

The Self-Help Book in the Therapeutic Ontosphere: A Postmodern Paradox

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Abstract

The self-help book is a prominent cultural and commercial phenomenon in the therapeutic ontosphere which permeates contemporary life. The generic term ‘ontosphere’ is here co-opted from IT to describe a notional social space in which influential conceptualisations and shared assumptions about personal values and entitlements operate without interrogation in the demotic apprehension of ‘reality’. It thus complements the established critical terms ‘discourse’ and ‘episteme’. In the therapeutic ontosphere the normal vicissitudes of life are increasingly interpreted as personal catastrophes. As new issues of concern are defined, it is assumed that an individual will need help to deal with them and live successfully. Advice-giving has become big business and the self-help book is now an important postmodern commodity. However a paradox emerges when the content and ideology of this apparently postmodern artifact is examined. In its topical eclecticism the genre is indeed unaligned with those traditional ‘grand narratives’ and collective value systems which the postmodern critical project has sought to discredit. It endorses relativism, celebrates reflexivity and valorizes many kinds of ‘personal truth’. Moreover readers are encouraged towards self-renovation through a process of ‘bricolage’ which involves selecting advice from a diverse ethical menu alongside which many ‘little narratives’ of localized lived experience are presented as supportive exemplars. However in asserting the pragmatic power of individual instrumentality in an episteme which has seen the critical de-centering of the human subject, the self-help book perpetuates the liberal-humanist notion of an essential personal identity whose stable core is axiomatic in traditional ethical advice. And the heroic journey of self-actualization is surely the grandest of grand narratives: the monomyth. Thus the telic self-help book presents the critical theorist with something of a paradox.

Keywords: Self-help book, ontosphere, therapeutic discourse, postmodern paradox, metanarrative

A Fearful Society

Since the phrase ‘risk society’ was coined by Ulrich Beck (1992: 21) to describe increasing public concern about hazards such as pollution, crime and emergent diseases, other commentators have documented a widespread sense of fearfulness in society (cf. Bourke 2006; Furedi 2006; Gardner 2009; Glassner 2010) whilst also noting that most individuals in the west have never been healthier, wealthier or safer. Lasch (1979) famously identifies a therapeutically-nuanced culture of narcissism which encourages anxious self-scrutiny. Sykes (1992: 38-45) observes ‘the marketing of the therapeutic’ and calls America a nation of ‘victims’ who increasingly lack the inner strength needed to fight personal adversity without external support (cf. Peele 1999; Playfair 2004). Furedi (2004: 8-12; 17-21; 95-105) considers that the normal vicissitudes of life have become increasingly interpreted as personal catastrophes so that universal experiences such as child-rearing, sexual relations, loss and ageing have been ‘pathologized’ into crises requiring professional advice. Salerno (2005: 26-32) thinks that the self-help movement has created ‘a world of victims’; Hoff Somers and Satel (2006: 5-6) deplore the American ‘intervention ethic’; and Fassin et al. (2009) trace how the ‘trauma narrative’ has become culturally and politically respectable.

Meanwhile each edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, which was originally published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1952 to provide a shared diagnostic lexicon for health practitioners, has described and named additional psychological disorders and problematic behaviours; most recently in *DSM-5* (APA 2013). This has led some practitioners to question what they see as the over-medicalization of mental health issues (cf. Szasz 2007; Greenberg 2013; NHS Choices 2013). However the constant revision and expansion of this publication make it of significant value to certain groups who operate beyond institution-based medicine. This is because its concise descriptors enable researchers, educators, publishers, drug companies, health insurers, lawyers, therapists of all kinds, those who produce self-help materials, carers and patients to identify and respond to the ‘authoritative’ categories of mental disorder promulgated in its pages (cf. Kutchins and Kirk 2001). Once a discrete ‘problem’ has been officially recognised it can then be ‘managed’ with the right help and at a price (cf. Furedi 2004: 98-102) as it becomes a niche market. Thus the commodification imperative of late capitalism identified by Harvey (1991) and Jameson (1992) exploits pathologies for economic gain: research is funded, pharmaceuticals developed, therapies offered, training devised, publications produced and advertising created (cf. Horwitz et al. 2005; Wright 2011: 23).

