THE ART OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

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Contents

Preface

In one of my most enduring nightmares, I stare into the mirror only to find that, overnight, my hair has turned white. My eyes are foggy and won't stay open. My skin is old and wrinkled, the consistency of parchment. I touch my face with skeleton fingers and understand that I am dying of old age. My response is one of dread. But it is not death as such that I fear. Rather, it is the realization of a terrible failure on my part. No, this cannot be, I am not done yet, I think in a panic—I have made no progress. I am overwhelmed by the terrifying realization that I have wasted my life agonizing over my various insecurities. The image I see in that dream-mirror is of an old woman with the psychological hang-ups of a teenager. Self-centered, but ineffectively so. It is the stuff of which true horror is made. For my dream-self has sinned against one of my most cherished beliefs: that it is possible to improve ourselves, and that self-improvement is our most important existential task.

We tend to write about the things that matter most to us, the things we wish to learn more about. I have always wanted to improve, to understand more deeply what self-improvement entails. A highly self-conscious introvert, I have battled with a range of frustrating limitations all my life. Constitutionally incapable of small talk, I often feel awkward in social situations, or come across as aloof. I find it challenging to connect with others. I can be preoccupied with my own debilitating inner voice; relentlessly self-critical, it drowns out many of the good things in my life. Because my energy is expended internally, I do not have nearly as much to give to others as I would like. My resources are

consumed in the endless battle between that critical inner voice and the wiser parts of my personality. I frequently feel as though I am functioning at a level far below my natural potential.

For decades, I have been searching for a way to direct my energy outward, once and for all, so that I can live a more other- and more purpose-oriented life. As I see it, that is the point of all worthwhile self-improvement: to free up our energies so that we can direct them toward other people and toward creative projects. Fundamentally, self-improvement is a desire to learn how we can best develop our personal faculties and our moral qualities.

I have tried out my fair share of self-help regimes and read hundreds of books on the subject. My reading has always been driven by hope—the hope that the next book really will hold the key, the long-lost formula for a sustainable better life. Self-improvement promises nothing less than salvation, of a secular kind. Crucially, self-improvement is intimately linked to the transcendence of the self. While that may sound paradoxical, I strongly believe that the truly improved self shows itself in its interactions with others. It is less egoistical, humbler, more generous. It is not constantly preoccupied with its own anxieties, perceived shortcomings, and disappointments.

Unfortunately, I have not found any single means of self-improvement, a strategy guaranteed to work for everyone. Indeed, I have come to the conclusion that it does not exist. I have, however, discovered multiple strategies for self-improvement that have survived the test of time. In this book, I have brought together what I consider to be the ten most valuable and enduring ideas about self-improvement. These ideas come from different periods and cultures, and they have undergone variation across the ages. I encountered them while I was working through the vast literature of self-improvement, the origins of which lie thousands of years in the past. One of the things those ideas teach us is that there can be no simple revolution of the self. We cannot improve ourselves once and for all. Rather, self-improvement is an ongoing process, and one that has to be pursued throughout our lives.

While self-improvement is a deeply personal topic for me, it is also a topic with wide-ranging philosophical, psychological, and social

significance. For it is based on the belief that we can learn and change for the better, that we are free to shape ourselves (albeit within certain limits) and are not simply destined to turn into our parents. It is a way of kicking against determinism, reassuring us that we all have the potential to mold our lives and that the work we do on ourselves is worth the effort. Self-improvement also entails a humble admission that there is always still so much that we can learn, both through honest self-observation and from others. We are, after all, "unfinished business," our selves constantly evolving.[1]

There is also a significant social dimension to self-improvement. Imagine a society that did not believe in the possibility that we can better ourselves. What place would there be for teaching and learning, for mentoring, for development of any kind? Would not such a society simply abandon or punish those experiencing difficulties and those who have fallen on hard times, rather than helping them to help themselves? Would it not ultimately be the least humane of societies? Arguably the most persuasive argument against the death penalty is precisely that it rules out the very possibility of self-improvement. To sentence someone to death is to assume that they cannot transcend the self that committed the crime for which they are being punished. I, for one, would not wish to live in a world that rejected the idea that change for the better is possible, and I do not believe that anyone else would either, if they really thought about it.

On the surface, Anglo-American cultures enthusiastically embrace the notion of the improvable self—a fact to which our current multibillion-dollar personal development industry attests. And yet there are cracks and contradictions in this construct, and many questions to which we do not have answers: Where exactly does our agency to shape ourselves begin and end? Which parts of us are innate, determined by our genes, and which are learned behavior, the result, in part, of upbringing and specific socioeconomic circumstances? What can we realistically hope to change about ourselves, and what is destined to remain fixed, no matter how hard we rattle the cage?

Crucially, our beliefs about our fundamental improvability (or lack thereof) translate into our politics. Are all self-improvers in

principle created equal, or is self-improvement much harder for some than it is for others? Do we hold those of us who fail to improve ourselves personally responsible, or do we take into consideration our individually unique circumstances? Do we assign personal blame to those who struggle with their weight, with social anxiety, with impulse control, with substance abuse, with relationship problems, or who find themselves in financial hardship? For, to be sure, with the theoretical possibility of self-improvement comes practical responsibility.

Some theorists of self-improvement believe in limitless agency, with which comes a high degree of personal accountability, while at the other end of the spectrum the determinists focus on dependency and helplessness. Where we position ourselves on that spectrum reflects our fundamental ideas about what it means to be human. Our views on self-improvement ultimately tell us not only who we are, but how we think about others. Nothing, to my mind, could be more important than that.

THE ART OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

Introduction

IT WAS UNTHINKABLE IN THE Middle Ages that a celestial being could descend from heaven to earth other than in a spiral movement. The notion that angels might approach the terrestrial sphere in a straight line was quite simply unimaginable. Today, to suggest that the self cannot be improved is, for most of us, similarly unthinkable. Perhaps we believe in the possibility of complete, even magical transformation, as in the fairy tales of old. Or we might trust in more humble forms of improvement—that, like a good wine or cheese, we will simply get better with age. In part, this widespread belief in self-improvement grows out of our belief in the idea of progress. Just as most of us assume that humanity has made huge leaps forward over the centuries, so most of us assume that we are—or at least should be—developing as individuals.

Our appetite for self-improvement has never been greater: in 2020, the personal development market was valued at $39.99 billion worldwide, and is forecast to grow rapidly over the next few decades.[1] We consume self-help books voraciously, ever hungry for new offerings. Self-help apps, podcasts, online workshops, and personal growth webinars are booming. We spend large sums on life coaches, tasked with enhancing our mental and emotional fitness, while our employers invest heavily in developing our resilience and soft skills. Where does this idea of helping the self come from? Is it new, or has the desire to improve

ourselves always been part of the human experience? And why does it define us so strongly?

The idea of the improvable self may appear to be a recent phenomenon. Firmly married to our belief in progress and personal agency, it also seems to have become entwined with a wider cultural drive for efficiency enhancement that includes the human. Self-improvement is, however, far from a modern concept. In fact, it has a long and rich history that stretches back to antiquity. Wishing to improve ourselves is a ubiquitous human desire. That said, it finds distinctive expressions in various historical periods and cultures.

It is important to distinguish between the literature of self-improvement and that of self-help. The self-help genre as we know it today first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of Samuel Smiles's bestselling book *Self-Help* (1859). It has gone on to constitute a highly visible and commercially extremely successful subgenre within the much older corpus of the literature of self-improvement—a literature rooted in texts addressed to lay readers containing concrete advice on how we can develop ourselves positively. This literature aims to provide us with the tools and skills consciously to self-improve without the further involvement of any third parties, such as theologians, teachers, or psychologists.

While researching the long history of the idea of self-improvement I read widely, starting with works from ancient China and concluding with recent publications by bestselling writers such as Anthony Robbins, Eckhart Tolle, and Marie Kondo. I focused not only on modern self-help but also on philosophical works, religious texts, medical treatises, wisdom literature, ancient myths, and popular psychology. I read books on magic and astrology, as well as almanacs for medieval princes, Renaissance courtiers, and Victorian housewives. The more I read, the clearer it became that we today are far from being the only generation to have dreamed of improving ourselves.

The more I read, too, the more clearly I saw certain themes reoccurring. Beneath the many historical and cultural differences, ten core strategies run through the literature on self-improvement, both ancient and modern. We tend to know them

today mainly in their packaged and marketed form, which often dilutes or distorts the wisdom of the original versions. We therefore have much to gain by tracing these strategies for self-improvement back to their origins. By exploring their evolution through the ages, and across cultures, we can discover much about our own shifting cultural values and anxieties.

Each chapter of this book focuses on one of these ten core themes from the long history of self-improvement. I examine the different guises they assume in changing cultural contexts, as well as how and why they resonate with our present-day concerns. It is from these enduring ideas about how we can improve ourselves that we have most to learn. For new is not always better. Sometimes, we forget what we already know. History holds many answers to our most pressing contemporary challenges.

The ancient wisdom has endured for a reason. The very best works on self-improvement are philosophies of life. As the Roman Stoic Seneca defined it, such a philosophy shapes our personality, provides structure and moral guidelines for our behavior, and generally "sits at the helm and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas."[2] This is a perfect description of any self-help literature worth its salt, with "improvement" meaning simply that we hone our ability to deal with being so tossed, to exist in these perilous seas. Indeed, the greatest works in the literature of self-improvement have always managed to function as an "axe for the frozen sea within us," as the writer Franz Kafka put it. They not only appeal to our reason but also manage to activate our emotions and our imagination.

