

# Education, Despair and Morality: A Reply to Roberts

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*In a recent thought-provoking piece, Peter Roberts argues against the central role of happiness as a guiding concept in education, and argues for more attention to be paid to despair. This does not mean cultivating despair in young people, but allowing them to make sense of their own natural occasional despair; as well as the despair of others. I agree with Roberts about happiness, and about the need for more attention to despair; but I argue that focusing too much on despair is dangerous without paying simultaneous attention to goodness. Roberts argues that students must be helped to face the despair born of the realisation that (i) we can never be sure of the moral grounds on which our actions are based, (ii) we can never fully know ourselves, and that (iii) education should make us more appreciative of what we don't know. I argue against all three claims: (i) there are some moral truths that we can know; (ii) we can know enough of ourselves in certain contexts; (iii) education should not only teach intellectual humility, it should also give us confidence in appreciating the sources of meaning that are ordinarily available, e.g. personal relationships. The paper concludes with a response to the objection (perhaps by Roberts, as well as by liberals) that my position is little more than old-fashioned moralism and conservatism.*

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent thought-provoking article, Peter Roberts (2013) summarises and criticises one of the foundational assumptions of the modern education of children: that it ought to concern, ultimately, the search for happiness, the promotion of happiness, the imparting of the means required to maximise the likelihood of finding happiness. He quotes Nel Noddings: 'Happiness and education are, properly, intimately related. Happiness should be the aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness' (Noddings, 2003 p. 1 cited in Roberts, 2013, p. 463). Even if 'happiness' is not the word used, one often sees synonyms such as: self-esteem, well-being, or a state of being well-adjusted or

well-integrated (Roberts, 2013, p. 464). Even if the content of a school curriculum may generally speak in terms of the skills and knowledge required by future employees and citizens, the ultimate goal, according to this foundational assumption, is for the student to find a place in the adult world that allows her to be happy.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, Roberts starts with the thought that education should be about challenging and stimulating the student, not about reassuring them. Education ‘is meant to create a state of discomfort, and to this extent may also make us unhappy, but it is all the more important for that’ (ibid.). The idea is that discomfort is what drives the student forward (however ‘forward’ is to be defined) whereas happiness comes too close to complacency.

As part of this challenge, Roberts calls for a greater emphasis on *despair* rather than happiness in both the curriculum and the goals of school education. This means two things: firstly, students should be taught how to understand and deal with their own occasional despair; secondly, they should be taught how to understand the despair of others. This is not only because despair is an ineliminable part of human life, but Roberts even goes further: despair is ‘a key element of any well-lived human life’ (ibid.). Note Roberts’s emphasis on ‘well-lived’—he is not talking about teaching students skills to muddle through, he is arguing that part of what makes a life well-lived is precisely some experience with despair.

I agree with Roberts’s rejection of the primacy of individual happiness. And I agree that the concept of despair should assume greater prominence. However, I am troubled by the lack of any detailed reference in Roberts’s piece to the role of *goodness*. One familiar critique of the primacy of happiness in education is to say that it encourages hedonism and self-fulfilment at the expense of simple decency and generosity. In this piece, therefore, I want to explore Roberts’s suggestion, but also to seek to balance it with an appropriate concern for goodness. (Importantly, this does not mean that I am advocating an old-fashioned moralism in the classroom, and I will return to this objection in the final section.)

## THE CRITIQUE OF THE PRIMACY OF HAPPINESS

There is a long-standing debate in philosophy and in psychology about the nature of individual happiness. I think it is fair to say, however, that one of the defining elements of the modern West has been a huge shift toward a happiness understood in almost purely subjective terms, almost entirely as an authentic feeling rather than a state of being. One implication of this is to give the first person a privileged and authoritative access to the question of her own happiness, access that can turn away others’ advice or criticism. Although I may tell you my ideas about activities worth pursuing because they are useful, meaningful, or generous, it is rationally legitimate for you to turn these ideas away by declaring that ‘they don’t make me happy’. (I am assuming that you are not otherwise *obligated* to pursue these activities.) The spectre to avoid here is being trapped in activities of great putative value that just do not, for whatever reason, make me feel happy. There is

very little content to the secondary criticism that such-and-such an activity *ought* to make you happy.<sup>2</sup>