The processes of expansion and commodification can be seen at work, for example, in the case of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which has been called one of the most researched disorders of all time (Bailey & Haupt 2010: 3). As the historical survey undertaken by Lange et al. (2010) makes clear,

the challenging childhood behaviours now being described as ADHD are not a recent phenomenon. But once the designation ADHD was introduced into *DSM-III-R* (APA 1987) a penumbra of formal and informal commentary, together with a variety of proposed interventions through both professional and non-professional therapy, soon developed around the concept. And this rapid growth of interest in the issue can be clearly observed in the pages of the British Library Catalogue (BLC) which contains just 16 items about ADHD published before 1987. But there are 11,520 publications on the topic subsequently: 201 between 1987-1994; 1,549 between 1995-2000; 3,824 between 2001-2007 and 5,946 since 2007. This list includes books, articles, journals, reports, conference proceedings and what the BLC terms 'popular literature' such as practical advice for parents, teachers and those with ADHD themselves. Thus we find *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Adult ADHD: An Integrative Psychosocial and Medical Approach* (Ramsay & Rostain 2008) sitting alongside *The Pocket Guide to ADHD: Practical Tips for Parents* (Green & Chee 2004). Furthermore a Google search for ADHD in February 2014 elicited more than sixteen million results which included the sites of professional and clinical organisations, charities, training companies, personal blogs and the web pages of informal support groups. Clearly a clinical denotation created less than thirty years ago as a definitive term within a specialist lexicon is now entrenched in demotic discourse.

Similarly, after the term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) appeared in *DSM-III* (APA 1980) to describe not just behaviours which had long been of concern to the military (Dean 1999) but also the persistent severe anxiety suffered by other groups of people after terrible experiences, research concerned with the nature of trauma-related disorders, their societal effects, their treatment and support rapidly grew (Wilson & Keane 2004; cf. Fassin et al. 2009). Clearly traumatic distress has not somehow been recently 'invented'. The point is that when an aspect of human experience becomes officially 'pathologised' and specifically named, as ADHD and PTSD have been, ordinary people eventually begin to acquire some new vocabulary with which to discuss the issue and an additional area of personal concern becomes established in society (Mays & Horwitz 2005; Illouz 2008: 165-7).

Moreover the publishing industry eagerly responds to such developments, thereby furthering the conversation. For example *AD/HD for Dummies* (Strong & Flanagan 2004) and *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for Dummies* (Goulston 2007) are part of a highly popular series of publications which began with a single guide to the DOS computer operating system in 1991. The *Dummies* franchise, whose publicity claims that it is designed to make everything easier in our lives by providing step-by-step instructions, currently has over 1,800 'manuals' covering, business, health, sports, pets, relationships etc. etc. There is advice on universal experiences such as anger (Gentry 2006) and eldercare (Zukerman 2003) as well as on more specific personal problems such as stroke (Marler 2005) and schizo-

phrenia (Levine & Levine 2008). Indeed the *For Dummies* backlist presents cultural commentators with a useful primary source of information about various manifestations of contemporary angst because it is effectively an index of those issues which have come to trouble people significantly enough for them to seek published advice in the last few decades.

Meanwhile the 12-step model of therapeutic intervention originally developed by members of Alcoholics Anonymous (Kurtz 1991; Kaminer 1992) has been widely promoted by the 'recovery' industry as an effective intervention stratagem in other settings (Travis 2013). So the disease theory of addiction is now being applied to problems such as drug use, eating disorders, hoarding, gaming, obsession with work and 'co-dependency': a condition described by Beattie (1986) as the compulsion to control the behaviour of others. Each of these issues now has its own register of 12-step meetings as well as a characteristic 'recovery' discourse which is articulated in a collection of associated guides, testimonies, workbooks, calendars, websites, blogs etc.

Moreover the professional counselling industry has expanded remarkably since the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy was set up in 1977 to provide practitioners with a code of conduct and to advise official bodies about developments in mental health treatments. Indeed the wide variety of organisations now active in this area can be seen in the *Counselling Directory* (2014). However there has been some concern about the possible negative effects of the growing intervention culture. For example Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) worry that therapeutically-nuanced education in schools may be infantilising young people by focusing attention on present behavioural problems and issues of emotional vulnerability; rather than teaching them how to welcome challenges and cope with instances of failure, thereby helping them to establish a core of psychological resilience for the future.

