

## REVIEWING A REFUTATION OF THE SELF-IMPROVEMENT INDUSTRY BY SVEND BRINKMANN

Stand Firm Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze by Svend Brinkmann gives you plenty to think about.

This book outlines several different perspectives on self help. Self help is an industry and takes advantage of how people think something is working if it at times makes them feel a bit better. It is a scam,

Positive thinking proponents recommend visualising good things only as if that is going to make things go well. When things go badly that only leaves you feeling worse about the situation. He explains how the ancient philosophy of Stoicism is right in how it is very important that you visualise what bad things would happen if you lost what you have as opposed to thinking of what you want to get. This helps you be prepared. Action not visualisation is what may give you what you want. Visualising goals as in trying to act as if thinking something makes it happen will fail. Even if you get the thing it is not visualising that did it.

The Stoics are commended for saying that you think of how you will die some day and that helps you understand that you are lucky to have the life you have. He says it is key to realise that all you have is on loan and can vanish any time. He warns against living on "positive daydreams".

I would add that ideas that what you get or have is not on loan but is a gift from God - one of the core reasons for wanting to believe in God - have a lot to answer for. It could explain why Jesus' austere spiritual message is practiced only by a handful and the religion bearing his name is remarkably fond of material blessings - it despite its protestations is a part-time faith.

The book makes the point that depression can ensue from the self help advice to keep looking inside deeply. "Only by delving ever deeper inside yourself, and ending up trapped in a vacuous circle that will ultimately leave you completely numb. Philip Cushman once posited that the depression epidemic in the West is explained by the fact that if you look inwards long enough - if you dwell on how you feel, and use therapy to find yourself - then depression will descend the moment you realise that there is, in fact nothing there. If as constantly asserted, the meaning of life is to be found inside you, then finding nothing there renders it all pointless...You also run the risk of finding answers that are just plain wrong."

While it is true that digging deep means you will find monsters is it really true that you will find nothing at your core at all and thus be left that bereft?

Going deep and looking for sins to confess to God is harmful.

Religious people say you will find God if you go deep enough.

It seems such teachings are risky.

In a world where all are systematically expected to introspect a lot, he writes, "real resistance to the system consists not of turning inwards in search of some self or other, but in rejecting the whole concept and finding out how to live with yourself."

He warns about the the paradox of when "the very act of striving for something specific actually prevents

you from achieving it."

You can seek joy in becoming something and realise that no desire can be completely satisfying. Looking for an ecstatic life guarantees you will not have one.

He quotes Rousseau, "I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality." Then he comments on Rousseau, "He articulates the idea that being yourself as some kind of intrinsic value. No matter what you are like otherwise, just being yourself is valuable. This -you now know - is not the case. It is - without a shadow of doubt - better to be an inauthentic Mother Teresa than an authentic Anders Breivik. Indeed, being yourself has no intrinsic value whatsoever." His point is that you being yourself means that you will sacrifice others for that to happen.

Most however feel that being yourself does have some intrinsic value but must not be taken too far.

He points out that allowing people to be negative implements freedom of speech. It helps people assess that there is a problem. He is right that negative feelings and expression is virtually censored in modern society.

Do you make yourself happy with things outside of you? We read how Seligman found that "only 8-15 per cent of the variance in happiness is due to external factors." One external factor is being rich or poor and another is being healthy or not healthy. He thinks that urging people to keep up their happiness and develop it at all times backfires. It is too stressful and too insular and individualistic and when misery happens you blame yourself.

Nice definition of integrity, "Integrity means that you don't just tag along with the latest trends. You live in accordance with a specific idea that is more important to you than everything else. " The alternative is being "externally controlled".

The point that the idea needs to be clear and specific is an interesting one. Religion and society tend to be vague and use the insanely complicated and multi-faceted concept of love or justice as what they are about. Thus they are cons. They don't want to be clear and specific for it will show them up that they are too much about talk.

Religion is a trend - just because it is old does not mean its a trend. Trends can be one day or millions.

He writes, "Certainty is necessarily dogmatic, whereas doubt has an important ethical value." He warns that dogma ends up risking blindness and making you blind. He warns, "If I know, I don't need to listen." I would add and "I shouldn't listen."

Dogma and certainty do exist but do not have to make you blind. The trouble is that we depend 90% of the time on hearsay and evidence etc and they by definition should not be making you feel or think you are certain. That is where blindness starts. And the blind never realise how blind they are.

If certainty comes from thinking carefully and from evidence that it seeing not blindness.

He quotes Hannah Arendt, "Even if there is no truth, man can be truthful, and even if there is no reliable certainty, man can be reliable." He concludes, "There may be no such thing as absolute truth, but that is exactly why it is up to us to create it in our own lives."

That may sound profound but it is rubbish. If there is no truth then you are a bigot when you try to invent truth. You set yourself up against the person who might actually know something you do not. To say x is

true when you think there is no truth is to lie. You simply cannot say it is moral to call something the truth when it is only your feelings talking. The alternative to truth is pretending that you make things true by feeling they are true!

The author recommends Richard Rorty who declared that we must live with the irony of how you may see that your worldview is one among many and some time you will run out of ways to justify it and that does not mean you must look to something else for a different worldview. Rorty says stick with what you have and encourage others to stick with theirs and that is "called tolerance."

A lot of worldviews do contain a lot of truth. He is being too negative here.