I say that the concept of individual happiness has become *almost* entirely subjective. I say ‘almost’ because if it were entirely subjective then, in a point made familiar by Wittgenstein, there would be no grounds for the subject herself or for any observer to distinguish a particular feeling as happiness (as opposed to something else). Typically children learn to apply the concept correctly to certain objectively paradigmatic situations involving others or themselves, such as eating ice cream or winning a race, and they learn to distinguish the concept from those more appropriate to describe their own or others’ feelings in other paradigmatic situations. Loud crying is not generally a sign of happiness; or at least the crier owes the observer an explanation of how her crying could be ‘out of’ happiness (e.g. tears of joy or relief). But within these limits of intelligibility, the first person has the last word, and all the exasperated observer can do is launch that classic statement of half-reproach, half-resignation ‘whatever makes you happy’.

Etymologically, the word happiness is related to luck, as in ‘happstance’. (The connection is much closer in the German *glücklich*.) I suggest a German-speaker is better able to understand her happiness as closer to a matter of accidental and undeserved good luck than an English-speaker. The English-speaker is more likely to see happiness as something one has a right to, or at least, in the words of the American Declaration of Independence, the right to pursue. The corollary of deserving happiness is that if one fails to be happy then something is wrong. As Roberts puts it,

‘When students are unhappy—and this may be in kindergartens, schools, or tertiary educational institutions—we seek to address this as a “problem” with “solutions” that can range from changing subjects or classes, to acquiring new friends and interests, to counselling, and, increasingly, to drugs’ (Roberts, 2013 p. 464).

Insofar as the emphasis is on happiness as a feeling to which one is entitled as part of being normal, so that happiness becomes the singular desirable end-state, then there is no essential reason for an educational system to prefer one route to likely happiness over another: the only criterion for comparing routes becomes cost and effectiveness. I am not saying that anti-depressive medication never has a place in treating teenagers; I am only saying that the emphasis on happiness does not provide, in itself, a way of ruling out recourse to medication when considering first options, so that the idea of medication *as a last resort* is lost.

And since there is no essential distinction between kinds of happiness, then there is no way of morally distinguishing between different activities that generate the same happiness: immoral or trivial activities may as well become the focus of education. Once happy, one is above criticism, and the only way to be authoritatively called upon to reflect on one’s chosen path is if a more effective route to happiness can be suggested as worth trying. But if one is happy enough even to feel no need to try new things, then

one becomes smugly isolated from the world. This leads to the paradox described by Unamuno and quoted by Roberts:

... while happiness is often described as the marker of an authentic life lived to the full ('carpe diem'), it can also be described as the marker for self-alienation, since one loses the need to try to understand oneself. One is distracted by the present to the point of losing interest in the future (2013, p. 469).

The Greeks had the word *eudaemonia*, which is too often mistakenly translated as happiness. The whole point of *eudaemonia* is that it has much stronger and clearer objective criteria, namely, the idea of some kind of flourishing. Being objective, such markers could be observed by others, and therefore the person was vulnerable to criticism by such others (to the effect that her life does not have as much *eudaemonia* as she thinks it does), and this vulnerability forced her to reflect on what she might be doing wrong. The internal *feeling* of a successful life mattered less, if at all, both to the observers and to the person herself. One might say that the concept of *eudaemonia* remains in the concept of success: success usually has clear objective markers, and it remains intelligible for someone to describe themselves as seeking success more than happiness. However, success is a much thinner concept than flourishing, since success normally relates to narrow fields of activity (e.g. promotion within institutional hierarchies), or narrow quantitative evaluations (e.g. money).

All this is a fairly familiar critique, and I agree with Roberts's version of it. Now let us look at what he has to say in 'advocacy' (if that is the best word for it) for despair. The first thing about the cult of happiness is that it is meant to distract the student from the reality of despair. If we can remove the pursuit of future happiness, says Roberts, we can better examine, understand and work with the natural despair that hits most of us, now and then, in the present.