Yet not all is therapeutic anxiety and there is also significant interest in what makes for personal agency and sustained inner strength. For example the discipline of Positive Psychology developed by Professor Martin Seligman and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania (Seligman 1991; 2011) is now being widely taught (Hefferon & Boniwell 2011) and has generated much scholarly material, such as the articles in the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Seligman's 'new' approach studies the character strengths and virtues that produce well-being in people, rather than focusing on mental pathologies. Unsurprisingly there have also been a number of related self-help books such as *The How of Happiness: A Practical Guide to Getting the Life You Want* (Lyubomirsky 2007) and *Happiness for Dummies* (Gentry 2008), which describes itself as a guide 'to living the good life you deserve'. In this it echoes the L'Oreal cosmetic company's trademark slogan 'Because You're Worth It' which gained a US patent in 1976 and still appears constantly in advertisements. Happiness itself has been called a 'new science' by Professor Layard of the London School of Economics (Layard 2011) and there is

now *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness* (David et al. 2013); politicians talk about the importance of well-being for the nation (Bok 2010) and life coaching has become a recognised career choice (Purdie 2010; cf. Ehrenreich 2009). Furthermore the publishers of self-help books continue to earn many millions of pounds. However it must be remembered that their success is unavoidably predicated on readers feeling that something in their life needs need fixing. Thus even the most optimistic publication may be said to contribute to the prevailing ‘therapeutic sensibility’ (Lasch 1979: 7) inasmuch as it must initially situate the reader as a subject which is in some way ‘lacking’ and thus in need of relief.

The Therapeutic ‘Ontosphere’

In view of so much self-reflexive activity and ‘solution-seeking’, it is not unreasonable to speak of a ‘therapeutic turn’ in our peri-millennial experience, and the variety of discourses which may be encountered in therapy culture is remarked upon in *The Rise of the Therapeutic Society* (Wright 2011: 13-48; cf. Imber 2004). Many different assumptions and experiences coexist symbiotically in the current climate of self-concern. Some of these are scholarly while others feature in everyday conversation; some relate to issues of personal well-being while others are matters of public attention. Therefore the word ‘ontosphere’ is here co-opted into the critical lexicon from the fields of computing and artificial intelligence (AI) in order to describe this therapeutically-nuanced climate of thought with greater economy. Whereas in philosophy ‘ontology’ denotes a systematic account of the nature of existence, in computing, knowledge engineering (KE) and artificial intelligence (AI) the term is used to describe the accretion of concepts, relationships, vocabulary and behaviours existing and acknowledged within a grouping of disparate members who need to share virtual-encoded information during their contingent activities, and who must therefore establish common ground and protocols (Gaglio & Lo Re: 2014).

Thus there are different ‘ontologies’ in different communities, each one constituting a particular consensual space with perceptible yet protean conceptual boundaries within which members operate. Such a shared space might therefore be called an ‘ontosphere’ and I propose that this new generic term be used to describe any notional social environment in which variously linked formal and informal conceptualisations and shared assumptions about values and entitlements circulate axiomatically and are taken for granted in the popular apprehension of ‘reality’. An ontosphere is inhabited by professionals and the wider public alike; it is not a competitive or hierarchical environment but may be thought of as the matrix and host to a variety of contingent, sometimes competing, discourses which circulate at a variety of societal levels, yet which share fundamental concerns.

An example of a detectable yet comparatively recent ontosphere is the digitally-suffused environment inhabited by individuals and organisations who turn au-

tomatically to information technology for information, communication and entertainment and for whom engagement with the hypermedia, which allows seamless interaction with text, pictures and sound, is second nature. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014: 57-70) predict 'the digitization of just about everything'; and work on the Internet of Things (IoT) in which everyday objects contain embedded technology which enables them to interact with their external environment and each other is well under way (Adler 2013). This is the 'virtual ontosphere'. Meanwhile in the 'therapeutic ontosphere' the significant and pervasive assumptions are that while people are entitled to prosperity, health and personal fulfilment, they are likely to need interventions, advice and support from various 'authorities' throughout their lives in order to achieve them (cf. Illouz 2008; Wright 2011).