The idea of self-improvement is bound up with a number of profound philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions. These include our very notion of selfhood, as well as concepts of agency, willpower, and personal responsibility. Moreover, self-improvement literature provides a powerful barometer of the aspirations and fears that preoccupy us at a particular historical moment. All successful works of self-improvement speak to our most acute concerns. The most common personal development aims in our current self-help landscape are self-realization and self-optimization. Our self-help literature promises to help us

unleash our true potential (whatever that may be), raise our self-esteem, and enhance our personal effectiveness. In the self-improvement literature of the past, however, other values were more important. These included virtues such as altruism, humility, fortitude, and courage.

We also have much to learn from examining shifting trends in our own self-help literature. What, for example, are we to make of the current craze for minimalist living and decluttering, for mindfulness and digital detoxing, for Stoic ideas, and for invitations to learn from other species? All of these trends provide insights into the spirit of our age. They reveal a desire for cleansing (literally and metaphorically), living more sustainably, consuming more consciously, and privileging experiences over objects. They reveal our unease about the ways in which our smartphones and social media bleed into our experience of the present moment, and point to our growing concerns around what the attention economy is doing to our sense of self.[3] The neo-Stoic models reveal an intensifying sense of hopelessness in the face of the political and environmental challenges we face. Last but not least, the growing number of works that invite us to learn the art of living well from animals and plants indicates a profound disenchantment with our own kind.

The literature of self-improvement not only tells us about the aspirational values of different historical moments, but also reveals changing conceptions of selfhood. Is the self seen as atomistic or relational? As fundamentally good or bad? As primarily rational or emotional? Did our ancestors think of themselves as powerful agents able to exercise free will or as shaped by internal or external forces? The literature of self-improvement is always embedded in wider cultural paradigms. It offers views on what constitutes a good life—what we should strive for and what we need in order to live fulfilling and meaningful lives.

The literature of self-improvement also reveals how we think about the relation between the mind, the body, and the social communities to which we belong. It is for that reason that there is always an ethical, even a political, dimension to all self-improvement regimes. The various suggested paths to improving

ourselves rest on assumptions about what we can and what we cannot change about ourselves. They outline the scope of our agency and, by implication, our personal responsibility for overcoming the forces that shape us. These include our genes, our upbringing, our experiences, our broader sociocultural environments, and our economic circumstances.

For over two and a half thousand years, the art of self-improvement was the domain of philosophers, sages, and theologians. Today, however, many of our philosophers have abandoned the project of reflecting on the good life and dispensing advice on how we may achieve it. Our religious thinkers have lost their influence. As a result, the task of instructing us in how to improve ourselves is now largely in the hands of the self-help industry. This state of affairs is problematic. The desire to improve ourselves, to learn and develop, is an ancient impulse, manifest in our enduring quest for self-knowledge and for guidance on how to live well. Like all of our aspirations, this desire can be exploited. Today's self-help industry is profit-driven and, alongside serious and inspirational work, also markets many unsound regimes that promise instant transformation with no effort.

This matters. For self-help literature not only reflects but also shapes our values, our aspirations, and our behaviors. It shapes how we attempt to manage our emotions and cognitions. Even if we have never picked up a self-help book, our life will have been influenced by the many tropes that have infiltrated our everyday language. They shape the news we consume, the films we watch, and the narratives through which we understand our lives. At work, our line managers will have tried to enhance our productivity, hone our team spirit, improve our capacity to empathize, and sharpen our communication skills. Friends will have told us to feel the fear and do it anyway, to silence our inner critic, to be co-dependent no more, to listen to our inner child, to make our superego our amigo, to embrace the power of now, or to seek out the roads less traveled.

The language of self-help, its metaphors and imagery, also reveals much about the conceptions of selfhood that are at work in our society. Consider, for example, "self-management." This term

understands the self as an HR problem, requiring managerial interventions, like a dysfunctional team. According to this model, there are parts of us that need to be disciplined or performance-managed, perhaps even retrained or retired. "Self-optimization" and "self-enhancement," by contrast, suggest that the self is like a machine in need of fine-tuning.

Many self-help regimes compare our minds to computers. They recommend that we change our hardwired beliefs and reprogram our operating systems, and that we eliminate behavioral glitches and malfunctions. They suggest memory wipes and new software. But as complex and constantly evolving organisms that interact dynamically with our environments, we actually share very little with machines. We are embodied, embedded, and encultured. Thinking of ourselves as akin to computers is harmful. So are the equally ubiquitous financial and business metaphors—references to our social capital, emotional bank accounts, portfolios, and assets, with self-improvement being a form of long-term investment that will eventually pay off, yielding higher profits.[4] Their aim is to show us how to sell ourselves more professionally and effectively on the social marketplace. Even the term "self-worth" has a monetary ring to it.

Other much-used metaphors in modern self-help include the idea of life as a journey, a work of art, a battle, a jungle, a game, and a competition. Many writers rely on images of social ascent, such as rising to the top, climbing a ladder or a mountain, or getting over the wall. Depending on which of these metaphors we adopt, as the American sociologist Micki McGee observes, we may imagine ourselves as "combatants, contestants, or players; travelers or explorers; and entrepreneurs, salespersons, or managers. For the combatants, contestants, and players, winning is the goal, while power and wealth are typically the prizes. For the traveler or explorer, rewards tend to be experiential, nonmaterial, and spiritual."[5] The entrepreneurial cluster, finally, is motivated by material gains.

Our current notion of self-optimization contrasts starkly with the much older idea of self-cultivation. Prominent in the ancient literature, both Asian and Western, self-cultivation evokes a slower, less dramatic mode of developing our good qualities, an

approach that is incremental and sustainable. It encourages us to nurture our virtues patiently and calmly, as we would nurture seedlings in a garden. The ancient self is often represented in botanical terms, as something that needs to be carefully nourished so that it may grow and blossom. We might be urged to prune and gently guide it. We must find the right climate and soil for our selves to flourish, and eradicate problems at their roots. We might have to plant new seeds and pull out weeds. Modern esoteric texts that borrow from these traditions, in contrast, tend to write of the self in a more nebulous language of flows and energies. They favor metaphors of liquidity, light and dark, and natural power. They also tend to rely upon the imagery of networks, webs, and rhizomes, suggesting the connectedness of all life forms.

Metaphors matter.[6] In the literature of self-improvement, the choice of metaphors reveals how we see ourselves and our purpose. We may, for example, think of ourselves as part of a wider social community with shared aims and obligations, or as lone fighters in a hostile environment, out there to secure a personal advantage. The Stoic philosopher Seneca writes: "Our relations with one another are like a stone arch, which would collapse if the stones did not mutually support each other, and which is upheld in this very way."[7] His concept of our relational nature and communal purpose could not differ more from Jordan B. Peterson's. In his bestselling *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), Peterson recommends that we copy the ways of the "top-lobster." For it is "winner-take-all in the lobster world, just as it is in human societies, where the top 1 percent have as much loot as the bottom 50 percent."[8] The posturing of the strutting shellfish intimidates less confident members of the species, thus enhancing its chances of securing prey, territory, and sexual partners. Peterson, then, simply advocates we emulate natural dominance hierarchies, whereas Seneca's vision is ethically and socially more ambitious.

As the long literature of self-improvement reveals, our drive to better ourselves is related to our basic human needs. Perhaps the best-known attempt to identify these core needs is that by the humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943.[9] Primitive

physiological needs form the basis of his model, followed by safety, belongingness, and esteem, and at the very top, self-actualization.[10] Other theories of our most fundamental needs prioritize attachment, terror management, and self-determination.[11] The psychologist Robert Kegan, for example, argues that there are only two "great human yearnings"—our striving for autonomy and independence and our need for inclusion and communion—and they are in conflict with one another.[12] We could also add a need for beauty in its various forms.

There is truth to all of these models. However, the specific self-improvement aims I encountered in my research for this book tend to revolve predominantly around social relations, status, learning, variety, and altruism.[13] Most, if not all, of our historically and culturally changing self-improvement aims can, I believe, be traced back to these five basic needs.

Social relations encompass our desire to feel connected, accepted, and part of a community. They also include our longing for understanding, friendship, and love. This need captures classic modern self-help aims such as increasing both the quantity and quality of our friendships, and finding our soulmate. It also relates to our desire to feel rooted in a particular place and community. Many twentieth- and twenty-first-century self-help books focus on pain points that are directly tied to these desires, such as loneliness, isolation, alienation, and feeling unloved or undesirable. They aim to teach us how to connect with others in a deeper way, or at least more effectively.

Status includes our need for respect and attention, but also for power, influence, and control. Concerns about status may be manifest in a preoccupation with what others think about us and a desire to impress them—be that via looks, wit, ideas, clothes, cars, or other objects of conspicuous consumption. It may also be manifest in our need for professional recognition in the form of promotion, for social media "likes" and followers, or simply in feeling that our voices and opinions are heard and that we are taken seriously. At a deeper level, status relates to the hope that our existence matters and that it is positively acknowledged by others.

Learning is connected to our thirst for knowledge and understanding, as well, of course, to our desire to improve ourselves. Throughout our lives, most of us seek to continue to expand our understanding of the world. This includes the spiritual and the metaphysical, and questions pertaining to the meaning of our existence. It also includes skills and aptitude—we may wish to learn Arabic or Mandarin, to scuba dive, or to meditate. Perhaps we want to learn how to grow bonsai trees or how to draw animals. We may seek enlightenment, or simply new recipes for vegan brownies.

Most importantly, learning includes learning about ourselves—to understand ourselves more deeply, and to gain insight into our own patterns, preferences, and deeper motivations. It also includes our appetite for learning how to improve our character, interpersonal skills, and the management of our thoughts and emotions. We could even flip this argument on its head: rather than seeing self-improvement as an aspect of learning, we could consider all forms of learning as modes of self-improvement. Whichever way we look at it, learning and self-improvement are the closest of allies.