Note that despair is not the temporary or instrumental suffering that is justified by later achievement, in the spirit of 'no pain, no gain'; Roberts is interested in the kind of spiritual suffering that serves no evident purpose:

If education is, among other things, a process of deepening understanding—of extending and enhancing consciousness—some searching ethical questions arise, particularly for those of us who work as teachers. For it is not merely a matter of recognising that we all suffer from despair; it is also necessary to acknowledge that we may play a role in increasing despair among those we teach. In fostering the development of a reflective or critical consciousness, we also open up the possibility of greater suffering (Roberts, 2013, p. 470).

The idea of increasing reflective or critical consciousness, in itself an admirable pedagogical aim, allows and encourages the student to discover more facts and threats (to herself, or to things she cares about) in the world that are upsetting, makes possible more depressing comparisons between

herself and others, and reminds her of the sheer scale of the hurdles that need to be jumped if she is to ‘achieve’ anything, let alone acquire happiness. As such, says Roberts, teachers should be honest about this and face it squarely within the classroom. Obviously, no teacher wants to cultivate a permanent and incapacitating despair in their students, so there is, as with so much else in education, a balance to be struck.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly delicate, says Roberts, when we reflect that much of education involves the attempt to cultivate a point of view that cannot later be ‘unlearned’. Instead of the child growing up in something like harmony with the world, we are teaching restless longings that will make not only their teenage years more difficult, but will also make it more difficult for them to accept boring, repetitive employment that they might have come to see as ‘beneath’ them.<sup>4</sup> Roberts, like most educationalists today, is broadly supportive of this agenda, and is certainly not advocating some sort of primitivist ideal of ignorance.

Roberts draws the following conclusion:

... we can never uncover all the mysteries of reality, never be sure of the moral grounds on which our actions are based, never fully know ourselves. Education, I suggest, is also like this: it allows us not to become more confident in our answers to some of life’s deepest riddles but more appreciative of how much we do not know (Roberts, 2013, p. 471).

This is the point at which I begin to disagree with Roberts. Certainly we can never uncover all the mysteries of reality, but I suggest that (i) in some situations we *can* be sure of the moral grounds on which our actions are based, and (ii) in some situations we *can* know ourselves if not fully, then enough to understand the requirements of morality, and (iii) a good education can and should make us more confident about *certain* answers while humbly appreciating how much we do not know about *other* things. I appreciate what Roberts is saying here about the essential nature of the human condition, and I recognise the important sceptical or ‘existentialist’ (for lack of a better word) tradition to which he is appealing. Nevertheless I believe that his approach is unsuitable in the context of the education of children. Let me take these three criticisms in turn.

#### *(i) Being Sure of the Moral Grounds*

I want to introduce an example of a familiar moral practice.<sup>5</sup> If I promise to meet you at a given place and time, then I am morally bound to meet you at that place and time, even if it becomes inconvenient to do so, and even if a more pleasant opportunity presents itself. Certainly, sometimes I can break a promise, but I will need a good reason, and I will owe that reason, and an apology, to the promisee. Part of learning the practice of giving and accepting promises is to learn the standards of what does and does not constitute a good reason for breaking a particular type of promise. Certainly there will be occasional disputes about the boundary between a good and bad reason, but such disputes do not undermine the *general* practice of promise-giving and promise-keeping, nor do they undermine the general

practice of legitimately holding people to their promises. I offer this as a straightforward example of a moral obligation. This is something taught by parents and other family members in the first instance, reinforced by book and film narratives, and expanded by contact with other adults in the community and eventually in the school system. Rarely will this teaching be direct; more likely it will involve indirect discussion of moral exemplars in a story, or observation of adults in the ordinary business of keeping and breaking promises.

If a child has been well brought-up, then she will come to understand what a promise is. She will take the trouble to keep her promises. She will be careful when making promises, to think through circumstances that might make it difficult or impossible to keep them. She will be naturally pained when she discovers she has forgotten a promise, and will naturally feel she owes the promisee an explanation and perhaps compensation. She will become known as reliable, as the type of person who keeps her promises. Perhaps this example is so ordinary that it cannot really be said to belong to a person's *education* as opposed to their *upbringing*. After all, it is perfectly possible to understand promises and become reliable without any education.<sup>6</sup> But my point is this. The moral scepticism and existentialism to which Roberts appeals have no room for promises. The moral sceptic always sees the apparent normative force to keep one's promise as illusory; the existentialist evades the normative force by reminding us of our 'freedom' to break the promise. I put 'freedom' in scare quotes to signal the existentialist's thin conception of freedom as little more than the absence of physical obstacles. In contrast, the well-brought-up reliable person will declare that she is *not* free, in a richer sense, to disregard her promises.