The term 'ontosphere' which is being coined here usefully extends the lexicon of Cultural Studies by describing a nebulous yet powerful climate of opinion in which certain 'taken for granted' assumptions circulate and are assumed to be a given in every-day life: metaphorically like the atmosphere we breath. Firstly 'ontosphere' complements the well-established critical term 'discourse', which is used about more conscious and sometimes more formal mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the language and praxis associated with certain professional, social or cultural groupings (cf. Fairclough 2001). There are various contingent, and sometimes competing, discourses within an ontosphere. Secondly 'ontosphere' complements the notion of 'episteme' which was introduced by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966/1970) and has come to signify the body of formal ideas, and thus the system of understanding, which shapes intellectual knowledge during a certain period. It is therefore quite possible to speak of the 'postmodern episteme' which has been for some time the naturalised domain of cultural theorists, but not of a 'postmodern ontosphere' in which an awareness of postmodernity has become assimilated into every-day conversation. Even though the term 'postmodern' is sometimes to be found in popular articles about art, architecture, film and fashion, the notion has not significantly established itself in demotic ideology. Perhaps this is because the visual and material manifestations of postmodernity are more easily recognised and discussed (cf. Jenks 1989; Papadakis 1990) than the abstractions and complexities of cultural theory (Kellner 1988: 241; Jameson 1992: x-xiii). However both digital technology and issues of self-development impinge significantly on our personal narrative and very many of us now confidently inhabit both virtual and therapeutic ontospheres.

The Self-Help Book: A Postmodern Commodity

Within the therapeutic ontosphere the self-help book, which is defined by Katz (1985: xv) as a publication designed for those who wish to improve, modify or otherwise understand their physical or personal characteristics, is a highly visible

phenomenon (Starker 2002). Ever since Samuel Smiles (1859) inadvertently named a whole genre with a book which begins ‘Heaven helps those who help themselves’, self-development has become very big business; part of the culture of consumerism in which the ‘mobilisation of desire and fantasy’ (Harvey 1991: 61) sustains buoyancy in the market and keeps expansive production possible. Indeed some writers and publishers have earned many millions of pounds; not only from the primary publication but also as a result of the sequels, media appearances, seminars, coaching franchises and other merchandise which have followed. A striking example of this ‘inflation’ can be seen in the phenomenal success of John Gray’s *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992/2012) which has been a best-seller since the 1990s and has generated all of the above ‘additions’ as well as spin-off material about diet and exercise, thus becoming both a trademark and a world-wide franchise (Mars and Venus Coaching 2014).

Moreover the popularity of self-development material in general shows no signs of waning and in February 2014 Amazon.co.uk listed more than one hundred and forty-five thousand items under the heading ‘Mind, Body and Spirit’. Even allowing for duplicate hard copies, Kindle editions and the fact that this flexible commercial category embraces occasional works of fiction such as *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield 1994) and *The Alchemist* (Coelho 1993), there is clearly sustained demand for what Illouz (2008: 13) calls ‘commodified, quick-fix advice’. Furthermore new self-help sub-genres constantly arise to cater for emergent matters of self-concern. For example although the sub-genre devoted to ‘emotional intelligence’ (EI) is a fixture in bookshops today, it only surfaced as a truly commercial proposition for the book-trade in the mid-1990s. This topic had already been the subject of a scholarly piece by Leuner in 1966 and was quietly revisited by Salovy and Mayer in 1990. However it was when *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* became a bestseller for Daniel Goleman in 1995 with its readable mix of anecdote and research that a veritable spate of both popular and scholarly publications soon followed. Thereafter the Emotional Intelligence industry was underway and the EI approach began to appear in diverse and unexpected areas. Now senior managers, military personnel and debt collectors are all encouraged to develop Emotional Intelligence in order to improve their professional effectiveness (Illouz 2008: 209-216) and the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organisations (2014) maintains an extensive online bibliography and news hub for its members.

Meanwhile professional therapists have also been turning to self-help books in order to reinforce their treatments: as described in *Read Two Books and Let’s Talk Next Week* (Maidman Joshua & DiMenna 2000; cf. Stanley 1999). Oxford University Press has published *Self-Help that Works* (Narcross 2013) which provides a list of resources for clinicians; and GPs are being officially encouraged to offer ‘bibliotherapy’ to certain patients. To this end they have been issued with a core list of ‘Books on Prescription’ which will be held by their local library. Among

the topics covered in the list are obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), low self-esteem, anxiety and depression (Reading Agency/Reading Well 2013). Since it is likely that people will already be consulting self-help materials, this may be seen as an attempt to direct them to better quality resources (cf. Stanley 1999). But presumably this strategy will also prove much cheaper for the NHS than prescribing drugs or providing one-to-one counselling for patients.