This alliance is perhaps best captured by the German concept of *Bildung*. Denoting a complex psychosocial process of character formation, this notion was dear to many eighteenth-century German philosophers. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), for example, understood *Bildung* not just as the acquisition of knowledge and specific skills and aptitudes, but as a much broader and also deeper process of development and socialization.[14] Our formation, moreover, is based on a constant critical dialogue with cultural norms and other people. Most importantly, it includes learning about our inner life and our place in society, resulting in a more reflective and nuanced understanding of our selves, others, and the world.

Our desire for *variety* is what motivates us to travel to faraway places, to get to know new people, and to build new relationships. A form of epistemic and experiential curiosity, it leads us to try new foods and new sexual partners, or to climb mountains. Our thirst for novelty sometimes makes us restless, driving us to search for new jobs and new challenges. If we do not seek

variation, we end up dead in life, shutting out those new experiences that keep our minds and hearts active. Our horizons will shrink, our learning will stagnate, and we will become nothing but creatures of habit.

Our fifth and final basic desire, *altruism,* includes our wish to be good and to care for others. It centers on helping those around us to grow and to achieve happiness. It can find expression in social and community engagements, such as working in a charity shop or a food bank, volunteering, or agitating for political change; it includes caring for a child or an elderly parent, supporting friends through difficult times, or taking in a rescue cat. Closely related to our ability to empathize, it is a desire to translate kindness into concrete actions. At a deeper level, altruism relates to the need to know that our actions are meaningful and that they contribute, in some way, small or big, to making the world a better place. Our yearning for self-transcendence, too, is therefore a core facet of altruism.

Most of our aspirations—whether they be material, emotional, cognitive, or spiritual—can be located within these five categories. However, each period and culture tends to value some needs more than others. Maintaining a good balance between the five basic needs is an important task not only for individuals, but for societies. If, say, a culture privileges status well above the other needs, it will inevitably be out of kilter. This state of imbalance will be clearly visible in the values that shape its literature of self-improvement.

As the following chapters show, the ancients held altruism, social relations, and learning in higher esteem than we seem to today. It is fair to say that status-related desires have become much more important in the self-improvement literature of our era. That said, the number of other-oriented, pro-social self-help texts seems to be on the rise again. COVID-19, the climate emergency, growing inequality, psychological alienation, and a resurgence of populism have prompted an increasing proportion of us to reflect anew on our atomistic conception of the self, and its adverse impact on social structures and the environment.

The desire to improve ourselves is above all related to our need to learn and to develop our faculties and moral qualities. Many consider this to be quite simply our primary existential task. The belief in the possibility of self-improvement gives us purpose and hope for a better future. It rests on the conviction that our qualities can be cultivated and that we have the capacity for lifelong learning. The American psychologist Carol S. Dweck refers to this attitude as the "growth mindset." As opposed to people with a fixed mindset, who believe that our skills, abilities, and intelligence are immutable, people with a growth mindset believe that they can develop.[15] Dweck has shown that these two mindsets have wide-ranging consequences. They dramatically impact the degree to which we seek new challenges, attempt proactively to develop our skills and abilities, and learn from our failures. While we may all have different temperaments and talents, our belief in our ability to learn is a significant determinant of our success in life.

Crucially, this belief is also of wider social importance. As the German *Bildung* philosophers knew well, inner and outer transformation are interrelated. What would happen if we all simply let our potential go to waste? If nobody sought to stretch themselves, there would be no progress—neither social, emotional, nor technological. We would collectively stagnate, perhaps even regress. There would be no innovation and no creativity. None of the global challenges that we face today would be addressed. We would not seek to develop new social imaginaries and would stop searching for solutions to the many urgent crises we need to tackle. Moreover, as a society we would not seek to hone potential, but would instead fixate only on talent that is already in evidence. Individually and collectively, then, we must take our desire for self-improvement seriously. For we all have a lot to learn—including from history and from other cultures.

At the most fundamental level, our desire to improve ourselves, and the belief that this is possible, is an act of rebellion against the idea of determinism. Engaging in the act of self-improvement is our—however flawed—effort to exert control over our lives. It is an attempt to defy whatever forces we may blame for our perceived insufficiencies: nature or nurture, genes or the

environment, God, karma, fate, or the constellation of the planets. Our belief in the improvability of the self can therefore be seen as a powerful proclamation of defiance, an assertion of agency in a world where it is all too easy to feel powerless and adrift.

CHAPTER ONE

Know Thyself

GENUINE SELF-KNOWLEDGE HAS to be the starting point for any attempt to improve ourselves. Without a proper understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, we cannot determine what needs to be improved and how that might be possible. The Delphic maxim "Know Thyself" is therefore an ever-present mantra in the literature of self-improvement. But knowing ourselves—truly understanding who we are—is by no means easy. The ancient Greeks not only appreciated the vital importance of self-knowledge, but also knew how difficult it is to achieve. To remind themselves of this most essential of tasks, they carved the motto above the portal to the Temple of Apollo.

The Greek philosopher Socrates (470–399 BCE) went even further, declaring that the unexamined life is not worth living. He proclaimed self-knowledge as an absolute good, indeed as our highest virtue. While he put it rather starkly, it is true that if we remain in the dark about our natural preferences, our values, and our hopes for the future, it will be very difficult to change anything at all about ourselves. If we do not understand our basic motivations and fears, we will be tossed around by our emotions like small vessels adrift on a choppy sea. We will be controlled by forces that remain incomprehensible to us, and we will not be able to navigate toward the shore.

When he was put on trial for corrupting the youth of Athens in 399 BCE, Socrates's defense was that he did not know much about anything at all. But his strategy backfired, for, as Socrates knew well, admitting the limits of our knowledge is in fact a sign of wisdom. In Plato's *Five Dialogues,* Socrates reflects: "So I withdrew and thought to myself: 'I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.' "[1] The jury, unconvinced by his defense, found him guilty, and Socrates was sentenced to death.

Socratic self-knowledge, then, is anchored in knowing what we do not know, in a lucid awareness of our own shortcomings and prejudices. Importantly, however, Socratic self-knowledge is not the fruit of solitary introspection alone. The philosopher's favored method was naturally the Socratic one, which involves asking probing questions and pointing out inconsistencies in other people's arguments and beliefs. That way, Socrates hoped to guide us toward a fuller grasp of the truth.

Conversations with wise teachers, analysts, and friends can be powerful catalysts for acquiring self-knowledge. But how can we deepen our self-knowledge on our own? One tool, though ultimately limited, is personality theories, which give us an idea of our basic preferences. The idea that we can be classified according to our personality type can be traced all the way back to the ancient physicians Hippocrates and Galen. Their model of the four basic temperaments continues to shape current personality type theories and a range of widely used psychometric tests.[2]

According to the depth psychologist C. G. Jung, we can also acquire self-knowledge by studying myths, fairy tales, dreams, and folklore.[3] The tales of old can be windows into the collective unconscious, revealing the hidden archetypal patterns that structure our lives. Stories that follow the hero's journey blueprint, for example, can teach us about the important threshold moments that we all have to master.

The most nuanced understanding of ourselves, however, is gained by paying careful attention to our cognitive processes, by

observing our emotional reactions, and by reflecting on our past experiences. The founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, has shown in troubling detail just how much we are shaped by our pasts. That said, there continues to be a lively debate about the extent to which we can emancipate ourselves from our established patterns of thought and behavior.

Before we analyze more thoroughly the different ways of gaining a deeper knowledge of ourselves, we need to clarify our conception of that self. For there is no universal agreement on what a "self" really is. There are, for example, crucial differences between East Asian and Western notions of selfhood.[4] The philosopher Julian Baggini argues that there are three main ways of conceptualizing the self: the "no-self" (as found in Buddhist traditions), the relational self (as found in Confucianism and certain Japanese traditions), and the atomized self (as found in most, but by no means all, Western accounts of selfhood).[5]

The Buddhist notion of the self is the trickiest one for Westerners to understand, for it is rooted in a conception of the world that is not dualistic. Buddhists believe that our selves have no lasting, unchanging essence. Instead, we consist of five impermanent aggregates: our physical body, sensations and feelings, perceptions, mental activity, and consciousness. These aggregates bundle together in constantly changing constellations. What we think of as the self is therefore merely an assemblage of fleeting processes.[6] And neither is the self a separate and discrete entity—for we are connected with all things living and dead. Paradoxically, then, true Buddhist self-knowledge is to understand that there is no permanent self to begin with. Understanding the self in a Buddhist manner means fathoming our true nature, and letting go of our preoccupation with the self as a fixed and isolated unit.

The question of whether we are relational at heart—social animals, born to cooperate and support one another—or whether we are selfish, designed to secure advantages for ourselves and to maximize our pleasure, is both crucial and highly divisive. How we view the human—our basic nature and our core mission—depends to a large extent on our politics and values. What is more, conceptions of selfhood have not only changed dramatically

throughout history and across cultures, but they are also discipline-dependent. Biologists, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists will all come up with radically different answers as to how to define the self.

Historians can identify the beliefs about selfhood that were dominant at a particular time relatively easily because they were widely shared. Our own age, however, is marked by eclecticism. Our self-help landscape testifies to the often wildly conflicting scientific, spiritual, and political views of the self that coexist. Today, we may imagine ourselves as isolated or as relational, as rational or as predominantly governed by our emotions. We may understand ourselves in purely material terms or as embodied. We may still think of the self as a spiritual entity amenable to salvation. Or we may experience ourselves as autonomous agents, able to control our own destinies—or else as helpless, irrevocably shaped by our upbringing and environment. These different conceptions have wide-ranging consequences. Are we preprogrammed to behave and feel in a certain way, as many evolutionists, psychoanalysts, and behaviorists would have it? Or is our bio-social makeup characterized by plasticity, as most neuroscientists and self-help writers argue? Is the self a work-in-progress, or does it have fixed attributes? And, perhaps most importantly, which of our qualities are changeable and which are not?