The real existence of promises, I take it, then allows us to be sure of the moral grounds on which our actions are based. Why am I performing this action? Because I promised to. It is a simple and satisfactory explanation that acts as the moral ground, and I can be absolutely sure of it. Importantly, the promisee has a legitimate right to expect me to keep my promise, and she can also be absolutely sure of the grounds of that right. And everybody else fully understands the grounds too.

Am I advocating a kind of moral intuitionism? Am I suggesting that we possess a 'sixth sense' by which we reliably perceive the moral fact that Jones's promise ought to be kept? This has been a serious position in the history of philosophy, but there are well-known objections to it, the most obvious being its inability to explain moral disagreement. If my intuition tells me that it would be right for Jones to keep her promise, and your intuition tells you that it would be wrong, then it would seem that one intuition must be mistaken, and it is not clear how to show which, without abandoning intuitions altogether and seeking to ground discoverable moral rightness directly on the facts of the matter. However, I remain neutral on the debate about intuitionism. My point is more 'Wittgensteinian', and concerns the meaning of the concept of 'promise'; and in seeking the meaning I am exploring the use of that concept in ordinary situations. In ordinary situations people do say 'because I promised' as a *decisive* explanation for why they

are performing this action even if it seems to be against their self-interest, and importantly, other people *accept* this as a decisive reason.

A corollary of this Wittgensteinian approach is to criticise mainstream Anglophone moral philosophers for having gone badly wrong when they ask, in general, *why* promises should be kept, and when they seek spurious solutions involving the general happiness, or universalising the maxim, or an implicit contract. For the Wittgensteinian will say that it is part of the definition of a promise that it should be kept.<sup>7</sup> If I say the words ‘I promise’ and then ask why I should keep the ‘promise’, it turns out that I have not made a promise at all, only a pretend-promise, and I will be liable for any justified beliefs and expectations that arise in the promisee as a result. A promise is not just the set of words; it also involves the promisor’s appropriate *attitude* to the content of those words, and her understanding of herself as being answerable to the world where her words make sense.

And because one can be sure of the moral grounds on which our promise-keeping is based, then education should reinforce that message as part of its attempt to cultivate a minimal goodness in the students. I agree with Roberts that happiness should not be the centrepiece of education, and promise-keeping may impede happiness by denying one access to last-minute pleasurable opportunities. I agree with Roberts that despair should have a more central place in education, but *not* the kind of despair born from the general inability to know *any* grounds on which one’s moral actions are based. Rather, the relevant kind of despair that should be talked about in an educational context is that arising from situations of tragedy or moral dilemma, for example when one is *forced* to break a promise without any obvious compromise or compensation possible, perhaps with a consequence that one loses a friend. But again, the tragic situation of breaking a promise can only exist as tragic precisely because of the widespread practice of keeping promises.<sup>8</sup>

Promising in concrete situations might seem too thin as a counter-example to Roberts’s grand claims about the human condition. However, it is important to see promising as a *type* of counter-example, a type that includes many other examples of ordinary moral obligations in ordinary life. I borrow a book from you, and *of course* I have an obligation to return it to you; I could probably profit from your ignorance with a confident lie about this car, but *of course* I shouldn’t; a competent adult patient tells me she does not want the medical treatment I am offering, and *of course* I should not force it on her. There are so many situations where I do not seek the moral grounds of my belief because I already know them, and what’s more, you can reasonably expect me to know them. Educating children should not encourage a global despair based on a global scepticism, but should rather teach children to recognise and articulate the differences between situations where they are sure and situations where they are not, should teach them the right information to seek and the right people to ask to help them deal with situations where they are not sure, and should teach them how to take responsibility for their decisions, including the cultivation of the impulse to retrospectively evaluate their past decisions in order to learn from what went wrong.

