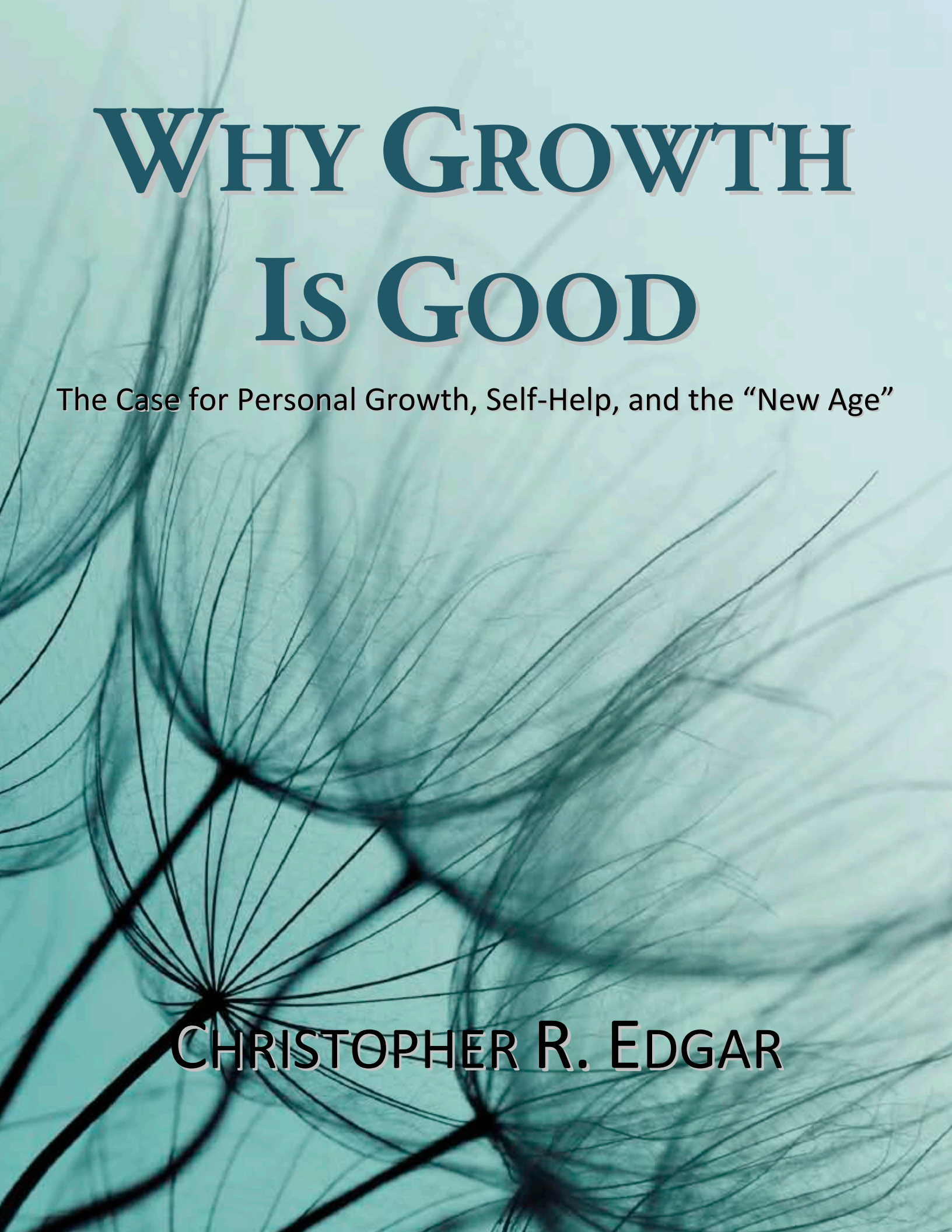

Why Growth Is Good

The Case for Personal Growth, Self-Help, and the "New Age"

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For more information about Chris Edgar's writing on the case for personal growth, visit www.DevInContext.com. Other works by Chris include his first book, *Inner Productivity: A Mindful Path to Efficiency and Enjoyment in Your Work*, and the accompanying blog Work Consciously.

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Introduction

Do personal growth techniques like meditation, affirmations and psychotherapy really have practical benefits? Is self-development nothing but self-indulgent navel-gazing? Can intelligent people engage in it with a straight face?

The essays in this collection are part of my effort — and, as far as I know, the only effort being made — to answer these questions, and to make a systematic, compelling argument for the value of personal growth ideas and practices.

By "personal growth ideas and practices," I mean perspectives and techniques for working with our *inner,* or *subjective*, experience — our thoughts, emotions and sensations. Because this definition is obviously broad, I'll illustrate what I mean with a few examples:

- *Psychotherapy* works with our inner experience by, among other things, helping us become aware of the unconscious beliefs and emotions that shape our behavior and life circumstances.

- *Meditation* affects our inner experience by, depending on the practice we engage in, helping us cultivate attentiveness, calm, insight, or some other state or

- capacity.

- *Yoga* reduces stress and increases our ability to concentrate, in addition to offering "external" benefits such as blood pressure reduction.

"Personal growth," of course, is only one of the common terms used to describe these ideas and practices — others include "self-help," "personal development," "the New Age," and so on. I'll get into categorizing various types of personal growth, and distinguishing between activities that amount to self-development and those that do not, further below, but hopefully this will suffice to give the reader a general understanding of what I mean for now.

Although there is a less than clear understanding of exactly what personal growth is, even among its teachers and critics, one thing that's clear is that it is coming under attack.

In recent years, several books — most notably, Barbara Ehrenreich's Bright-Sided and Steve Salerno's SHAM — have been sharply critical of various facets of personal growth. Self-help has also garnered (usually hostile) media attention over the last two years, due to an October 2009 incident in Sedona, Arizona, in which three died in a sweat lodge held as part of a self-improvement workshop. The upcoming February 2011 trial of James Arthur Ray, the workshop's leader, will bring this issue back into the public consciousness.

Thus far, these critiques — to my knowledge — have largely gone unanswered. Maybe this is because personal growth is such a vast and amorphous field, and it's hard for any individual "teacher" or "student" to understand whether the attacks are aimed at them. Or, perhaps self-development teachers see their ideas as so widely accepted that no defense is necessary.

Whatever the reason, we've seen no public response to the critics yet, and the purpose of these essays is to change that. I think many of the personal growth ideas and techniques out there have much to offer us, and I want to encourage people to avoid

hastily dismissing them as woo-woo, flaky, or impractical.

What Do The Critics Say?

