting.

But don't give in, insist on arguments, and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when, instead of being a destroyer, it will become one of your best workers—perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building your life.

In other words, make sure that you include “doubt” in the category of things that you doubt. Demand answers from doubt. Press it, interrogate it, require an account for the privileged status it is so often assumes for itself. Insist that it justify its presuppositions, ask it to construct in addition to the much easier task of deconstructing. And, above all, remember that there are higher goals for a human life than doubt. It can be useful, yes, even *essential* in the building and maintaining of a life; but it must be disciplined and trained. It must be reminded frequently of its limits and of its value as one tool among (many) others in the task of becoming a genuinely *human* being.

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