Theorists of temperament and personality type tend to assume that we are defined by a fairly fixed set of behavioral preferences, which can be used to classify and categorize us. This idea can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and the physician Hippocrates (ca. 460–370 BCE). His typology of the four basic temperaments is rooted in humor theory. Established in the fifth century BCE, this theory was developed further by the Greek physician Galen of Pergamum (129–ca. 216 CE). Humor theory was so influential that it remained the dominant medical paradigm until the advent of modern medicine in the nineteenth century.[7] The idea of four basic human temperaments, too, persisted for millennia. We can still feel the repercussions of the Hippocratic temperament typology today.

Humor theory suggests that we are made up of four bodily fluids, or humors: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. These four humors need to be in balance; otherwise, serious disturbances to our physical and mental health will ensue. Each humor is also associated with specific qualities and with one of the four elements: blood is aligned with warmth and moisture, and the element air; yellow bile with warmth, dryness, and fire; black bile with coldness, dryness, and earth; and phlegm with coldness, moisture, and water. Furthermore, each of the humors is also related to a particular temperament. Blood is associated with the sanguine temperament, yellow bile with the choleric temperament, black bile with the melancholic temperament, and phlegm with the phlegmatic temperament. The characteristics of the soul, Galen writes in *On the Temperaments,* follow the mixtures of the body. Humor theory, then, explained not only acute and chronic physical disturbances, but also our long-term psychological dispositions.

The sanguine type is thought to be relaxed, optimistic, and outgoing, while the phlegmatic character is stable, calm, and self-contained, bordering on the lethargic. Those with a choleric temperament are dominant, prone to wrath and outbursts of aggression, while the melancholic is brooding, depressive, and inward-looking. The many typologies of temperament that have emerged since Galen are essentially variations of this model. We can clearly see here the origins of Jungian and other more recent theories of personality types. We might now describe the sanguine, for instance, as extroverted feelers with a high social intelligence, and the choleric as extroverted thinkers, happy to lead and, on occasion, to bully. The phlegmatic map onto the category of introverted feelers, who are in touch with their intuition. The melancholic are introverted thinkers, prone to brooding. Knowing our temperament, then, and accepting the core traits that are associated with it, constitutes one of the oldest and most basic forms of self-knowledge.

The temperament that attracted most attention in the past was the melancholic. Melancholia was associated with "causeless sorrow and fear"—which we might now describe as symptoms of

depression and anxiety. It was also aligned with a bitter, withdrawn, and occasionally misanthropic disposition. Melancholics often caused concern and sometimes evoked dislike. There were those who even thought of them as a danger to social cohesion. At the same time, however, melancholia was also associated with genius, art, scholarship, and creativity. In some circles, it was valorized, even celebrated—most notably by the Romantics.[8]

Three Books on Life (1489) is the first self-improvement handbook specifically addressed to melancholics and "learned people." Written by the Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), it instructs gloomy knowledge-seekers on how to stay healthy and to live long and productive lives. In his wild mélange of astrology, astronomy, alchemy, and white magic, Ficino shows us how we can benefit from planetary constellations and draw on their specific energies. It is only by living in harmony with cosmic patterns that we can truly thrive, he believes. His thinking was very much in line with the then-current assumption that there were essential analogies between the micro- and the macrocosmic patterns of the universe.

But it is Ficino's advice on the recognition of our "natural bent" that is most important for our exploration of self-knowledge. "To live well and prosper," he writes, "first know your natural bent, your star, your genius, and the place suitable to these; here live. Follow your natural profession." First and foremost, we must find out and embrace our true calling, the one activity we enjoy most in life: "Assuredly for this above all else you were made by nature—the activity which from tender years you do, speak, play-act, choose, dream, imitate; that activity which you try more frequently, which you perform more easily, in which you make the most progress, which you enjoy above all else, which you leave off unwillingly." Only if we find and follow our natural bent will our undertakings be supported by the heavens.

If we fail to discover our natural bent, and our natural work, and even our natural habitat, we cannot prosper. If, for example, we choose a profession contrary to our genius, we "will find fortune adverse and will sense that the heavens are [our] enemy." There are two kinds of people, Ficino warns, who are unfortunate

beyond the rest: the do-nothings and the misfits. The former "vegetate lazily when all the time the ever-moving heavens are continually inciting them to activity."[9] The misfits, however, labor in vain, because they are working not just against the grain of their own nature, but against the patterns of the cosmos. Living in harmony with our celestial patron enables us to tap fully into our potential, while battling against the order of the universe will result in complete exhaustion. The heavens will drain our resources and thwart our ambitions, and all our efforts will be for naught.

Ficino's self-improvement philosophy, then, amounts to a "know thyself" creed with both an astrological and a very practical spin. Beneath the astro-magical aspects of his model hides a timeless lesson: the importance of recognizing our natural talents and preferences. First of all, we need to establish what they are. In a crucial second step, they must inform our professional choices. By asking us to choose the external conditions that are most suitable to our internal dispositions, Ficino goes further than his predecessors. Socrates was interested in showing us the limits of our knowledge. Galen encouraged us to understand our basic temperament. Ficino's emphasis, by contrast, is on deliberately engineering fit. He urges us consciously to choose the environment that harmonizes most with our needs.

Applying Ficino's insight, we can draw some fairly obvious conclusions. Nervous introverts, for example, would be well advised not to work in a bar. People-loving adrenalin-cravers might not be suited to life as a librarian. Kind-hearted carers might make wonderful social workers and nurses, but in all likelihood be abysmal insurance salespeople. In this, we are not dissimilar to plants, for fig and olive trees will flourish in the sun, but not in the shade. Richard N. Bolles knew this well. His book *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (1970) has been described as "the world's most popular job-hunting guide."[10] It is structured precisely around Ficino's idea of engineering as good a match as possible between our "natural bent" and our profession. According to Bolles, it is necessary to take an inventory of the self, which enables us first to establish and then to plan our careers around our key passions and preferences.

Our current concept of self-knowledge includes not only an understanding of our temperament and natural preferences, but also an acknowledgment of how our past may have shaped us. By introducing the notion of the unconscious, the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), ushered in a dramatic paradigm shift. Our mind, Freud argues, is like an iceberg: only a small part of it is observable, while the rest drifts in the murky depths of our unconscious. Only when we pull our darkest desires into the light of the conscious, where we can examine them calmly and analytically, will they begin to lose their monstrosity, and much of their influence. Although Freud demonstrated in great detail the disconcerting power of the unconscious over our emotions and behaviors, he also remained a firm believer in reason as a panacea for our problems. He suggests that all of our seemingly irrational actions in the present can be explained rationally, by understanding our repressed desires and our past patterns.

"Psychoanalysis is often about turning our ghosts into ancestors," the neurologist Norman Doidge writes. "We are often haunted by important relationships from the past that influence us unconsciously in the present. As we work them through, they go from haunting us to becoming simply part of our history."[11] The things that tend to haunt us most are those we most rigorously try to repress. But, like the monster in any horror movie, the repressed has a tendency to return and to wreak havoc. It is very hard, if not impossible, to kill it off once and for all. The repressed is, of course, also what we do not know consciously—it is the true "other" to genuine self-knowledge.

Strictly speaking, psychoanalysis is not a form of self-help, since it requires the involvement of a third party—an analyst who acts both as an interpreter and as a projection screen. Via transference, the analyst allows us to reenact and eventually reframe key beliefs in the safe space of the consulting room. But Freud's ideas have substantially shaped modern conceptions of selfhood, and many of his basic assumptions are at work in the self-help literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. First and foremost, these are manifest in the notion that we have basic psychological patterns that are determined by childhood

events. These experiences may be responsible for our conflicts in the present. No less important is Freud's conception of critical superegos in overdrive. He has clearly shown that there is a part within ourselves that may be hostile, and that may even turn into our tormentor by constantly castigating and judging us. Last but not least, there is also Freud's famous three-part model of the human psyche, divided into the id, the ego, and the superego. It enjoys a vivid afterlife in various "mind model"–based self-help regimes.

In what is perhaps his darkest text, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud argues that culture constantly urges us to repress our aggressive impulses, which we therefore tend to internalize. Mostly in the form of guilt and self-hatred, we learn to turn them against ourselves rather than outward. Our superego can become a persecutory and even a sadistic agency, viciously lacerating the ego, constantly berating it for its failures. It is so powerful that it can even drive us to abandon the will to live altogether.

The melancholic is a classic example of someone tormented by a cruel superego. In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud outlines the core features of the melancholic, which traditionally include causeless sorrow and fear. Yet he throws a new symptom into the mix: self-hatred. As he puts it: "The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment."[12]

Melancholia is associated with loss. In a complex psychological procedure, the melancholic transforms emotions originally triggered by the loss of a love object into the loss of a stable sense of self. Above all, Freud writes, the melancholic suffers from a persistent "delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority." As he explains: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to

be cast out and punished."[13] The melancholic's energies are spent on sadistic attacks inflicted on the vulnerable ego by a judgmental superego. In other words, melancholics are quite literally consumed by self-hatred. They use up all of their energy in psychological battles with themselves. Consequently, they have very little energy left to direct outward—that is, toward other people or external projects. In the more recent literature of self-help, the ongoing impact of this idea is evident in concepts such as "negative thoughts," "negative self-talk," and "limiting beliefs."

As psychoanalysts well know, in order to become genuine self-knowledge, any kind of rational insight into our nature needs to be accompanied by emotional change. Otherwise it will remain sterile and ineffective. We may be given a sharp and accurate diagnosis of what is wrong with us, and we may even accept it intellectually, but it is unlikely that this will change our behavior in a sustainable way. For transformation can only happen when an insight permeates deeper, to a place where it affects the very structure of our feelings. It needs to change the way we experience and interpret the world. In psychoanalysis, it is the analyst who tries to build these bridges. Their main tool for bringing about such deeper transformations in the patient is transference. The analyst helps us to change our stories about ourselves, assisting us in reframing our experiences and creating kinder, more productive narratives. Analysts are existential detectives, trying to trace the origins of our discontent back to its source. Then they put this information to work to disempower our less helpful self-beliefs.