*(ii) In Some Situations We Can Know Ourselves*

Again, I agree with Roberts insofar as he criticises the simplistic picture of the self presupposed by the pursuit of happiness: the self is no more than a bunch of more or less hidden desires, and education is designed to help people to discover their desires and how best to satisfy them—within the limits of the law! But Roberts goes too far in the other direction, suggesting that the self is essentially unknowable, that even with increasing experience of different kinds of situation we can never be confident about knowing our strengths and weaknesses, that we should always be ready to be assailed by surprising passions and fears. However, the despair born of such a cautious view of the present and future, I suggest, would prevent any sort of meaningful commitment and risk.

In response, I first want to suggest that in many ordinary situations, one can know *well enough* those parts of one's self that are relevant to that situation, and one does not have to be troubled by the deeper unknowability of the self. Students within the education system<sup>9</sup> should still be guided by the Delphic injunction to strive to 'know thyself', and they should also learn that in this sense real progress can be made, not only during the school years, but indeed for several years afterwards until the personality has settled. The correct kind of despair in which Roberts should be interested is the *routine* despair of being unpleasantly surprised to discover weakness or vice within oneself, of discovering that one was not quite as good on a particular occasion as one thought one was—not the *general*, surrendering despair at the unfathomability of the self.

Second, I also want to suggest that *mere* piecemeal self-discovery is not the full story as concerns the self. For education is not only about self-discovery but also about self-reconstruction, under the discipline of an objective morality to which the self is answerable. Again, take the simple example of promise-keeping. This is not only a matter of self-discovery, it is also a matter of partial submission to the requirements of moral reality, as interpreted and reinforced by the education system. The student should not look inside, survey her desires, and then decide what to do in the light of those desires; often it is a matter of discovering what she *must* do, regardless of desires which may well incline to the contrary. I promised to do X, and I know very well that I have no desire to do X—and yet I go ahead and do X, simply because I promised. Over time, as the student becomes reliable, the opposing desire might be just as forceful, but it will become *silenced*, to use John McDowell's suggestive phrase (1979).

Third, later in his piece Roberts says: 'to be educated is to live, constantly, with tensions—and the most important of these tensions, between hope and despair, can never be resolved' (Roberts, 2013, p. 472). Insofar as it makes sense to speak *in general* about hope and despair, it is not clear with what authority Roberts can say this, or whether it is even meaningful. The specific nature of hope and despair varies from context to context. Surely in some contexts the tension between hope and despair *can* be resolved? Part of this is the ordinary process of maturation, of getting to know the world better and getting to know oneself better, so that I learn to distinguish between realistic



and unrealistic hopes, for example, between hope for meaningful events and hope for unimportant events, between justified and self-indulgent despair, between motivating and corrosive despair. One very simple example of this is the thought that one should not try to run before one can walk. In order to learn these distinctions, the student will gradually need a more sophisticated language with which to articulate the tensions and the confusions, and with which to recognise them in and discuss them with others. The greatest source of such language is of course literature, and to this end, literature is a greater tool for moral education than 'ethics' or 'philosophy' or 'religion' (however these terms are defined) could ever be. It achieves this partly by showing what happens when human beings succumb to despair and seek to survive by committing evil. In this respect I certainly agree with Roberts about the relevance of Dostoyevsky.

(iii) *Appreciating How Much We Do Not Know*

Roberts says that a good education 'allows us not to become more confident in our answers to some of life's deepest riddles but more appreciative of how much we do not know'.

Insofar as an education system should cultivate a certain intellectual and spiritual humility among students, Roberts makes a valid point. It is all too easy to see oneself as an expert after strong success in a school leaving exam, and soon only arrogance and hubris will follow.<sup>10</sup>

However, I am worried about one possible implication of what Roberts says, and that is cultivating an inappropriate despair based on *technocratic deference* among students. Let me explain the term. One characteristic feature of modernity is the rise of the technocrat: a person in a position of power or influence who grounds her controversial political opinions on technical expertise, especially of a political and economic kind. Politics and business have evolved into such a science that non-experts are effectively disenfranchised from democratic conversation. The English have always been suspicious of the French system where high-level bureaucrats are systematically trained, and inevitably indoctrinated to a certain extent, in special third-level colleges. But the British civil service has come to rely increasingly on Oxford PPE graduates, and the rise of the MBA has made this a more global phenomenon. So many modern policy decisions, while essentially political, are disguised in complicated economic jargon and numbers, and thereby placed beyond criticism by the vast majority of voters. Roberts's suggestion of being more appreciative of how much we do not know risks further alienating the citizenship, who usually lack sufficient interest and aptitude to learn the basic principles of economics.