The critics have attacked self-development from many different angles, and these essays will not attempt to comprehensively review or rebut every critique. However, a review of the anti-personal growth literature reveals a group of general themes, four of which I'll address in this collection:

1. Radical Responsibility

The idea that we have the power to shape our life circumstances is a common underpinning of self-development practices. Whether we're conscious of it or not, personal growth teachers often say, each of us is ultimately in control of our finances, relationships, and other aspects of our lives — and, perhaps, our thoughts and emotional states as well.

The critics' main quarrel with this notion is that it invites us to blame ourselves for, or "beat ourselves up over," the problems we face in our lives. If we find ourselves in debt, for instance, that must mean we're irresponsible, lazy or stupid. After all, *we* — not external factors such as government policy — are responsible for our own financial fates.

What's more, the critics charge, if we're in control of our own circumstances, it follows that others must be in control of theirs. This implies that people who are poor, ill, or laboring under some other misfortune are unworthy of compassion. If they have the ability to solve their own problems, any failure to do so on their part must be "their own damn fault."

"Radical Responsibility: Self-Efficacy and Self-Blame," the first essay in this collection, deals with these and similar issues.

2. A Dangerous Distraction

Many people see self-development as nothing more than a harmless distraction, much like Sudoku or reality TV. Not surprisingly, these aren't the people who spend time writing critical books and essays about personal growth. The vocal critics tend to see self-development as a socially destructive force.

A common reason for this view is the notion that self-development practices distract people from pressing social problems. If we develop too much happiness or inner peace by, say, meditating or saying affirmations, we may rob ourselves of the indignation that would otherwise have us act to combat poverty, disease, and so on.

If it doesn't cause us to blithely ignore political issues that need our attention, some critics suggest, getting involved in personal growth may cause us to neglect problem areas in our own lives. For example, "positive thinking," assuming it works, may make us "too happy," and thus complacent about real financial concerns we're facing.

"Personal Growth: The New Opiate of the Masses?" covers this topic.

3. Self-Help and Selfishness

Critics often argue that, as their name implies, self-development practices encourage us to become overly focused on ourselves, to the exclusion of others' needs.

Some critics basically suggest that every minute we spend taking workshops, doing qi gong, or engaging in some other self-growth activity, is a minute we won't be able to spend reaching out to people in need.

What's more, critics charge, personal growth teachers often encourage us to focus on our own wants instead of the wants of others. After all, there are all sorts of books, seminars and so on about becoming wealthy, "finding the one," and so on, but how often do we see self-help bestsellers about, say, ending

starvation in the world?

I address these questions in "Is Self-Help Selfish?"

4. The Victim Culture

As we saw earlier, some critics target what they see as self-development's exaggerated view of people's responsibility for their life situation. Some, however, take the opposite tack, asserting that personal growth teachers encourage people to adopt a passive and self-pitying "victim mentality."

For instance, many critics claim that psychotherapy fosters in patients the mindset that their parents are responsible for their present woes, and that freeing themselves of the influence of their "families of origin" is basically impossible.

Similarly, some self-development opponents assert that, by inviting us to wallow in our own pain, psychotherapy, support groups and like phenomena draw our attention away from the more serious suffering of others.

"Personal Growth: A Culture of Victimhood?" deals with these concerns.

What Is Personal Development?

Obviously, it is difficult to debate personal development's merits without fully understanding what it is. Thus, I'll explore what self-growth means more rigorously before addressing its critics.

In a nutshell, to my mind, personal development perspectives and techniques are (1) *consciously intended to work with our "inner experience,"* meaning our thoughts, emotions and sensations; and (2) meant to produce *progressive and lasting results*. I'll expand on this below.

We're In It For The Feelings

Arguably, human beings do basically everything they do with the goal of having some kind of inner experience. Whether we're meditating, giving to charity, getting an education, drinking alcohol, or something else, we're doing it because of the way we think that activity will have us *feel*.

To use a common example, we don't make money just for the sake of having a bunch of colored pieces of paper. We do it because of the *feelings* we think having and spending money will bring us. Perhaps we want the feeling of security that comes with knowing we'll have enough to eat, a sense of accomplishment, the thrill of knowing we can buy a flashy motorcycle, or something else. But in any case, what we're after is some inner experience.

Some might object that they make money to take care of others (their children or elderly parents, for example), not because it helps them feel a certain way. However, you probably wouldn't have any interest in taking care of others if doing so didn't give you a certain inner experience — maybe a feeling of happiness, righteousness, or something else.

In other words, if you were emotionally indifferent to whether someone else lived or died, stagnated or thrived, you probably wouldn't be helping them.

Where The "Conscious" Part Comes In

While it's true that we do most of what we do with the goal of having an inner experience, we aren't always *consciously* seeking such an experience. In everyday life, I think, most of us don't consciously contemplate how the things we do will have us feel.

When we get up in the morning, for example, we don't usually ask ourselves whether we'll feel better if we go to work or stay home, or whether listening to the car radio will make the commute smoother. Usually, when we do these kinds of

activities, we're just going through the motions, running on "autopilot."

By contrast, personal growth activities, to my mind, are things we do with the *specific goal* of transforming our inner experience. We do them consciously intending to create a specific mental or emotional state. As a simple example, I may say the affirmation "I am lovable" with the intent of developing more self-appreciation. Or, perhaps I'll do some yoga to get a sense of openness or lightness in my body.

By my definition, the specifics of an activity don't determine whether it amounts to personal growth. For instance, suppose (somewhat implausibly) that I'm in the habit of meditating every day simply because my parents told me to. I'm not doing it because I think it will bring me inner peace, happiness, or some other feeling.

In this example, meditation is not a "personal growth" activity *for me*, regardless of how others might use it, because I don't do it with the conscious goal of feeling a certain way. The intent is what's important, not the specifics.

Growth Versus Advice

I've yet to discuss how one particular area of self-development fits into this framework. I'm talking about approaches that try to harness our thoughts, emotions and sensations to create a specific result in the outside world.

Popular examples include visualizing something you want in order to bring it into your life — whether it's business success, an intimate relationship, or something else; and energy healing intended to improve the client's health.

This sort of practice is a form of personal growth, under my definition, if it seeks to achieve the outer result by transforming the user's inner experience, or the way the user relates to that experience.

To illustrate, as I said earlier, a book that teaches us ways to become more loving toward ourselves, on the theory that this

will help us attract a partner, would amount to personal growth by my lights, because it seeks to create an outer result by working with our thoughts and emotions.