The crucial act of reframing, of "self-story" or "script" changing, is much harder to achieve by reading self-help books than it is in a therapy or coaching setting. While we may be intellectually convinced or even deeply moved by what we read, information obtained from books is bound to be less effective in challenging our more deep-seated beliefs. Self-help writers attempt this task with stories. They tend to include numerous inspirational narratives or case studies of others who may have struggled with difficulties that are similar to our own. These stories reach us on an emotional, not just intellectual, level. They are designed to pull on our heartstrings, to appeal to our empathy, and to activate our imagination. They provide us with positive

visions of what could be. It is via artfully told and inspiring case studies, combined with insightful analysis, that psychoanalytic self-help works, too. Irvin D. Yalom's *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (1989) and, more recently, Stephen Grosz's *The Examined Life: How We Lose and Find Ourselves* (2013) are beautiful examples. Both are based on the assumption that by understanding more about the inner lives of others, we will be able to gain a kind of transferable self-knowledge that we can adapt to fit our own situations.

The greatest contribution of psychoanalysis to the deeper understanding of ourselves is, paradoxically, that it reconfirms our fundamental rationality. Psychoanalysis comes up with hyperrational explanations for our seemingly most irrational behaviors. It assumes that there are patterns in our lives and that we can trace the origins of these patterns back to our childhood experiences. If we feel undesirable or deficient in some way, it is because we have had this feeling at some point in our past. If we think nobody can ever love us, or are prone to erupt in anger at seemingly trivial incidents, there will be a pattern to discover there, too. If we trace it back carefully to its beginnings, it will reveal an old wound to our ego that has continued to fester in the shadows. We are, then, much more reasonable creatures than we may think. In fact, our behaviors only seem irrational if we lack the deeper self-knowledge to provide a rational explanation.

Many modern psychologists and self-help writers are highly critical of Freud. They dislike his fairly deterministic view of human nature, the importance he places on sexuality, and the interminable and indeterminable nature of analysis. They also take issue with his emphasis on past traumas and working through our bad experiences. And they are not alone. There can be no doubt that the grand narrative of psychoanalysis has dramatically lost purchase in the twenty-first century. We tend now to prefer cheaper, quicker, science-based, and more future-oriented ways of enhancing our psyches. But in spite of their renunciation of Freud, many self-help writers continue to adhere to a number of fundamental Freudian ideas.

It is now commonly accepted that basic psychological detective work is essential for genuine self-knowledge. If we want to improve ourselves, we need to understand our past patterns. This insight features centrally in M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values, and Spiritual Growth* (1978), for example. It is present in all books that operate on the idea of "healing the inner child." In *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984), Louise L. Hay neatly sums up the Freudian notion of childhood patterns and how they may affect us later in life: "When we grow up, we have a tendency to re-create the emotional environment of our early home life," she writes. "This is not good or bad, right or wrong; it is just what we know inside as 'home.' We also tend to recreate in our personal relationships the relationships we had with our mothers or with our fathers, or what they had between them."[14] In fact, because they are so common and so widely accepted, statements of this kind now sound like truisms. But they simply show how firmly Freud's basic ideas have been woven into our wider cultural fabric.

Equally important in modern self-help is the Freudian idea of the castigating saboteur inside us that can make our lives hell. Books such as Anthony Robbins's *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Financial Destiny* (1991) urge us to work on our inner critic. They advise us to eradicate negative self-talk and negative self-beliefs, and replace them with more positive mantras. Their key priority is the strengthening of our self-esteem. But the less conscious motive of works of this kind, and also of our wider cultural obsession with self-esteem, may well be different. It relates to the desire to guard ourselves precisely against the internal horror scenario that Freud describes so vividly—that is, the danger not just of constantly sabotaging ourselves but of becoming our own torturer.

The third prominent way in which Freudian ideas persist in modern self-help is manifest in models that attempt to manage our irrational side. Freud famously divided our psychological apparatus into id, ego, and superego. Others have created their own "mind models." Thomas A. Harris, in his bestselling *I'm OK—You're OK* (1973), for example, argues that our psyche is divided into a parent, an adult, and a child. In our interactions with others,

we tend to adopt one of these positions. Ideally, we should not just be aware of the particular relational dynamics in which we find ourselves, but relate to others on an adult-to-adult basis. If we know ourselves and also understand where the other is coming from, Harris believes, we can avoid most interpersonal misunderstandings and conflicts.

Perhaps the most famous work of "mind model"–based self-help is Steve Peters's *The Chimp Paradox* (2012). Peters refers to our three "psychological brains": the "chimp" (roughly corresponding to the id, and resident in our limbic brain), the "human" (more or less the ego, located in our frontal lobes), and the "computer" (the superego, situated in our parietal brain).[15] Depending on the situation we are in, our blood supply flows from one part of the brain to another, activating specific behaviors and emotional responses. Like Freud's, Peters's is also a model based on conflicting agendas, in which different parts of our psyche do battle with one another in an endless psychomachia. Peters's self-improvement regime, too, is based on the idea that understanding more fully how our mind works will allow us to master it more effectively. However, he uses neurological language and offers evolutionary rather than psychoanalytic explanations. He promotes cognitive behavioral therapy techniques for correcting glitches in our "computer" brain and learning to manage our "chimp" brain.

Most of Peters's book focuses on chimp management techniques. For the chimp cannot be controlled, only coaxed. Crucially, we need the chimp on our side. Without it, we lack energy, instinct, and passion in our lives. In that sense, too, there are parallels to Freud's model. Freud famously compares the relationship between the ego and the id to that between a rider and his horse. The horse, he writes, provides the locomotor energy, whereas the rider has to determine the direction in which this energy is led. Without the rider's directive powers, the horse will run wild, taking the rider places he does not want to go. Without the horse, however, the rider has no powers of movement and cannot get where he wants to go either.

The American psychologist Daniel Goleman, too, knows that simply repressing our nonrational parts is not the solution. If we

want to live fulfilling and balanced lives, we need to cultivate and master our emotions. Our emotions do not just provide impulses to act but can also serve as wise guides. Our aim should not be simply to let reason reign supreme—that would lead to a dull, cold, and lifeless existence. We would, in Freud's terms, lack the vital energy and drive of the id-horse. We would lack passion and the ability to connect emotionally with others. Instead, we should seek to establish a solid balance between our two forms of intelligence.

Goleman popularized the notion of "emotional intelligence." "Emotional aptitude," he writes, "is a *meta-ability,* determining how well we can use whatever other skills we have, including raw intellect."[16] Emotional intelligence involves self-control and the ability to empathize with others and to read their emotions. Crucially, emotional intelligence rests on an understanding of our own core emotional processes.[17] The keystone of emotional intelligence is "*knowing one's emotions.*" It is a form of self-awareness that is manifest in "recognizing a feeling as it happens." For, Goleman writes, the "inability to notice our true feelings leaves us at their mercy."[18] Those of us who know our feelings are generally better pilots of our lives. Indeed, for Goleman, knowing our emotions *is* knowing ourselves.

There is a crucial difference between simply being caught up in a feeling and developing an awareness that we are being taken over by that feeling. We might, for example, feel angry about not being served quickly enough in a restaurant. Our raw anger might lead us to shout at the waiter, get testy with our partner, storm out, and write a scathing online review. If we are better trained, however, it is likely that we will not do any of these things. We might recognize the physical and emotional symptoms of anger in the moment they occur. We might explore where our anger really comes from. We might be able to detach our emotions from the situational trigger and realize how they relate to deeper anxieties. Perhaps there was a time when we felt we were not taken seriously or were not treated with respect. In other words, by noticing, naming, and analyzing our feelings, we take the wind out of their sails.

Detached self-observation is essential for knowing our emotional selves. Such self-observation entails stepping back from

our experience. It is about cultivating an awareness of our conscious thought that hovers above it rather than becoming entangled in it. Both Freud and Goleman believe that knowing ourselves is essential. Yet Goleman's emphasis is firmly on the present rather than on the past. And while Freud ultimately wishes for reason to reign supreme in our inland empires (it is, after all, the rider in his image), Goleman advocates a more harmonious power-sharing between reason and the emotions. For our head- and heart-based intelligences would both be impoverished without the input of the other.

While Freud was interested in the unconscious of the individual, his rival C. G. Jung (1875–1961) turned his attention to what he called the "collective unconscious." Jung, too, believed that we all have an individual unconscious, but he argued that there is another layer beneath it that is transpersonal. We share this second layer, which holds latent memories from our ancestral and evolutionary past, with all other members of the human species. Jung was keenly interested in myth and in symbolism in art, literature, and in our dreams. He considered all of them rich repositories of the imagery and archetypes that derive from the collective unconscious.

Jung's construct of the archetype is a timeless one, primordial and archaic in character. It expresses material from the collective unconscious in a condensed and concise form. Jung understands the archetype as a memory deposit that has arisen "through the condensation of countless processes of a similar kind." It gives a distinctive shape to "certain ever-recurring psychic experiences."[19] Jung's four most important archetypes are the persona, the anima/animus, the shadow, and the self. A classic set of twelve characters is particularly popular in the coaching and self-help world. This dozen comprises the ruler, the creator, the sage, the trickster, the explorer, the rebel, the hero, the magician, the everyman, the innocent, the caregiver, and the lover. Jungian archetypes, too, can be tools for self-knowledge. They can help us to identify the ancient blueprints for the roles we play, the behaviors in which we engage, and our natural predilections.