Clearly the self-help book is a remarkable cultural and economic phenomenon in the present therapeutically-nuanced epoch and so it is unsurprising that the genre has attracted considerable critical attention, not all of it positive (cf. Chandler & Kay 2004; Pearsall 2005: 4-12; Dolby 2005: 35-55; Wright 2011). After all these hugely popular publications are *de facto* the indices and vectors of contemporary existential self-concerns, thus constituting a rich primary source of information for social commentators and historians. Moreover as notably successful commercial products which reify the aspirations of their consumers while encouraging them in that inflationary yearning for 'more' which Jameson (1992) describes as being the logical outcome of 'late capitalism', they are highly symptomatic of the 'postmodern condition'. Certainly they have flourished remarkably in what Charles Jencks, himself a pioneering chronicler and theorist of the postmodern, has characterised as 'an age of incessant choosing' (Jencks 1989: 7; cf. Schwartz 2005). In their insistence that people have the right to individual agency, self-help publications not only commodify the reflexive process but also standardise the personal ethic into various formulae for 'success'; simultaneously exhorting their readers constantly to desire greater things for themselves, both materially and 'spiritually'. Consequently, as a result of its characteristic responsiveness to changing social conditions and fashions, self-help literature has been able to generate substantial on-going revenues for its producers, not least through stimulating demand for future publications and related life-style products. Thus the genre now plays a significant part in the post-industrial 'knowledge economy' in which information of all kinds is traded and where the individual's continuing desire for more and better everything, a characteristically postmodern dynamic identified by Lyotard (1979/1984: 38), must be maintained.

The Self-Help Genre: A Postmodern Paradox

But although it is clear that self-help books are a notably successful product in the current therapeutic market-place and may thus be said to contribute to the wider 'postmodern condition', both as fashionable material artefacts and through their remarkable commercial footprint, things become more challenging when one seeks to interrogate this group of publications more specifically as a postmodern textual genre: that is, to examine their content. This is less because of their topical diversity than because the theoretical debate about what actually constitutes 'postmodernity' and 'the postmodern' is so multi-faceted. However some consen-

sus about certain salient postmodern patterns has emerged (cf. Hassan 1985: 123-4; Edgar & Sedgwick 2002: 295; Malpas 2004) and it is illuminating to measure self-help material against two well-known ones which may be summarised thus: firstly the recognition that traditional, 'legitimising' narratives have now lost credibility; and secondly the idea that there is no essential, given 'self' – only an incrementally-constructed and contingent social phenomenon which provides us with the illusion of personal autonomy while we proceed to live out our lives mostly unaware of the wider discursive forces which are actually shaping and constraining our understanding and ability to communicate.

Since Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in 1979 it has become a tenet of postmodern thought that the totalising 'grand narratives' of enlightened rationality, science, religion, politics and patriotism, which were long thought by many to provide comprehensive explanations about existence and a framework for living, have lost their credibility (Lyotard 1979/1984: 60). Yet Eagleton (2007) observes that although postmodernity may lack faith in more traditional systems of legitimisation, its characteristic celebration of relativism and subjective value systems has proved to be a matrix in which diverse personal beliefs flourish. For example, although formal religious practice has declined (Rieff 1966/1987: 48-65) and secularisation has increased (Bruce 2002), issues relating to people's well-being and ethical conduct are widely discussed: not least in self-help literature which is unashamedly enthusiastic about the possibility of bodily, mental and spiritual renovation. Indeed, although self-help material as a whole is unaligned to those monumental, totalising sources of authority or 'metanarratives' (Lyotard 1979/1984) which have historically sustained people, and which the postmodern critical project has sought to discredit, the genre accommodates very many different 'localised' approaches to achieving personal fulfilment.