While it uses the transformation of our inner experience as a tool to change our outer circumstances, this book nonetheless qualifies as personal growth, because it involves consciously focusing on our inner experience.

Tire-Changing Isn't Self-Development

On the other hand, a book that teaches us how to dress to attract a mate is not a form of personal development under my definition, because it doesn't focus on transforming or relating to our inner experience.

For this book's purposes, the way we feel about ourselves is irrelevant. Its goal is to get *others* — namely, potential partners — to approve of our appearance. I may follow all of the book's advice and still feel miserable about myself, but the book has nonetheless fulfilled its purpose if potential mates like my style.

This caveat is important, because it keeps the definition of personal growth from encompassing every possible type of advice, and every product or seminar out there that seeks to teach us how to do something.

I imagine most of us wouldn't think of books on changing a tire, investing in municipal bonds, or mastering Portuguese cooking as being about personal growth, and this observation explains why — the techniques in those books don't focus on transforming our inner experience. Those books, we could say, are about *advice*, but not growth.

In *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, self-help critic Wendy Kaminer recognizes this distinction, stating that she is "distinguishing between practical (how to do your own taxes) books and personal (how to be happy) books," and declaring that she will focus on the latter.

The Consequences For Critics

One result is that, under my view, some ideas targeted by personal development's critics actually have nothing to do with personal development. In *SHAM*, for example, Steve Salerno treats magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, which teach women "how to paint themselves, primp themselves, and acquire enough sexual know-how to keep a man satisfied and at home," as examples of "self-help and actualization" (a.k.a. "SHAM") literature.

However, from my perspective, advice about putting on makeup that doesn't focus on transforming your inner experience is not "personal growth" advice. To say otherwise, I think, would likely expand the concept of personal growth so far as to render it meaningless. After all, if makeup tips amount to personal development, why not tire-changing tips as well?

Progressive and Lasting Change

Thus far, we've talked about the first part of my working definition of personal development — namely that, to amount to personal growth, an idea or technique must be consciously intended to work with our "inner experience," meaning our thoughts, emotions and sensations.

This brings us to the second criterion an approach must meet, under my definition, to be personal development: it must be intended to produce *progressive and lasting change*.

By "progressive" change, I mean that, each time the user does the activity, they make progress — however gradual — toward their ultimate goal, whether that goal is happiness, a better job, a Buddhist-style attitude of non-attachment to their experience, or something else.

By "lasting" change, I mean the benefits of the activity must persist even when the user isn't doing the activity. In other words, the user must take those benefits with them into the "real world," rather than only experiencing them in the therapist's office or seminar, or on the meditation cushion.

Why Therapy Isn't Like Candy

If I see a therapist, for instance, I'll probably do so expecting progressive and lasting benefits to my mental and emotional health. I'll desire *progressive* change in the sense that, each week that I visit my therapist, I want to feel more at peace with myself than I did during the last.

What's more, I'll probably want those benefits to persist in between therapy sessions. I won't want the self-acceptance I feel to suddenly disappear the moment I walk out of the therapist's office. In all likelihood, I'll also want that peace to last even when I'm no longer in therapy — I won't want it to fade away after the therapeutic relationship ends. Thus, generally speaking, psychotherapy is a personal growth activity under my definition.

By contrast, suppose I eat a piece of candy because I want to create a particular inner experience — in this case, a taste sensation. I probably won't do this expecting lasting changes in my experience. In all likelihood, I'll understand that eating the candy will give me a brief moment of pleasure, but after a little while the feeling will pass. I'll be "back to square one," emotionally speaking — as far as my inner experience is concerned, it'll be as if I never ate the candy at all.

It's About Expectations, Not Results

Finally, note that I said the activity must be *intended* to produce progressive and lasting change. The activity need not *actually* create that type of change to amount to self-development under my definition.

For example, if a person goes to an energy healer expecting to grow more relaxed and focused over time, but in fact each session only creates a fleeting "high," like the candy I mentioned earlier, the energy healing would nonetheless be "personal growth" as I use the term.

I offer this caveat to avoid defining personal growth to

include only techniques and perspectives that "work," because that would foreclose the possibility of meaningful debate about the merits of specific approaches.

As a result, even if you believe that no form of personal development is effective and it's all a fraud, you can still accept my definition. Like I said earlier, my definition is purely descriptive — it's simply meant to capture the conventional view of what self-development is, and not to judge whether certain techniques are helpful or moral.

As I imagine you've already gathered, despite the anti-intellectualism people often ascribe to personal growth, the critiques of self-development, and my responses to them, raise profound philosophical, psychological, political and other questions. Let's get into some of those questions now.

1

Radical Responsibility: Self-Efficacy and Self-Blame

A common theme in personal development literature is that we should take responsibility for our life circumstances. It's best for us, in other words, to see ourselves as in control of our situation, as opposed to believing that forces beyond our control create it. I call this idea the "responsibility ethic."

On the surface, this doesn't seem controversial. If I'm in debt, for instance, it won't do me any good to sit around blaming the stock market, my family, the current phase of the moon, or some other outside force. I have no reason to take steps to get out of debt unless I accept that *my* actions — cutting expenses, selling things I don't need, and so on — can fix the situation.

Personal growth's critics, however, often argue that the responsibility ethic has unsavory consequences. A person who believes they control their lot in life, the critics say, will be prone to beating themselves up. If they don't get the results they want, in whatever area of life they're trying to improve, they'll blame themselves.

Suppose, for example, that I do everything in my power to get out of debt — I cut up my credit cards, sell unnecessary stuff,

and work with a debt counselor — and I still fail to reduce my debt by the desired amount. If I think I'm 100% in control of my situation, I'll see this failure as proof that I'm lazy or stupid, and suffer over it. As Steve Salerno writes in *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*, "if you make people believe they have full control over their lives, and then their lives don't get better (or even get worse), how could that *not* throw their synapses into turmoil?"

In this essay, I'm going to question the assumption that the responsibility ethic promotes self-blame.

The Psychological Research

Psychologists use the term "locus of control" to describe a person's beliefs about the degree to which they're responsible for their circumstances. The more I tend toward an "internal locus of control," the more I believe in my own power to direct my destiny. By contrast, the closer my beliefs are to an "external locus of control," the more I think I'm at the mercy of factors I can't influence.

For example, suppose I'm a student, and I'm about to take a test. If I have a strong internal locus of control, I'll believe that, if I work hard enough, I'll get a good grade. But if I have a strong external locus of control, I'll assume that studying will have little effect on how well I do, and the grade I get will be largely the result of luck. Not surprisingly, psychologists have found that students who tend toward an internal locus of control usually study harder.