Jungian archetypes are also highly relevant for self-knowledge in relation to myth. According to Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), the teaching of self-knowledge is one of the primary functions of myth. A comparative mythologist by training, Campbell established the theory of the "monomyth"—the idea that all myths are essentially variations of some basic archetypal narratives. One of the most important myths is the hero's journey, which Campbell explores in depth in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Hero's journey myths follow a cyclical departure/return structure. Their key stages include the call to adventure, with the hero venturing forth into the unknown. The unknown may take the form of a dark wood, an underground kingdom, caves, the sea, the belly of a beast, or lands in which fabulous creatures roam. The hero then encounters an obstacle and needs to engage in battle—with a creature, an enemy, or a temptation—finally winning a decisive victory. He returns from his adventure transformed, often with a boon, an elixir, or a message in tow. There may also be magical helpers, protectors, and mentors, and, of course, dangerous temptations—frequently in the form of seductive women.

The hero's adventure often begins with a lack or a loss, and ends in a recovery of what has been lost or was lacking. Like many other successful Disney productions, the plot of *Frozen II* (2019) follows the hero's journey pattern. At the beginning, something is not right in Queen Elsa's kingdom. She hears voices, and nature is acting up. Elsa is, quite literally, called upon to venture into the unknown. She embarks on a journey into an enchanted forest, and later seeks the mythical river Ahtohallan, which, as legend has it, contains the answers to all secrets. Entering into the glacial heart of the frozen river, she penetrates deeper and deeper in search of the answers she seeks, putting her life in peril. Eventually she discovers the disconcerting truth about herself and her family's past. Armed with new self-knowledge, and aided by the brave actions of her sister Ana, Elsa finally emerges from the cold depth of her unconscious onto a higher spiritual plane. Her outfit is now all white. She returns to save the people of her kingdom, and henceforth lives happily in the woods, in harmony with nature and the elements.

century. Many tend now to associate talk of the collective unconscious with an esoteric, new-agey kind of mysticism. Jung's personality type model, by contrast, is still proving influential. As we have seen, the idea that we can be classified according to our basic temperaments is not new, but reaches back all the way to Greek antiquity. Modern psychologists have continued to search for universal types and models that capture our fundamental differences. But by far the most influential attempt to establish such a characterology is Jung's.

In *Psychological Types* (1921), Jung argues that there are two main categories of people: introverts and extroverts. The key difference between these two types is the direction of their interest. Extroverts direct it outward, toward people and external objects, whereas introverts are primarily preoccupied with their inner self. This difference is crucial, because it determines how we interpret and perceive the world. For introverts, the subjective factor rules supreme. This can result in a "devaluation of the object. The object is not given the importance that belongs to it by right. Just as it plays too great a role in the extraverted attitude, it has too little meaning for the introvert."[24]

Jung presents an evolutionary reason for our fundamental differences. Always intent on expending and propagating themselves, extroverts are characterized by a high rate of fertility and low powers of defense. Introverts, by contrast, invest the lion's share of their energy in self-preservation, with a resulting lower fertility rate.[25] By producing both introverts and extroverts, nature tries it on both ways. Sometimes the proactive and sometimes the defensive and cautious approach is bound to be more suitable for ensuring the survival of the species.

While introversion and extroversion are the basic "attitudes of consciousness," Jung also specifies four "functions of consciousness": feeling, thinking, sensation, and intuition. According to our predilections, there can thus be extroverted thinking types, introverted sensing types, extroverted feeling types, and so on. If we have a preference for sensing, for example, we will privilege seeing and hearing over our intuition. We may be realists, empiricists, and lovers of "tangible reality" with a highly developed sense for objective facts.[26] As an extroverted intuitive

type, by contrast, we may not be bound by accepted reality-values, but may have a keen nose for novelty and possibilities. We may feel suffocated by stable conditions and constantly ferret out new possibilities, choosing entrepreneurial or speculative professions, such as investment banking.

It is fair to say that Jung is generally not particularly positive about introverts. Partly this is because he was an introvert himself, so we can interpret this negativity as a form of self-criticism. But we can also see his stance as the result of a broader cultural bias against introversion. His negative take contrasts starkly with that of Susan Cain, whose beautiful hymn to introversion, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (2012), perceptively analyzes the wider cultural prejudice against introverts. Whereas Cain bolsters introverted egos by outlining their many gifts and special talents, Jung writes that introverts' strong disregard for external objects, including other people, can make others feel unimportant or unwanted. If we fall into the introverted category, we may be shy, taciturn, and aloof, and appear arrogant, cold, and inflexible. If we are thinking introverts, moreover, we may overcomplicate things and constantly become entangled in our own scruples and misgivings. If we are really tragic cases, we may even "develop into a misanthropic bachelor with a childlike heart."[27]

While Jung sometimes found it difficult to hide his distaste for introverts, the intention behind his characterology was neither to judge nor to rank the different types, but simply to understand them. The core lesson to learn from his reflections on type is that we all have natural preferences, resulting in different ways of looking at the world. We all perceive through specific lenses, filtering out information or focusing on completely different things. As Jung puts it, "Although it is true that everyone orients himself in accordance with the data supplied by the outside world, we see every day that the data in themselves are only relatively decisive."[28] The better we understand what our preferences and lenses are, then, the better we understand ourselves.

During the Second World War, Katharine C. Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers, both ardent fans of Jung's work,

decided to develop his ideas further. The result was the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI accepts extroversion and introversion as basic type indicators, along with the four functions of consciousness, thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuition. However, Briggs and Briggs Myers also added a preference for judging or perceiving as a further function pair. Today, the Myers-Briggs typology is still a widely employed personality assessment tool. It is used for personal and leadership development, recruitment purposes, team enhancement, and even on dating sites.

Another widely used Jungian psychometric tool that has much traction in today's business world is Insights Discovery Profiles. Users of the Insights product answer twenty-five questions; the responses are converted into a detailed personality report listing our natural preferences, strengths, and weaknesses. Insights uses color coding, dividing people into cool blue types (thinking introverts), fiery red types (extroverted thinkers), sunshine yellow types (extroverted feelers), and earth green types (introverted feelers). These types and the colors are clearly related to Hippocrates's four temperaments, with blue mapping onto the melancholic, red onto the choleric, yellow onto the sanguine, and green onto the phlegmatic temperament.

On its website, Insights describes its services in the following terms: "We bring self-awareness to people, teams, leaders and orga-nisations. That's where business breakthroughs happen. We provide insights for your people—increasing their self-awareness, helping them form better relationships, and becoming more effective at their jobs. . . . Self-understanding is transformative for your people; self-aware people are transformative for your business."[29] In this marketing snippet, we can clearly see the instrumentalization of self-knowledge. It is presented as a tool for productivity enhancement and gaining competitive advantages. Here, self-knowledge is presented not so much as a value but as a skill, even a product that we may purchase. It is worth having because it turns us into better communicators, more productive team players, more effective relationship builders, and generally more efficient workers.

These may indeed all be consequences or welcome side effects of self-knowledge. There is nothing wrong with these aims per se; indeed, most of us aspire to possessing these qualities. It is also perfectly reasonable that our employers would wish for us to have them—for nobody enjoys working with catastrophic communicators, bad team players, and colleagues with poor impulse control who constantly clash with their clients and coworkers. And it is very likely that such people are also bad for business. However, self-knowledge has been recast here as a means to achieve an end. Stripped of its ancient connection to wisdom, it is no longer considered a value in its own right. Instead, self-knowledge has been turned into yet another tool for realizing the diktat of relentless efficiency enhancement.

While still very popular in the self-help and business world, typological approaches such as Jung's have fallen from favor among psychologists. Instead, they have searched for more scientific ways to capture our fundamental differences. The most famous attempt, the so-called "Big Five" trait theory, rose to prominence in the early 1990s. It is based on a lexical analysis of descriptors of common language. The five factors used to describe the human psyche in this model are openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (they form the acronym OCEAN). How we score on these traits is measured by rating statements such as "I am the life of the party," "I don't mind being the center of attention," and "I have a soft heart." Openness refers to the degree to which we seek and appreciate new experiences and intellectual stimulation. It also relates to our ability to tolerate ambiguity. Conscientiousness measures how organized, disciplined, industrious, and goal-orientated we are. Extroversion relates to our need for stimulation from others and from the outside world. Agreeableness measures our potential for aggression, politeness, compassion, and the extent to which we care about what others think about us. Neuroticism, finally, encompasses our general emotional stability, our ability to cope with stressful situations, and our tendency to withdraw.[30]

According to psychologist and self-help author Richard Wiseman, not only do these character traits "tend to remain unchanged" throughout our life, but they also influence almost

every aspect of our behavior, including "relationships, performance in the workplace, leisure activities, consumer choice, religious and political beliefs, creativity, sense of humor and health."[31] Wiseman puts forth an even more disconcerting claim: "Most psychologists now believe that the apparent complexity of human personality is an illusion. In reality, people vary on just five fundamental dimensions."[32] Judging by the prevalence of Big Five and other personality tests in modern self-help texts, many self-help writers appear to agree with this rather reductive view of the human psyche.