There is a second worry. When Roberts speaks of 'life's deepest riddles', the most obvious riddle is of course the meaning of life. And no education system is going to pretend to 'solve' this for its students (leaving aside religious education, again). So far so good. But here I'm worried about Roberts saying that the meaning of life is *so* deep that the healthy sources of meaning that students spontaneously derive both in and out of school cannot themselves be valuable. These healthy sources of meaning for adolescents

are hardly arcane or obscure: one important source is the intimate relationships with friends and family members, and the various projects carried out with such friends. Another source of meaning is the academic content of the school and later the university. Another source of meaning is the work carried out by charitable institutions at which many adolescents volunteer. I'm sure Roberts would not disagree with the importance of these sources of meaning. Where we might disagree is that I believe such sources can allow us a confidence born of knowledge. Yes, there are plenty of things we do not know, but there are also plenty of things that we do know, enough things to protect us from deep despair by providing *some* relevant answers to the 'riddles of life'. It is this confidence that then allows the adult to challenge those claiming immunity on the grounds of their technocratic expertise.

Later Roberts cites Unamuno: 'This uncertainty, the suffering, and the fruitless struggle to escape uncertainty, can be and are a basis for action and a foundation for morals' (1972, p. 142, cited in Roberts, 2013, p. 472). This might be the case for some people, suffering in certain ways, and struggling to escape certain kinds of uncertainty. But on the whole I would disagree with Unamuno. Uncertainty and suffering all too often result in *immorality*, as people strive to assert themselves to overcome their anxiety, as people reach for the shallow consolations of power, fame and money to distract themselves from the anxiety. Uncertainty can only be fought by certainty somewhere else, and it is better that the student draw on the certainties provided by relationships and by the distinctive trust and generosity needed to sustain them.

### THE DANGER OF MORALISM

In this final section I want to respond to an objection that might come from Roberts, or it might come from some educational liberals: the objection that I am being too moralist, perhaps even too conservative. The tenor of the objection is that my emphasis on morality comes too close to dogma in downplaying the role of discussion and discovery. Education should be about opening people's minds, about challenging and criticising everything, and about looking behind and beyond received wisdom and tradition. Even if we did want to improve students morally, then preachy moralism is usually counter-productive.

The objection partly hits the target. I admit to being a moralist in using a large amount of moral *language* unquestioningly, as in the case of 'promise', for example. The concept of a promise has a meaning that we cannot just abandon at will, for it is a normative concept that we use to guide our own and other people's behaviour in the world. Importantly, the concept of promise cannot be reduced to a dictionary definition, for it includes the distinctive use of such a concept within our interpersonal language games. One cannot know what a promise is without understanding what it means to be bound by a promise, and without understanding the sort of reasons that would be relevant to breaking a particular promise. All of this is importantly *given* in the society that one grows up in. Some concepts change their meaning over time, such as 'happy'; some concepts can be

invented, as in ‘computer’; some concepts can be changed as part of a political effort, as in the movement among homosexuals to re-appropriate the pejorative word ‘queer’ and wear it with pride. But the concept of ‘promise’ is and always has been too important, and too central, to our form of life. (What’s more, I would guess it has a similar place in most major linguistic-moral systems—the success of an organisation such as the World Trade Organisation, founded on the idea of a contract, reveals this.)