The locus of control concept is relevant here, because psychological research has repeatedly found a relationship between people's locus of control and the likelihood that they will suffer from depression. People closer to an internal locus of control, as it turns out, are less prone to depression than people who tend toward an external locus of control.

In other words, people who see themselves as responsible for their circumstances in life are less likely to get depressed. In

fact, it's those who see themselves as mere pawns of other people or forces who are more likely to have that problem. This makes sense, psychologists say, because of the feelings of helplessness and despair created by these people's sense of inefficacy.

These findings don't mesh well with the self-development critics' argument. If the critics are right, and people who see themselves as in charge of their lot in life are likely to beat themselves up, we should expect those people to be *more* prone to depression than those who believe they're at the mercy of outside forces. But the exact opposite appears to be true, which casts doubt on the idea that the responsibility ethic is creating all this unnecessary suffering for people.

We Need More Evidence

I'm not claiming that this completely settles the issue. After all, if we really want to know whether personal growth's responsibility ethic is causing suffering, we need to study people who do some kind of personal development activity — reading self-help books, going to transformational workshops, or something along those lines — and inquire whether that activity has any relationship to depression, problems with anger, and so on. And these, of course, would have to be books, workshops, and so forth that encouraged a sense of personal responsibility for one's situation.

Psychological researchers have only recently begun to look into the effect of personal development techniques (not counting psychotherapy) on mental health issues like anxiety and depression.

There is no clear consensus yet: in one study of a wide range of self-help books, the vast majority of the readers surveyed reported "a significant improvement in their condition." There have also been many studies of the psychological effects of meditation, suggesting that meditation helps alleviate depression and other emotional problems.

However, as far as I'm aware, there is no concrete

evidence that the responsibility ethic, whether presented through books, workshops, or some other medium, is doing all the psychological harm to people that the critics allege. Thus, the "self-blame" argument against the responsibility ethic isn't obviously correct or commonsensical at all.

Responsibility Versus Blame

The critics of personal growth aren't the only ones aware of what I'm calling the "self-blame argument." Many personal development teachers understand it as well. What they often say is that it's possible to see ourselves as responsible for our circumstances without blaming ourselves for them.

In other words, if we suffer a setback, we can admit how our actions contributed to it without suffering over it. If I'm in debt, for instance, I can acknowledge what I did to create the debt without calling myself lazy or stupid and endlessly self-flagellating.

As we saw earlier, psychological research suggests that people can, and do, make this "responsibility versus blame" distinction. People who tend toward an external locus of control — the belief that they lack control over their lot in life — often punish themselves for the difficult events in their lives, even though they see themselves as helpless.

As psychologist Helen Block Lewis puts it in *The Many Faces of Shame*, "behavior theorists have described a cognitive paradox in depression: If depressed people are as helpless as they feel, logic dictates that they should not also feel self-reproaches (guilt) for what they are unable to do." And yet, interestingly enough, they do feel guilt. By contrast, people who tend toward an internal locus of control, although they see themselves as in charge of their lives, actually do less self-flagellation when they get bad results.

Some critics acknowledge this distinction but reject it, arguing that it effectively destroys any notion of morality.

For example, in *Self-Help Inc.*, sociologist Micki McGee derides Deepak Chopra's discussion of responsibility in *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, in which Chopra advocates "not blaming anyone or anything for your situation, including yourself." "This notion of responsibility," writes McGee, "suspends the literal meaning, ensuring that no one is actually accountable for anything," and creating "a mystical world without need of morality or ethics."

Is this true? Let's take this question to a deeper level. As I think you'll see, this discussion is a good example of how the debate over personal growth ideas raises some important, and timeworn, philosophical questions.

What is self-blame? I'd put it this way: When we blame ourselves for an event in our lives, we are 1) judging ourselves as worthy of suffering because it happened, and 2) administering punishment — by, perhaps, tensing our bodies painfully when we think about the event. For example, I'll bet you can think of a time when you got really angry at someone, in a way you now see as inappropriate — and that you cringe (punish yourself) when you remember it.

When you think about it, the idea that I should suffer because of something I did is based on some interesting metaphysical assumptions. The idea seems to be that, when I do something wrong (whatever that may mean to me), I basically knock the universe out of balance. I can only restore the cosmic equilibrium by experiencing suffering proportional to the anguish of my victim. The fancy philosophical term for this idea is "retributive justice."

We see this mindset in how people tend to talk about the criminal justice system. For instance, people often say of a criminal that he must "pay for his crime." This means the criminal has drawn on a sort of "cosmic bank account" by

creating suffering for another person, and he must repay the "debt" through his own suffering — most likely, by going to prison for some number of years.

Justice Without Retribution

In essence, many personal growth teachers, while asking us to take responsibility for our situation, also invite us to let go of the philosophy of retributive justice. I can acknowledge my role in creating my circumstances, they say, without punishing myself if those circumstances aren't up to my standards.

What's more, when I stop wasting time and energy punishing myself for the past, I become able to look to the future and take constructive action — make a plan to reduce my debt, perhaps, or look for a new relationship.

If we do what these teachers suggest and let go of the retributive justice idea, do we also eliminate morality? I think not. It's certainly possible to believe in moral rules — that is, rules of right and wrong conduct — without accepting the concept of retributive justice.

I could believe, for instance, that stealing is wrong, without also believing in retribution against people who steal. Instead, I might believe that people who steal should be required to pay their victims the money they stole, or the value of the property they took, to put the victim in the position he was in before the theft. In other words, I may accept what's called compensatory justice, but not retributive justice.

What's more, I would be far from the first to take this stance — many philosophers have argued against the concept of retributive justice, and the notion that people should suffer for their misdeeds to restore some abstract cosmic balance. The idea of dispensing with retribution against ourselves and others is not some kooky New Age innovation.

But Isn't Guilt Good For Society?

I think some personal growth critics would acknowledge that we can retain notions of right and wrong, even if we stop blaming or punishing ourselves when our results are less than perfect. But that, the critics might argue, is not the real issue — the point is that, if we don't blame ourselves when we act wrongly, morality loses any practical significance.

The very reason we act morally, they say, is because we're afraid that, if we don't, we'll beat ourselves up over it. If people lost the capacity to self-blame, society would descend into violent anarchy. "There's a name for people who lack guilt and shame: sociopaths," writes Wendy Kaminer in *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*. "We ought to be grateful if guilt makes things like murder and moral corruption 'harder.'"