There is no doubt that these and other kinds of personality tests can capture some of our basic traits and cognitive preferences. Often, they can be surprisingly, almost spookily, accurate, as in the case of Insights Discovery Profiles. However, they remain limited tools. The Big Five model, for example, has been shown to be methodologically flawed. It is not nearly as effective in explaining or predicting behavior as is often claimed. And in no way does it include all of the "normal" traits of human personality, let alone those deemed "abnormal."[33] The Big Five have also been described in terms of a "psychology of the stranger." The test refers to the obvious parts of our personality, while revealing very little about our more private selves.[34]

Personality tests based either on Jung's typology or on the Big Five model can give us important pointers to our preferences, ones we may not have been consciously aware of, and in that respect, these tests are useful. However, they are also reductive, each with its specific flaws and blind spots.[35] While they may provide appealing labels that resonate with us, by putting us into boxes they can also halt growth rather than stimulating it. Labels can be experienced as positive and helpful, but they can also lead to selective attention and create fixed mindsets. If we grow too attached to them, we may become blind to the many instances when we do not live up (or down) to our type. Our behavior, moreover, tends to be highly context-dependent, and our type affiliations may vary accordingly. We might be quite extroverted and chatty when in a family setting, for example, but very reluctant to speak during meetings at work.

never be gained purely by theoretical introspection or reading about different models of the mind, but only through trials and tribulations, and in dialogue with others. It needs to be acquired on our own journeys—heroic or otherwise.

CHAPTER TWO

Control Your Mind

THE BELIEF THAT WE can control our feelings by controlling our thoughts is both the most simple and also the most radical premise on which most modern self-help rests. The promise of sovereignty over our minds is highly attractive. If we were truly able to control our thoughts, nothing could ever rattle us, no matter how bad the cards we are dealt in life. The prospect of control over our cognitive processes is even more appealing in times of uncertainty and change. The more unstable our external circumstances are, the more we long to establish stability within ourselves. But the dream of being master in our own house is much older than we may think.

The idea first emerged in ancient Greece around 300 BCE among the philosophers of the Stoa. The school of Hellenistic philosophy known as Stoicism flourished in the Greek and Roman worlds until the third century CE, its name deriving from the place where the early Stoics taught their doctrine, the *stoa poikile*, or "painted porch," which looked out to the ancient agora of Athens. The significance of the porch is that it was an open public space rather than an enclosed private one, like Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde Park. One of the many achievements of the Stoics was that they democratized the venture of philosophy: anyone could drop by and listen to their teachings.

We now tend to associate the Stoics with the repression of the emotions and imagine them to have been cold and heartless, lacking empathy and a sense of humor. A bit like Data in *Star Trek,* we are inclined to think of them as people who have trouble computing human emotions. But this is a misconception. Rather than arguing that we should put a lid on our emotions, the Stoics believed we should evaluate them rationally and reason ourselves out of upsetting emotional states. Their method was a "working-through" maneuver, but one that was purely analytical in spirit. Reason, not repression, was their solution to all of our emotional challenges.

In that respect, Stoic thought is strikingly modern. Stoics such as Seneca (ca. 2 BCE–65 CE), Epictetus (ca. 55–135 CE), and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) believed that all suffering is in our minds. It is caused not by external events but by our reactions to those events—that is, by faulty judgments and unrealistic expectations. The Stoics also held fantastically pragmatic views about how we should spend our mental energies. Given that most external events are beyond our control, they believed that it is pointless to worry about them. Our evaluations of these events, by contrast, are completely within our control, for we are ultimately rational animals. Therefore, they recommend that we should not attach significance to any external phenomena or circumstance. Instead, all our mental energies should be directed inward, with a view to controlling our minds.

Stoic thought has a rich and thriving afterlife. A modern Christian version of Stoic principles can be found in Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer. The prayer has become a core mantra in twelve-step programs such as AA: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), with its emphasis on disempowering our negative thoughts and limiting beliefs by confronting them with more rational and objective assessments, is also based on Stoic principles. The notion of resilience, too—the idea that if we cannot change our circumstances, we should concentrate on building up our inner resources instead so that we can cope more effectively

with adversity—belongs in this tradition. Resilience is essentially about "bouncing back better."

The Stoic approach is highly reasonable—perhaps to a fault. There are other advocates of mind control who are situated on the opposite end of the spectrum, with theories more akin to magical than to rational thinking. The Stoics were absolutely clear about what we can control (our inner world) and what we cannot control (external events). Yet a highly influential group of self-help writers alleges that by controlling our inner world we *can* influence the outer world as well. Writers such as Napoleon Hill, who wrote the bestselling *Think and Grow Rich* (1937), and more recently Rhonda Byrne, author of *The Secret* (2006), argue that our thoughts are "magnetic." If we think positive thoughts, we will automatically attract positive outcomes—and vice versa: if we are gloomy pessimists, bad things will happen to us. The illusion of omnipotence that Byrne and other mystic-esoteric self-help writers promote is dangerous in many ways. According to their logic, everything bad that happens to us is entirely our fault, and that includes illnesses, assault, poverty, and other misfortunes.

Positive psychology, which rose to prominence in the 1990s, sits somewhere between the two extremes of the Stoic and the magical thinking traditions. It argues that how we think about ourselves can have an impact on our performance and achievements. However, it sidesteps the overestimation of the powers of our rational faculties, and also avoids unsubstantiated claims about the ability of our thoughts to influence external events. Positive psychology is particularly concerned with self-belief and positive self-talk. It, too, advocates that we control our minds, by urging us to focus on the importance of positive and optimistic thinking. Positive psychology also mobilizes the powers of our imagination in this task. The Stoics, by contrast, trusted only reason with managing our emotions. It is to their ideas that we shall turn first.

The greatest Stoic thinkers, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, all believed that philosophy's key function is to help us reform our character and to provide practical advice on how we may achieve this aim.[1] They propose philosophical action plans for

living a good and virtuous life, in harmony with divine providence and society. Epictetus's famous essay *Of Human Freedom* includes chapter titles that could easily feature in a modern self-help book, such as "Concerning what is in our power and what is not," "How a person can preserve their proper character in any situation," "On satisfaction," "How we should struggle with circumstance," and "Every circumstance represents an opportunity."

It is no coincidence that Stoicism flourished in times of great political instability. Changeable and often cruel emperors held absolute power over the life and death of their subjects. It was not uncommon for men in influential political positions suddenly to fall from grace and to be banished from Rome. Some were beheaded or instructed to commit suicide simply because they had aroused the emperor's jealousy. Epictetus knew a thing or two about such dramatic changes of fortune. Consequently, he sought to establish robust psychological defenses against them. Before he became a philosopher, he was a crippled Greek slave. He was eventually freed by his Roman master, who recognized his considerable intellectual gifts. But even as a free man he was not safe. Banished from the capital by governors envious of his popularity, Epictetus had to set up his school in the provinces and start all over again.

Seneca's life provides another captivating case study in instability. Early in his career, the statesman, philosopher, and author of tragedies was sentenced to death by Caligula. He was accused of having committed adultery with the emperor's sister. Although Ca-ligula's successor, Claudius, commuted the death sentence to banishment, Seneca had to spend eight long and lonely years in exile in Corsica. Eventually, he was recalled to Rome to teach Claudius's son, who would become the infamous emperor Nero. But Nero clearly ignored the teachings of his mentor. Violent and vindictive, he became renowned for his cruelty. In 59 CE, Nero ordered the killing of his own mother. Justifiably worried, Seneca withdrew from public life and, as a precaution, donated his entire fortune to his former charge. But the gesture failed to appease. In the aftermath of a botched plot to kill Nero, in which Seneca may or may not have been involved, the philosopher was ordered to commit suicide.

spike for a few days or weeks, only to return to where it was before. What is worse, our possessions also make us more vulnerable to the pain of loss. For while we will feel no increase in our contentment in the long run whenever we purchase stuff or gain in status, we are very able to feel acute pain when we lose these things. The more we value things beyond our control, then, the less control we have. Freedom, Epictetus concludes, is "not achieved by satisfying desire but by eliminating it."[5]

But how realistic is it to aspire to such a high-minded nonmaterialistic mindset? Even the Stoics were ready to admit that some of the external phenomena beyond our control are preferable to others. It is obviously nicer to be wealthy, healthy, loved, and sated with a roof over our head than the opposite. Seneca writes that he is not against us possessing these things as such. But he wants to ensure that we possess them "without tremors." We can only achieve that by convincing ourselves that we can live happily without them, and "by always regarding them as being on the point of vanishing."[6]

By contrast, Epictetus—generally more hard-nosed than Seneca—seems positively to welcome blows of fortune. They provide us with essential training and ultimately turn us into better, stronger people. Life is suffering; bad things will happen. And when they do, we can use our bad luck to test our resolve: "So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom God, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck. For what purpose? To turn you into Olympic-class material."[7] Adversity, then, is to be seen as a sparring partner. All our challenges are opportunities to strengthen our inner resolve. Everything that fortune throws at him, Epictetus writes, "I will transform into a blessing, a boon—something dignified, even enviable."[8]

Predictably, the Stoics do not abide self-pity. They are particularly unsympathetic to people complaining about their parents. There is no room in their philosophy for the idea of victimhood or psychological damage. On parents and childhood wounds—a topic on which much ink is expended in modern self-help—Epictetus has the following to say: "'It's my bad luck to have awful parents.' Well, you couldn't very well choose them beforehand, saying 'Let this man have intercourse with this

woman, at this particular moment, so that I can be conceived.' Your parents had to come first, then you had to be born the way you are, of parents the way *they* are. Does that mean you have to be miserable?"[9] Both Epictetus and Seneca cavalierly eliminate all the drama and sense of injustice from our formation years. Their hyper-rational view runs completely counter to our psychoanalytically inflected understandings of our mental troubles. The Stoics make no allowance at all for the impact of traumatic experiences. There is also no attempt to understand why some of us are more resilient than others. This is clearly a blind spot in their philosophy. Almost everything that is of interest to present-day psychologists the Stoics would dismiss as weakness and a failure of our logical faculty to control our passions.