In professional philosophy, there is the figure of the ‘fearless thinker’, who follows the argument as far as it will go, ready to jettison favourite principles or preferences if they remain unsupported or unjustified. I have already said that philosophers have erred in asking why promises should be kept. Philosophers also err in ignoring all their moral intuitions (inherited from their family, school and society) in order to re-invent morality from basic principles.<sup>11</sup>

The objection was off-target insofar as it accused me of rigid conservatism. But it was on-target in accusing me of using a certain amount of moral language unquestioningly. Here the image of Neurath’s boat is apposite: in the same way that one has to stand on the floating boat in order to replace some of its parts, so too one has to stand on a good number of unquestioned moral intuitions in order to challenge a few others. I am certainly not denying that there are many parts of conventional morality that need to be changed, and as such I am no conservative. As words, moralism and conservatism have certainly had a bad press, not entirely without cause. But in my discussion above, I am assuming a very modest account of moral requirements: the well-educated student will be reliable in keeping her promises, will be minimally decent and generous. I am certainly not assuming some moral superhero, out to save the world.<sup>12</sup>

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## NOTES

1. It is important that Noddings speaks about the individual and *collective* happiness. Roberts chooses to focus on individual happiness, and I have followed him on this. While there are relatively clear debates about the nature of individual happiness, and I will be touching on some of these, the idea of a collective happiness is much more difficult to grasp. I think it is most plausibly related to the idea of a healthy democratic citizenship, and this will raise the question of citizenship education, but that is not my concern here.
2. For completeness, I should admit to accepting Roberts’s equation of happiness and well-being, an equation that would be vulnerable to several challenges. In addition, I am also sharing Roberts’s assumptions about what it means to *promote* feelings of happiness.
3. There is a similar balance to be struck in cultivating in one’s students the right amount of fearlessness, the right kind of ambition and pride, the right capacity for shame: enough, but not too much.
4. Famously, Noam Chomsky, 1995, thinks that Western educators have been so worried about cultivating this type of despair that they have deliberately designed the system to produce docile and obedient factory workers and consumers. Such citizens will accept their poor working conditions and prospects on the workday as long as they can spend their meagre earnings at the weekend.

5. This example draws from J.L. Austin's 1962 account of speech acts, according to which the expressed promise carries a certain 'illocutionary force' beyond the meaning of the words: namely, a promise (like a bet) is 'commissive' and commits the speaker to future acts in the eyes of the promisee and third-party observers.
6. The reader should not attach too much weight to my distinction between upbringing and education, and I accept that it is more complex. My intention is to focus on the ordinariness of much moral learning. The word 'upbringing' might have some misleading connotations of domestic intimacy, but of course moral learning goes on in much wider contexts of the child's life without yet involving formal schooling. In this respect the German word *Erziehung* might be more appropriate. Indeed, it is worth remembering that for most of human history, most children did not attend formal schooling, and even today there is a not insignificant number of children in Western countries educated at home. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out.
7. See the entry by Allen Habib 'Promises' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available online at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/promises/>. Last accessed: January 2016.
8. Roberts (2013, p. 469 n. 8) cites Kierkegaard's concern that one 'becomes wracked with guilt in being unable to live up to ethical ideals and also falls into despair'. I think this fear is exaggerated if it is a fear of *general* guilt. A certain amount of guilt and despair is appropriate in localised failure to live up to ideals, as long as one can learn and grow from the failure and perhaps manage to avoid it next time.
9. By 'education system', I am not referring to the legitimate role and requirements of a national system of state schooling within a liberal democracy. I am making a more general point about any educational process that involves socialisation and moral learning. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for asking me to clarify this.
10. In the context of the current discussion, I think it is interesting to mention a religious education. One of the goals of a religious education is precisely to give students a confidence in dealing with life's deepest riddles, where such a confidence is based on a wide-ranging trust in the goodness of a loving God. At the same time, the good religious education should also cultivate an essential humility before the mystery of God's creation. The successful combination of the two goals would seem to eliminate the risk of despair of the kind Roberts warns against. However, it then has to be said that the religious believer will be vulnerable to different kinds of despair, for example, that born from repeatedly failing to achieve perfectionist ideals of behaviour and thought. A religious believer's character failings and weaknesses might be quite average and acceptable to her non-believing peers, and yet deeply undermine her confidence and self-image.
11. The opening words of John Mackie's hugely influential book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1979) are 'There are no objective values'. He then proceeds to explain why we all think that there are objective values. The reasoning is no doubt clever, the writing is clear. On the one hand, this was designed to deliberately provoke, and thereby to invite the reader into further discussion. On the other hand, if we take him at his word, we would have to reject him immediately as frivolous or psychopathic, and in either case there would be no point to reading or discussing further.
12. I wish to thank two anonymous referees for their useful comments.

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