A Brief Reality Check

First off, I think it's important to keep in mind that this argument is purely theoretical. I don't know of any critic who has presented solid evidence that personal growth teachings are actually turning people into violent psychopaths. Nobody has shown that, say, serial killers are statistically more likely to have read *I'm OK, You're OK* than the average person. What the critics claim is that *if*, hypothetically, people took the "responsibility vs. blame" distinction to its logical extent, people would stop behaving morally and we'd all be in trouble.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the critics are right — that, if people fully accepted the idea that we shouldn't punish ourselves for the past, and they fully understood the logical implications of that idea, they'd start murdering and stealing with wild abandon. Even if this is true, that doesn't necessarily mean the responsibility versus blame distinction is a menace to society. That would only be true if we had reason to believe that people, *in practice*, are taking, or will take, that distinction to its logical extent.

Is there reason to believe this? Like I said, there's no conclusive evidence one way or the other to my knowledge, but I think a few observations are worth making.

First, consider the audience. Admittedly, given the vastness of the personal growth field, it would be difficult to come up with a profile of the "average personal development consumer." But we do know that the majority of self-help book sales are made to women. I hope it isn't unforgivably sexist of me to point this out, but men commit most recorded violent crimes (and, in fact, most crimes of any stripe). Notably, in the U.S. in 2008, men committed 90% of murders where the killer's gender was known.

If personal growth teachings really do turn people into miscreants, shouldn't we expect to see more criminality among women, who are self-help books' biggest consumers? Or, to put the point differently, perhaps we can all rest easier knowing that women, who appear to have a lower propensity for violence, are largely the ones buying these books. But if there's ever an upsurge in male self-help book consumption, I guess, we'd all better stock up on ammunition and canned goods and hunker down for the apocalypse.

Second, consider the teachings. As we saw, the critics' argument is that, if people took the "responsibility versus blame" distinction to its logical extent, they'd behave destructively. If this is so, personal growth teachers certainly aren't encouraging their audiences to make that logical leap. You know the typical goals of personal development: to help you make money, have fulfilling relationships, develop inner peace, and so on. We don't often see books, CDs or seminars about "Guilt-Free Murder," "Self-Esteem For Child Abusers," or "Loving Your Inner Car Thief."

I don't know for a fact, but I'll make the educated guess that consumers of self-development products and services, by and large, aren't even *thinking* about the abstract philosophical implications of the ideas they're learning. They have specific, practical objectives, and they're interested in personal growth

only insofar as its perspectives and techniques help them get where they want to go.

Is Self-Blame Needed For Morality?

We've seen that, even if we assume in the abstract that letting go of self-blame means eliminating morality, it doesn't follow that personal growth teachers who talk about releasing guilt are, here in the real world, promoting immoral behavior. Now, let's return to the original question: if we lost our tendency to "beat ourselves up" over the past, would we lose any incentive to act morally? Would the proverbial dogs and cats start living together?

To some, it's obvious: a person who doesn't feel guilt (which, I think, is another term for self-blame) is, in psychological terms, a psychopath, and therefore a danger to society. As we saw earlier, Wendy Kaminer argues as much in *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, writing that "there's a name for people who lack guilt and shame: sociopaths."

However, as philosopher Gilbert Harman points out, that's not what psychologists actually think. Psychologists see the lack of guilt feelings as only one of several defining characteristics of psychopaths. Others include antisocial behaviors like killing or stealing, a lack of empathy, and so on.

In other words, the fact that someone is guilt-free doesn't necessarily make them a psychopath, just as the fact that my car has an engine doesn't necessarily make it a Lamborghini. For all the psychologists know, there may be many people out there who don't suffer over the past and nonetheless behave morally.

What's more, clearly the threat of self-punishment isn't the *only* reason people refrain from antisocial behavior. Many of us, I suspect, don't even form the desire to harm others in the first place. I don't know about you, but as I go through my day, I don't usually find myself thinking "you know, it'd be great fun to kill that person, but I'd just feel so guilty if I did, so I'll hold off."

I also suspect that many of us abstain from hurting others

because we *care* about them, and want to see them stay well. And, at the very least, surely the fear of getting caught and punished by *others* — which is distinct from the fear of *self*-punishment — deters some people from criminal activity.

My point is that I think there's reason to question the notion that, if people let go of their tendency to self-blame, widespread chaos would ensue. Hopefully, this will give some solace to people locked in a painful cycle of self-flagellation.

Responsibility and Compassion

Perhaps self-help's responsibility ethic does not necessarily lead us to self-blame, but does it foster an attitude of "other-blame?"

A common argument against the responsibility ethic goes like this: if I am responsible for my lot in life, it follows that other people are also responsible for theirs. For instance, if I assume my own actions created my financial situation, logically I must also assume other people's actions created theirs, and thus I must accept that poor people's own choices created their poverty.

What's more, if I believe poor people are responsible for their situation, there's no reason for me to help them. After all, because their choices and actions created their situation, it's "their own fault." Thus, if we accept the responsibility ethic, we must jettison any semblance of compassion for others. Wendy Kaminer, for instance, decries the "antisocial strain of the positive thinking/mind-cure tradition," which holds that "compassion is a waste of psychic energy."

The Psychology Of Generosity

I think it's useful to begin this discussion with another reality check. Again, the critics are speaking hypothetically. No one, to my knowledge, has any evidence that people involved in personal growth actually give less to charity, or do anything else that might suggest they lack compassion for the less fortunate.

What the critics say is that, *if* people took the responsibility ethic to its logical extent, they would stop being generous to others.

Admittedly, I don't have conclusive evidence that personal growth books or seminars make people more generous. However, there is evidence suggesting that people who see themselves as responsible for their circumstances — in other words, people who accept the responsibility ethic — are actually *more* inclined to help others, not less.

You may recall that, earlier, I described a concept in psychology known as "locus of control." As the psychologists have it, people with a more internal locus of control believe they have the power to determine their destiny, while people who tend toward an external locus believe their destinies are largely shaped by outside forces.

As it turns out, there has been much psychological research finding that people who tend toward an internal locus of control are actually more concerned for others' welfare. One study, for instance, found that children with a more internal locus of control were more likely to help another child struggling with an academic problem. Another study found that people who tended toward an internal locus of control were more likely to act in an environmentally responsible way.

Intuitively, this makes sense. If I believe I have control over events in the world, I'll be more inclined to think I can make a difference in someone's life. So, if I help another person study for a test, they'll probably do better. But if I don't see myself as capable of affecting events, why would I bother helping another student? If nothing I do seems to change anything, why should I expect them to benefit?