And what he proposes is dogma not tolerance. True tolerance encourages people to look for better worldviews and strictly speaking there is no such thing as a worldview. It is a collection of things not a thing. If a person thinks sexual preferences define him that is part of a worldview and needs to be challenged. Worldview cannot be partitioned off and must be ready to be challenged. All worldviews should demand to be respected enough to be challenged. When something wants to be immune to be challenged it is not interested in improving knowledge or wisdom or anything else. Its just selfish. Something that gets challenged is something that is treated with respect as in being considered important to somebody. It is bizarre how somebody could write a book to challenge the new God, self help, the new worldview, self help, and tell us that tolerance means you let people get absorbed by and captured by self-improvement rubbish.

He warns that feelings that are considered negative such as guilt, shame and anger are not bad just because they are negative. Without them we lose a sense of being responsible.

He interestingly writes that before they sinned by eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil Adam and Eve were essentially animals. They became people after their sin.

So animals can sin and turn into people? Thought sin was only something people could commit!

He denies original sin. The wrongdoer must be God who punished Adam and Eve for eating the fruit.

He says we should be encouraged to commend and admire those are "capable of controlling - even suppressing - negative emotions." What about the negative emotion of hate?

He writes, "Psychological studies also suggest that if you put aside your negative emotions, you will be less likely to remember the unpleasant episodes associated with them. You may recall the unpleasant things in life - e.g. if someone has mortally offended you - not just because they were unpleasant experiences, but because you yourself reacted strongly to them."

He is careful to warn that negative and positive thinking both have their benefits and there is no simple answer and you need both.

He points out that anger arises from self-awareness which is why there is really no such thing as an angry baby or an angry cat. He agrees with Seneca who declares that anger is a revenge impulse.

Marcus Aurelius suggested that if you realise and think of how relatively unimportant things are that helps you lift your anger.

Everything is ultimately "an extremely small and insignificant matter."

The author advises that the best way to realise your identity as a person who cares about things outside herself or herself and which is part of being a person - a person is more than a navel gazer - is to do something for another without them or anybody knowing:

"Anonymous benevolence will help you to understand the intrinsic value of good deeds." The point is that it gets you to realise that it is not what you think is valuable that makes it valuable but "there are aspects of the world that are good, significant and meaningful in their own right - even though you derive nothing from them in return." In his notes he warns, "You should do good deeds because they are good. Not because they make you feel good - though it is not bad thing if the deed makes you feel good as well."

I would add that you do the good deed not because you see yourself as good. That turns the good deed into something that looks like it is about the other but which is about you. To do it because you see yourself as good is worse than doing it to feel good. Why?

The truly good person will do good and take steps so that nobody knows. What about God then? God supposedly sees all and hears all. Faith in God or the mere belief that he is watching destroy your right to try and do good secretly. Nobody knows if they would have fed the starving if they thought God was NOT watching. It makes altruism suspect.

He writes that the reason there are so many self-help books and we keep buying them is that they don't work. They promise but do not deliver.

They do not deliver enough if they deliver at all. It creates a dependency. I would add that the same could be said of religion.

He warns that thinking outside the box makes no sense. You have to know what the box is and what is in it. He advises working on the box not outside of it. Thinking outside the box can be about smashing things up without realising the value of the box in the first place. So fix inside the box.

Thinking outside the box shows too much concern for creating change instead of appreciating what is there.

He warns that thinking you must find yours can really mean disconnecting with the person you have always been. It can lead to somebody breaking with everything in the name of finding their true selves when in fact the true self is the person they have always been since they were born. It is about ceasing to know your past and that takes away guilt for you must have things to feel guilty about and at the end up you cannot act morally.

He reminds us that instead of sacrificing things for self-development too much we should remember that "nothing is always 100 per cent good." He continues, "Apart from general, self-evident and quite abstract ideas (e.g. about doing your duty)" that "there is probably no such thing as absolute truth when it comes to ethical ideas or philosophies of life. This is the very essence of pragmatism: ideas are tools developed to solve life's problems."

He says there is a limit to growth and we must remember that in a world that always wants us to improve and grow.

Religion says that God's grace lifts us above our temptations and flaws. So there is always a need for God's help. This is just another form of the degrading bullying notion that we must always be getting better even a little.

He praises how the Stoics saw reason as what makes us different from every other creature and with more potential and it is the only way to make us able to live up to our duties. It keeps selfishness at bay. Reason is theoretical (eg logic) or about how you live your life in practice. To be practical you have to think first so the use of logic and living sensibly go together.

He quotes Seneca, "To avoid anger with individuals, you must forgive the whole group, you must pardon the human race."

That one reason we should be skeptical of Christians. They say they forgive x or y but what about Hitler? To really forgive you need to be self-aware and that means suffering at Hitler's hands. Forgiveness is what faith is all about and shows it is just a cultural sham. Some say a cultural sham claiming to be a religion is not a religion at all. Its just a scam.

The author does not accept the Stoic thesis that that the only moment that matters is the present moment. "I don't believe that humankind mainly lives in the moment but in time as an extensive and continuous structure." It "gives the individual too great a responsibility for how he or she meets the world. I don't believe that we can freely choose how we will be affected by the present." He is blunt that we are more impotent than led to believe. On the good side this demands that we work better with others for we all are in it together.

The book is quite good but I have been forced to take its principles and think about them which is what the author should have been doing. He should have shown that atheism is a duty and a necessity and faith in God is bad but he did not.