Rather than discussing the ramifications of challenging philosophical matters in depth, self-help books are carefully designed to educate and comfort their readers by providing them with concise information and easily digested 'little narratives' (cf. Lyotard 1979/1984: xi, 60) of personalised struggle and success which are often presented in the form of anecdotal testimony or confession. Paradigmatically each self-help book is a quest narrative similar to the 'hero's journey from darkness to light which Joseph Campbell finds to be the fundamental and ancient structure of many tales throughout the world. He calls this pattern the 'monomyth' and describes it thus: 'A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won' (Campbell 1949: 23). And similarly, the questing reader who is seeking to overcome some difficulty or sense of 'lack' in their personal narrative (cf. Propp 1968: 53; Dolby 2005: 4) ventures to consult a self-help book which addresses their problem, thereby aiming to become empowered and 'victorious' as a result of following its advice.

But of course each self-help publication has its own notion of what constitutes ‘success’ and takes a particular approach to dealing with what Charles Taylor famously calls ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’ (Taylor 1989: 3-91). By this he means those situations, activities and challenges which have significance for individuals who must make themselves a framework for effective daily living in a society where, as Smart (2010) observes, there is now unprecedented ethical and consumer choice. So it is perhaps no surprise to find that although self-help books sometimes mention those scientific developments, particularly in psychology, which offer insights into how people behave to each other (e.g. Nettle 2005), they pay comparatively little attention to wider political and social issues over which the individual can have no control. These publications are necessarily circumscribed texts which are designed to show readers how to make significant and speedy improvements in their every-day experience. Therefore the challenging theoretical questions about the existence or otherwise of the unified ‘self’ and personal agency which exercise and excite postmodern critics are not at all an issue for them.

Yet inasmuch as this kind of literature focuses on personal development and comprises a remarkably wide range of topics and techniques from which readers can choose, it *de facto* articulates the reflexive imperative towards self-fashioning which critics such as Schrag (1997) find to be a defining characteristic of the pluralistic postmodern epoch. Indeed a visit to the self-help section of a bookshop will confirm that there are many kinds of ethical ‘truth’ on offer out there; just as the cultural theorists would have us believe. Readers may select and combine advice from a highly diverse topical menu, thereby undertaking their psychic and physical renovation through a process of ‘bricolage’: a term from the lexicon of postmodern criticism which is used to describe the way in which each person assembles their identity from the disparate cultural resources available to them. For example they are likely to find the bracing work-ethic of authors like Spencer Johnson (1998), Dale Carnegie (1936/2009) and Stephen Covey (1989/2013) alongside extensive material on aspects of physical and mental addiction; a growing corpus of what the book-trade calls ‘misery memoirs’ from people who have survived abusive situations and feel that sharing their experiences will help others; a whole lot about negotiating emotional relationships; various traditional and New Age spiritualities; and many suggestions about thrifty living. They are also likely to encounter the sincere optimism of publications such as *The Cosmic Ordering Service* which declares that ‘thoughts create matter’ (Mohr 2006: 20) and assures its readers that the universe is just waiting to fulfil their dreams.

Such diversity of topic and approach within self-help literature is surely consonant with the claim made by postmodern theorists that there can be no single ‘objective’ account of reality and no ultimate ‘truth’: all is relative. The critical view is that the discursive resources available to each of us at any particular time inevitably limit what we can think and say; our perceptions and understanding are nec-

essarily contingent upon our given circumstances: family, education, gender, class etc. However the postmodern affirmation of what Giddens (1991: 32-3; 75) calls ‘the reflexive project of the self’ also suggests, more encouragingly, that we can achieve a significant amount of personal reinvention should we choose to adopt different linguistic strategies and habitual practices: for example by reading self-help material. Here then is a paradox for the postmodern theorist. Whether someone buys *How to Make Money* (Dennis 2011) in order to explore the putative opportunities offered by late capitalism or *The Joy of Less* (Jay 2011) in response to the economic downturn, the underlying assumption is the same: that this particular individual is absolutely entitled to effect significant changes in their circumstances and will be enabled to do so.

Beneath all its superficial and fashionable variables therefore, the self-help genre shares the same liberal humanist faith in self-determination which is to be found in the optimisms of the Enlightenment project and modernity (cf. Thompson 2004: 107-122). Meanwhile postmodern critical ‘orthodoxy’ insists that the notion of *telos* is obsolete (Jameson 1992: xi), that ‘progress’ is illusory and that the grand narratives of universalism, religion, science and politics have lost their power over us (Lyotard 1979/1984: 37). Indeed Harvey (1991: 9) claims that ‘fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourses’ are the hallmark of postmodernist thought. Yet Taylor (1989: 211-304) observes how much people truly yearn to have goal-directed experiences which will give some shape and sense of meaning to their lives: for example through establishing a family or following a vocation. And in its engagement with the dynamics of personal loyalties, alliances, conflicts, reversals and triumphs, as well as with life’s more practical challenges, the self-help book acknowledges, articulates and enables this telic human drive.