It stands to reason that, if self-development ideas are causing people to see themselves as responsible for their circumstances, those ideas may actually be promoting generosity and compassion, not stifling them.

And Now, Back To Philosophy Land

We've seen that, even if we assume that the responsibility ethic, taken to its logical extent, would cause people to lose compassion for others, it's not at all clear that people who believe they're responsible for their circumstances are — in practice — less generous.

Now, let's turn back to the original, more abstract question: if I see myself as creating my circumstances in life, does it logically follow that others' circumstances are "their own fault," and I shouldn't help them? I think the answer is plainly no, for several reasons.

1. I'm Responsible, You're Responsible? If I believe I'm responsible for my life situation, it doesn't follow that I must believe others are responsible for theirs. I may see myself as someone with the health, resources, social network, and so on that I need to have control over my reality. However, I might see others who lack the same advantages as helpless, or as less capable of influencing their situation than I am.

Personally, this way of thinking strikes me as irritatingly paternalistic, but the point is that, at least, it's not illogical to think this way.

2. Responsibility Versus Blame Redux. As we saw earlier, it's possible to see yourself as responsible for an event in your life without blaming yourself or beating yourself up over it. By the same token, I think, it's possible to see someone else as responsible for their situation, without judging them as "at fault" and unworthy of help.

Suppose you have a friend who has a decent job and is capable of supporting himself. However, he becomes addicted to drugs, and because of his addiction he falls into poverty. Would you lack compassion for him because he chose (at least, initially) to take drugs? I doubt you would. In other words, although your friend is responsible for his situation, that doesn't mean you'll

automatically lose any desire to help him.

3. Unconscious Beliefs. We'll delve deeper into the concept of unconscious thoughts and beliefs later on. For now, I'll note that, according to many personal growth teachers, our situation in life often results from thinking that occurs outside our awareness.

In one sense, we're "responsible" for these beliefs, because we're the only ones who can become aware of and change them. No one else can do that for us, although perhaps they can help us along. However, it would be hard to argue that we're "to blame" for our unconscious thinking, as it's often the product of our childhood conditioning, and letting go of those harmful ways of thinking can take a lot of time and energy.

For instance, suppose I harbor the unconscious belief that I'm unlovable, and thus I have trouble forming relationships. I'm "responsible" for this belief, in the sense that no one else can change it for me. However, I don't think anyone would claim in this example that the difficulties I'm having are "my own damn fault" and I'm unworthy of compassion.

Is The Responsibility Ethic Anti-Political?

A related argument often made by critics of personal growth concerns the relationship between the responsibility ethic and politics. This is a complicated argument, but I think it's an important one, so bear with me as I flesh it out a little.

The critics argue that, if I believe I'm responsible for my circumstances, I am unlikely to participate in politics — to vote, protest, debate issues with others, and so on. In other words, if I think I hold the power to change my life situation, I won't see any need to use the political process to improve my lot in life.

Say, for instance, that I run a business, and a tax imposed by the city is hurting my bottom line. If I believe I have full control over my destiny, I won't see any reason to lobby the city government to reduce the tax. After all, because I have the power

to fix the situation, I can solve the problem myself — by, say, moving elsewhere, or just increasing my revenues to make up for the loss.

To the critics, because it convinces people there's no need to participate in politics, the responsibility ethic is anti-democratic, in that it discourages an informed, politically active public. What's more, the critics argue, we do need the political process to change aspects of our life situation. Critics with a left-wing bent commonly argue that only the government can remedy the economic unfairness in our society, and the responsibility ethic blinds the "have-nots" to this by deceiving them into thinking they, individually, can solve their financial problems.

Thus, some say, the responsibility ethic serves as a kind of "opiate of the masses." As sociologist Micki McGee writes, personal growth teachings tend to trap their followers in a futile "cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic, and political in origin."

Clearing Up Some Confusion

Simply put, I think this argument misunderstands the responsibility ethic. All the responsibility ethic says is that I am responsible for the situation I'm in, and I have the ability to change that situation if I wish to do so. It does not address the specific *actions* I should take to improve my situation, or whether "political action" is the right option.

We can understand this by returning to my earlier example, where my city imposes a tax I think is bad for my business. If I accept the responsibility ethic, I will believe I'm capable of improving this situation. But the question remains: what is the *best way* to change it? Should I move to another city? Try to increase my revenue? Lobby the city council to repeal the tax? The responsibility ethic is silent on this issue.

In other words, it doesn't follow from my belief that I can improve the situation that political activity will not be an effective method of doing so. Supporting a politician who pledges to

repeal the tax might indeed be an effective method of getting what I want. Thus, I think it's a mistake to cast the responsibility ethic as inherently anti-political.

The Politics of "Non-Responsibility"

This becomes even clearer when we consider the extreme opposite of the responsibility ethic, which I'll call the "non-responsibility ethic." A person who accepts the non-responsibility ethic (in other words, someone with a strong external locus of control) sees events in their lives as the product of luck, or of forces they can't influence.

Suppose I believe in the non-responsibility ethic, and I'm faced with the same situation where the city tax is hurting my business. If I believe my actions are unlikely to make a difference, what will I do to improve my situation? If I really think I'm a helpless pawn of fate, I'll do *nothing*.

As this example illustrates, it's also a mistake to call the responsibility ethic inherently politically conservative, as left-wing critics of personal growth tend to do. If these critics want to see more redistribution of wealth, it won't help them to have a nation of people with an external locus of control who feel powerless to change the status quo.

In light of this, it's no surprise that some of the most popular personal growth books use political leaders to illustrate their ideas. Even the much-maligned *Think and Grow Rich* cites Gandhi as "one of the most astounding examples known to civilization of the possibilities of faith." Napoleon Hill writes that Gandhi's faith in his ability to change the world — or, we might say, his strong internal locus of control — drove his contribution to ending the British rule of India.

The Psychology of Responsibility

I won't harp too much on the psychological evidence, because I've done that a lot thus far. Suffice it to say that several

psychological studies have suggested that people with an internal locus of control — a belief in their own capacity to affect events — are actually *more* inclined to participate in politics.

For example, one study surveyed some newly voting-aged college students, and found that the ones who described themselves as having an internal locus of control were more likely to vote in a presidential election. Another found that people who tended toward an internal locus of control were more likely to participate in political activism.

In other words, it seems that a person's belief that they're responsible for their circumstances leads them to be *more* politically active, not less, which also belies the critics' claim that the responsibility ethic is somehow anti-political.

2

Personal Growth: The New Opiate of the Masses?