The question of responsibility in Stoic thought, finally, is also provoking. On the one hand, we are completely released from any blame for external events. In some cases, this lack of accountability may be experienced as a relief. The Stoics believe that we can do very little indeed to impact our surroundings. Epictetus writes: "The gods have released you from accountability for your parents, your siblings, your body, your possessions—for death and for life itself. They made you responsible only for what is in your power—the proper use of impressions. So why take on the burden of matters which you cannot answer for? You are only making unnecessary problems for yourself."[10] Many of us might feel uncomfortable with this deterministic worldview—we like to think of ourselves as possessing much more agency than the Stoics suggest we have. However, the Stoics compensate by arguing that we are 100 percent responsible for our inner life—our judgments, beliefs, values, and desires. According to that logic, experiencing grief, sadness, anxiety, depression, or anger is our own fault, too. Epictetus and Seneca would judge that these emotions are the result of false interpretations and wrong expectations. They would remind us that it is not just within our power but indeed our primary duty to manage these. In reality, this is far from easy, and not always possible.

The Roman emperor-by-adoption Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) was not a professional philosopher, but his famous *Meditations* read

like the (albeit highly sophisticated) journal of a Stoic trainee. Private reflections, they include self-examinations, mental exercises, and numerous maxims that beautifully capture Stoic thought, revealing the efforts of someone who tried to put Stoic doctrine into practice in his everyday life. They also demonstrate just how much cognitive discipline being a Stoic requires. Aurelius's text is teeming with imperatives such as "remember," "keep in mind," and "do not forget." The *Meditations* not only record the journey of a man in search of self-mastery, but function as a spiritual-philosophical guidebook for its author.

The *Meditations* focus solely on the inner life. There is no mention of any of the external events with which Aurelius had to contend during his reign—in spite of the fact that they included fairly major ones such as the flooding of the Tiber, famine, and the plague, which broke out in 166–167 CE, as well as various attempts to usurp him. The *Meditations* are not about mastery of the external world but, in true Stoic fashion, purely about cognitive self-mastery. They chronicle Aurelius's attempt to reassert his rule not over his subjects and his enemies but over himself. For him, philosophy was above all a form of self-therapy.

Aurelius practiced various mental exercises. One entails the act of disassembling something into its constituent parts, thereby rendering it strange and alien. The purpose of this technique is to create emotional distance. We should seek to show things "naked, see their shoddiness, strip away their own boastful account of themselves."[11] This "denuding of human experience" is an excellent Stoic strategy for putting things into perspective.[12] On food and sex, for example, Aurelius writes: "How good it is, when you have roast meat or suchlike foods before you, to impress on your mind that this is the dead body of a fish, this the dead body of a bird or pig. . . . And in sexual intercourse that it is no more than the friction of a membrane and a spurt of mucus ejected."[13] Another technique Aurelius favors for honing our ability to respond more rationally to external events is to remember the vanity of all our desires. He constantly reminds himself of the transience of phenomena, the flux and cyclical nature of change, and, of course, the great equalizer that is death. Like Epictetus and Seneca, Aurelius is cavalier about the end. Death, so what, he

shrugs: "You embarked, you set sail, you made port. Go ashore now. . . . You should always look on human life as short and cheap. Yesterday sperm: tomorrow a mummy or ashes."[14]

For Aurelius, too, the crux is the control of both our desires and our judgments. We should only desire that which happens to us. In other words, we should completely align our wishes with the workings of divine providence. Assuming any kind of agency over external events and wanting what we do not have is not just illogical but sets us up for failure. One of his most beautiful lines, which captures in a nutshell the importance of adjusting our expectations, is "Only a madman looks for figs in winter."[15] There is much wisdom in that image. If we want a friend who is caring and supportive, for example, we need to befriend someone who has the ability to act in this way. We should not choose someone who is completely preoccupied with their own dramas and has little or no capacity to give. If we know that our mothers, fathers, or partners are constitutionally incapable of expressing approval, we need to seek that approval elsewhere. There is no point in trying to impress the unimpressible. In the same spirit, if we want our portrait painted, we need to go to someone who can actually paint. We often have expectations of people that they simply cannot fulfill. The Stoics argue that it is always our unwise expectations that do us harm, not the actions of others. Aurelius advises: "Harm to you cannot subsist in another's directing mind, nor indeed in any turn or change of circumstance. Where, then? In that part of you which judges harm. So no such judgment, and all is well."[16] In other words, it is we alone who can make ourselves hurt. We are the sole creators of our inner pain. This is an insight that is both frightening and liberating.

Finally, Aurelius, like the other Stoics, puts great emphasis on man not just as a rational but also as a quintessentially social animal. His conception of the self is fundamentally relational—we are all part of a larger social collective. We should treat each other with kindness and respect, and always think about the social consequences of our actions: "What does not benefit the hive does not benefit the bee either."[17] "We were born for cooperation," he writes, "like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against

to them. Everyone suffers bad fortune: that is simply the way things are. The sooner we accept that fact, the better. The Stoics expect life to involve suffering. Our own horizon of expectation, by contrast, has shifted quite dramatically in the modern period. We expect not just happiness and well-being but also a largely trouble-free existence. Many of us feel a strong sense of injustice when that life is not granted.

Finally, the Stoics understood that self-improvement requires hard, sustained, and indeed lifelong effort. As Aurelius knew well, becoming a Stoic requires absolute commitment to the cause. This is also an optimistic thought, for the Stoics believed in lifelong learning and continuous improvement: we can all train our minds, and our minds can continue to learn and change. But unlike many of us, the Stoics did not embark on this quest in order to avoid pain and displeasure. An increase in their general happiness levels was also not what they aimed for. Instead, they simply sought to cultivate a mental attitude that met whatever fate threw in their way with poise and composure. Their aims and methods could not contrast more starkly with many of the self-help titles that populate our bestseller lists today, which promise quick-fix transformation without effort.

Rhonda Byrne's spectacularly successful *The Secret* (2006) exemplifies a highly influential strand of self-help literature. It, too, is based on the "control your mind" dictum. However, it blends in mystic and esoteric ingredients. This tradition of self-help could not be more different from the sane and sober Stoic approach, with its claim that we have no control over external phenomena at all. "Mind over matter" writers such as Byrne, by contrast, argue that our thoughts are omnipotent and have the power to shape the external world. This self-help tradition dates back to the final decades of the nineteenth century. Its beginnings lie in the American "New Thought" or "mind cure" movement. Proponents of this movement argued that all sickness originates in the mind; consequently, right thinking has a healing effect. The American clockmaker Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) was among the first to articulate this idea. In Quimby's view, disease "is the offspring of the mind," a false belief that manifests in the body


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transformation specialist." All of them, too, talk about nothing but the wonders of the law of attraction. *The Secret* is teeming with stories about unexpected checks in the mail and magical transformations of personal circumstances. It promises its readers that they can easily attract ten million dollars using "the Secret." "The Secret can give you whatever you want," Byrne reassures us, for "you are the most powerful magnet in the Universe! . . . Your thoughts become things!"[29] Our thoughts, apparently, have a frequency. We emit this frequency into the universe and thus magnetically attract all things that are on the same frequency as our thoughts. We are therefore not just the equivalent of a "*human* transmission tower," but one that is "more powerful than any television tower created on earth."[30] Science proves this: "Quantum physicists tell us that the entire Universe emerged from thought!"[31]

Many of us may find these overblown promises of effortless transformation suspicious. But, what is worse, Byrne's doctrine is victim-blaming. She and her band of metaphysicians hold those who experience misfortunes personally responsible for their sufferings. This includes cancer, rape, car accidents, and acts of violence. For Byrne seriously suggests that *all* of life's calamities are caused by our failure to think positive thoughts and to transmit our cheerful requests for luxury items loudly enough into space. She makes it perfectly clear that the rule of the law of attraction also applies to the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Apparently, it was the Jews' "thoughts of fear, separation, and powerlessness" that attracted them "to being in the wrong place at the wrong time."[32] The masters of *The Secret* sternly assert: "Nothing can come into your experience unless you summon it through persistent thoughts."[33]

Why do books such as *Think and Grow Rich!* and *The Secret* appeal to so many of us? It is, of course, nice to be told that we can all become rich without lifting a finger, and that checks for ten million dollars will start arriving in our mailbox if only we think about money hard enough. Books that suggest that all lasting change requires effort, grit, and time champion a less attractive—if perhaps more grown-up—message. Byrne also argues that "all good things are your birthright!"[34] It is, she suggests, our

prerogative to be happy and rich—a notion that clashes dramatically with the Stoic and Buddhist conception that life is suffering.

But it is not just our strong sense of entitlement, our aversion to effort, and our desire for quick-fix solutions that render these kinds of books so popular. Another central reason is our age-old desire for empowerment. The magical thinking advocated by thinkers of the mind-cure tradition feeds our yearning for omnipotence and invincibility. It hooks into our ancient desire to guard ourselves against the twin threats of vulnerability and loss of control. The problem, however, remains that while reading these kinds of books may make us feel temporarily hopeful, perhaps even giddily expec-tant, reality will inevitably catch up with us at some point. We will end up feeling worse, not better, when our promised riches fail to arrive. Not a single one of our problems will have been resolved. We will have learned nothing new about ourselves, and gained no useful insights that may help us genuinely to improve.

Psychotherapists frequently nominate *The Secret* as one of the potentially most damaging self-help books on the market. The most widely recommended self-help manual, by contrast, is David D. Burns's *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy.* It is one of very few self-help books that is proven to have measurable and lasting positive effects on its readers.[35] Published in 1980, its scientific underpinnings may no longer be particularly cutting-edge now. Given that its 688 pages include some at times very dense technical prose, it is also by no means an easy read. But its core message is a powerfully soothing one, and it is full of pertinent practical insights. In many ways, it presents a more down-to-earth and applicable version of Stoicism. Based on the premises of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), it contains numerous worksheets and self-assessment questionnaires. It is also peppered with many moving anecdotes drawing on Burns's practice as a psychiatrist. It is precisely these examples that breathe life into the book, ensuring that its message reaches us not just at an intellectual level but also engages our emotions and our creative imagination.


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Index