Moreover when the issue of psychic autonomy in the self-help book is further contemplated, then the critical paradox intensifies. Whatever the particular topic of a publication may be, and whether its writer adopts a rigorously didactic or comfortingly discursive approach to advice-giving, the existence of the individual reader as audience is never in question. Indeed while people clearly consider themselves to have pressing emotional, spiritual or bodily problems when they seek for guidance in a bookstore, anxiety about the metaphysical status of ‘the self’ is never going to be one of them. Yet as indicated by the various scholarly extracts collated by Atkins (2005) in *Self and Subjectivity*, traditional assumptions about the nature of essential selfhood have undergone vigorous critical attack. For example Lacan (1968) powerfully argues that the axiom of the coherent ‘given self’ which has long existed in Western philosophy and psychology must be replaced by the notion of the decentred ‘subject’ whose experience of life will be both incremental and fragmented. Likewise Foucault (1982) famously insists that personal freedom is inexorably limited by institutional discourses and societal practices over which the individual can have no control. Thus what seems to be a

‘self’ is actually an impersonal discursive construct. Likewise Metzinger (2004) observes that we have only phenomenological ‘selves’ which manifest as a result of social consensus and through the processes of our life experience. Yet the contemporary self-help book has no problem at all in assuming the existence of a ‘self-reflexive individual’ with a unique and stable, albeit sometimes troubled, core personality which can always choose to improve itself.

Conclusion

Self-help books are a notable element in the therapeutic ontosphere inasmuch as they are a highly successful commodity which engages with many issues of contemporary personal concern and is widely consumed. Indeed they are acutely responsive to the cultural fashions and economic shifts of late capitalism as publishers seek new ways of ‘pathologizing’ experience in order to provide readers with a constant stream of advice at a price. Yet a paradox for the postmodern theorist lies in the fact that structural analysis of the genre as a whole finds it to be essentialist and telic in its fundamental narrative paradigm. The literature of personal development necessarily conserves the liberal-humanist creed of an essential stable core identity which has always been the focus of traditional ethical advice. Even though self-help books must initially situate their readers as beleaguered people in a risk-laden society who are in need of therapeutic support, their fundamental framework is always the problem/solution model and they are ultimately optimistic and integrative. These ‘closed’ texts are designed to give clear, concise information and advice and it is not their purpose to worry their readers with opportunities for deconstructive, negotiated readings.

Moreover self-help books pay little attention to variables like class, ethnicity or the possession of cultural capital which can significantly shape lives. These are unselfconsciously ‘universalising’ texts whose global sales figures show how much readers crave ‘salvation narratives’ which offer a comfortingly circumscribed experience of comprehension and control in an increasingly fragmented world. Each publication, whatever its particular subject matter or linguistic register, and whether it is advising about perceived threats to well-being or is concerned to promote personal development and agency, is predicated on a fundamental narrative of transformative possibility for the individual. Thus in asserting the power of personal instrumentality in an episteme which has seen the critical decentring of the human subject, this genre perpetuates the telic optimisms of the Enlightenment and modernity in reified form.

In its engagement with an essential self which seeks improvement, self-help literature is clearly part of the liberal humanist tradition which has always regarded the notions of human progress and individual responsibility as axiomatic. Furthermore, in its many ‘re-presentations’ of the quest narrative in which the reader may start out as a victim but is encouraged through self-reflexivity and right ac-

tion towards self-renovation and eventual triumph, the self-help book surely perpetuates the grandest narrative of all: the 'hero's journey'. Thus while it is undoubtedly a significant material artefact in the contemporary market place and seems capable of undergoing infinite transformation in order to respond to emergent anxieties in the contemporary therapeutic ontosphere, the self-help book presents a paradox for the critical theorist inasmuch as it also constantly asserts and celebrates the power of essential self-hood which the deconstructive debates of postmodern cultural theory have enthusiastically sought to undermine. A popular product which presents a paradox! What could be more postmodern than that?

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