In this piece, I'll address a common criticism of personal growth that casts it as a veiled form of socioeconomic oppression. I'll spend a chunk of time describing the argument to make sure I do it justice, because I think this is one of the most important controversies surrounding self-development.

The argument goes like this: people usually seek out personal growth books, workshops and so on because they're unsatisfied with some aspect of their lives — their finances, relationships, stress level, and so on.

Yet, even if they achieve their goal, that same unhappiness, in some form or another, remains. If I get a new relationship, I may still dislike my job. If I get a higher-paying job, I may want more time to relax. And so on.

Unhappiness Comes From Unfairness

In the critics' view, this is because personal development does not address the root cause of this unhappiness: *economic unfairness*. From this perspective, there is no defensible moral reason why there should be disparities in wealth between people.

People's talents and abilities largely result from luck, and thus it is immoral to allow those talents and abilities to determine people's economic situation.

We all feel the impact of this unfairness, the argument goes, regardless of our circumstances. A man in dire financial straits obviously feels it, because he's constantly worried about paying the bills. But a wealthy man feels it as well, though perhaps in a subtler way — maybe because he's nagged by the feeling that he doesn't deserve what he has.

Personal growth ideas, the critics say, obviously don't address this basic unfairness. Even if I get richer because of a wealth-management seminar I took, I'll still envy those with more, and I'll still feel guilty because some have less. Even if I learn how to reduce the stress of my job, I'll still feel the stress of knowing I live in an unfair society. The solutions offered by personal development, then, are temporary at best and useless at worst.

Personal Growth: Part Of The Problem

Worse still, the critics charge, self-development ideas actually help maintain this inequality. By encouraging us to seek happiness through meditation, making money, improving communication in our relationships, and so on, personal growth distracts us from the real source of our unhappiness — economic inequality — which only government redistribution of wealth can ultimately solve.

Thus, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King write in *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, contemporary spiritual practices "seek to pacify feelings of anxiety and disquiet at the individual level rather than seeking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress."

Similarly, as we saw earlier, Micki McGee writes in *Self-Help Inc.* that personal growth teachings trap their followers in a futile "cycle of seeking individual solutions to problems that are social, economic, and political in origin."

Marx Redux

We've seen that, to the critics, economic inequality is the real cause of the unhappiness that prompts people to explore personal growth. If this is true, we should expect that doing away with inequality would get rid of the unhappiness — and thus that, in an economically "fair" society, no one would care about personal growth.

This, of course, is not a new idea — Karl Marx had pretty much the same to say about religion. As he famously wrote, "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." In other words, people's reliance on religion to relieve their suffering is misguided. The real cause of their suffering is "oppression," meaning inequality.

Only a fair distribution of wealth — to be achieved, for Marx, through communism — can alleviate that suffering. Under communism, because wealth would be equitably distributed, people would have no need for religion. Similarly, if the critique of self-development we've been discussing is correct, eliminating economic inequality should also eliminate people's desire for personal growth.

A Brief Detour Into The Real World

Is this true? Not, it seems, in real-life communist countries. There, even though — ostensibly — inequality runs less rampant, people still seem to be interested in activities that, in the West, we'd probably call "self-development" or "spiritual" practices.

In the People's Republic of China, for instance, millions of people — despite government oppression — practice Falun Gong, a form of what we know as qi gong in the West. In North Korea, again despite persecution, the underground practice of Christianity continues. Back in the USSR, as Barbara Ehrenreich points out, "positive thinking" was mandatory — if someone

appeared to lack optimism about communism or the future of the Soviet state, they could get in serious trouble with the government.

A Thought Experiment

Suppose we lived in a society where the government mandated total economic equality. Everyone lived in an identical house, drove an identical car, and had an identical income, regardless of what they did for a living. In this society, would anyone be interested in personal growth or spiritual practice?

For several reasons, I suspect the answer is yes. First, I doubt that total equality of resources would affect many common human problems. What about, say, conflict in people's relationships? Can we honestly argue that the unfair distribution of wealth is the sole cause of, for instance, divorce and child abuse?

Second, a longing for spirituality and the transcendent, in one form or another, has existed in all societies throughout human history — from hunter-gatherer tribes, to classical Greece and Rome, to communist countries as we saw, to modern nations. It seems unlikely that total economic equality would reshape human nature so profoundly that it would erase this tendency.

The Hazards of Happiness

Some critics make the related, but distinct, argument that the problem with personal growth — at least, in some forms — is that it works *too well*.

This argument focuses on personal development techniques aimed at transforming our inner experience — at making us peaceful, more focused, less stressed, and so on. Examples would include meditation, yoga, and psychotherapy.

Does Contentment Equal Complacency?

By helping us feel content, some critics claim, these techniques may have us neglect problem areas in our lives. Suppose, for example, that meditating gives me a deep sense of calm. On the surface, this sounds wonderful. However, let's say I'm deeply in debt.

If meditation takes away the stress of my financial situation, I may not be inclined to get the help I need. Perhaps I'll just sit there, blissed out in a lotus position, until my landlord throws me into the street. In this example, meditation has actually harmed me, because it has removed the anxiety that would have spurred me to take action.

In *Artificial Happiness: The Dark Side of the New Happy Class*, anesthesiologist Ronald Dworkin raises this concern. Dworkin mostly focuses on the pacifying effects of antidepressant drugs, but he argues that meditation and similar practices pose the same threat. The "artificial happiness" created by these practices, in Dworkin's view, can make people dangerously complacent about problems in their lives.

Critics who focus on the political implications of personal growth sound a similar note. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King write in *Selling Spirituality* that modern spiritual practice is "the new cultural prozac, bringing transitory feelings of ecstatic happiness and thoughts of self-affirmation, but never addressing sufficiently the underlying problem of social isolation and injustice."

In other words, if meditation, positive thinking, and similar techniques really can make us happier, that may be a bad thing, because we may lose the righteous indignation that would lead us to seek political change or help others.

Are Happy People Uncaring?

As we've seen, some critics worry about personal growth's effects on an individual level, while others focus on self-

development's political, or society-wide, impact. However, their arguments share a common assumption, which we might call "happy people don't care."

That is: if you feel contented or peaceful, you'll lose the desire to improve your own situation, or that of others. In other words, you won't work toward personal or social change without enough anxiety, anger or despair.

At least in American culture, people seem to take various versions of this idea as common sense: people who don't worry must be lazy, "if you aren't outraged, you aren't paying attention," and so on. Perhaps these notions are vestiges of the U.S.'s dour Calvinist heritage. But can they be proven?

In the critical books and articles I've reviewed, I've seen no evidence that, say, unhappy or anxious people are more "successful" in life by some measure, or more generous to others. Nor have I seen evidence that people who pursue sources of so-called "artificial happiness," such as meditation and qi gong, make less money, get divorced more often, or "fail" more frequently by some other standard.

In fact, this study argues that "frequent positive affect" actually causes "favorable life circumstances" — that being happier leads to better job performance, income, and so on. In other words, perhaps happiness actually "buys" money, rather than the other way around. Barbara Ehrenreich, to be sure, disputes studies like this one, arguing that all they prove is that employers in the U.S. are irrationally biased in favor of happy (or at least happy-looking) employees.

More importantly, I've also found psychological studies suggesting that happier people are actually more compassionate. One study found that children who felt pleased about having accomplished a school task were more likely to help a fellow student. Another concluded that people with a greater sense of "subjective well-being" were more inclined to give to charity.

I think these studies are actually consistent with common sense. Unhappy people, at least in my experience, are more likely to criticize or avoid others than to help them. If we feel okay

about ourselves, on the other hand, we'll feel more secure turning our attention toward others' needs.

Self-Development and the "War on Envy"

As I mentioned earlier, the idea that societies with more economic inequality — whether in terms of income, net worth, or something else — are less moral is nothing new. In the past, people have usually made this argument from a philosophical perspective — for instance, John Rawls' famous argument that, if you designed a society from scratch, with no idea where you personally would end up on the economic scale, you'd choose a society where inequalities were only allowed if they benefited the worst-off.

Today, however, people are increasingly making this argument in psychological terms. The larger the economic inequalities in a society, advocates of this view argue, the more emotional distress and "lack of social trust" — *i.e.*, envy — people will feel.

For example, in *The Spirit Level*, epidemiologists Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson claim that societies with more wealth inequality, and therefore more (if you will) envy per capita, tend to suffer from lower lifespans, more teenage pregnancy, and a host of other problems. Not surprisingly, Pickett and Wilkinson argue that — at least, in already rich countries — more wealth redistribution will create a healthier and happier population.

Thinking about this argument, for me, raises two interesting questions. First, even assuming envy creates social ills, is designing government policy with the goal of reducing envy a good idea? Second, are there other ways to reduce society-wide envy that don't involve the use of state power?

Mission Creep In The War On Envy

I'll admit, the argument that the government should act to

combat envy is disturbing to me. One reason is that, although *The Spirit Level* and similar books focus on envy created by inequalities of wealth, there are obviously many other forms of inequality that cause jealousy.

For example, suppose I resent what I see as your biological superiority — maybe you're taller and have lost less hair than me. Or perhaps I'm jealous of your relationships — maybe you're married to the woman of my dreams, and I wish she were with me.

If money-related envy causes social ills, I'd wager that other types of envy have similar effects. In other words, if wishing I were as rich as you renders me more susceptible to disease and shortens my lifespan, surely "wishing I had Jessie's girl," or that I had somebody else's athletic talent, will also be debilitating.

You can probably tell where I'm going. Does this mean the government should engage in "sexual redistribution," and compel attractive people (by whatever measure) to accept intimate partners they wouldn't otherwise choose? Should we adopt *Harrison Bergeron*-style rules requiring, say, people with natural athletic ability to wear weights on their legs?

In other words, if we're willing to redistribute wealth in the name of fighting a "War on Envy," it's hard to see why social policy shouldn't reach into other areas of our lives in ways most people — regardless of political persuasion — would find repugnant.

Does Self-Development Soothe Envy?

Earlier, I discussed critics of personal development who cast it as a sort of modern-day "opiate of the masses." These critics argue that practices like psychotherapy, meditation, and affirmations, precisely *because* they're geared toward relieving human suffering, are socially harmful.

Why? Because, these authors say, the main source of human angst in modern times is economic inequality. At best,

then, self-development practices only offer a temporary "high," because they don't attack the root of this problem. At worst, these practices perpetuate injustice, because — like "cultural Prozac" — they distract the masses from the inequality-induced suffering that would otherwise spur them to rise up against an immoral capitalist system.

What if we took this critique at face value for a moment, and assumed that self-development *does* reduce some of the pain caused by envy? In other words, what if meditating, saying affirmations, or doing similar practices actually can cause people to feel less jealous of others? In my own experience, this has some truth to it — the more I've kept up my meditation practice, the less I've found myself unfavorably comparing myself to other people.

Perhaps the widespread adoption of these practices would make people less interested in redistributing wealth. But if that's true, in all likelihood, these practices would also lessen people's tendency to suffer over *other* kinds of inequality — envy about other people's intimate relationships, jealousy over others' looks and natural aptitudes, and so on.

So, if we take Pickett and Wilkinson at their word, and assume envy causes all kinds of social ills, it stands to reason that personal development — at least, the types of self-development with real emotional benefits — may help create a happier and healthier society. On balance, maybe a little "cultural Prozac" isn't such a terrible thing after all.

What Is "Real" Happiness?

There's another interesting assumption behind the critiques we're looking at, which is that happiness brought about by personal growth practices somehow isn't "real" or "legitimate." Thus, the inner peace I may find through meditation — no matter how wonderful it may seem to me — is somehow "fake."

"In real life," Dworkin tells us, "people succeed if they are

rich, famous, powerful or glorious." Happiness brought about by other sources, to Dworkin, is "artificial." I think Dworkin correctly states the conventional wisdom about what creates happiness for people. However, I don't think he gives a satisfying reason why we should take the conventional wisdom at face value.

If I feel happy when I'm meditating, that experience is certainly "real" to me — no less "real" than the happiness I imagine Donald Trump experiences when he closes a real estate deal. Even assuming the average person gets no happiness from meditating, that doesn't make my experience "false." To say that would be like arguing that, if I like an underground form of music such as Christian death metal, my enjoyment of the music is somehow "artificial" because the genre isn't popular.

The Hard Work of Happiness

As we've seen, the critics overstate the danger happiness poses to society. But a key question remains open: are personal growth practices an effective way to create happiness in our lives?

Usually, in arguing that self-development is ineffective, critics single out the practice of "positive thinking" — of generating positive, self-affirming thoughts, and blocking out self-denigrating ones. For some, positive thinking is a futile enterprise, because pushing negative thoughts or feelings away is impossible. For others, it's doable, but it takes a lot of work. And if it takes so much work to be happy, is it worth the effort?

In *Bright-Sided*, for instance, Barbara Ehrenreich derides positive thinking, because it seems to require "a constant effort to repress or block out unpleasant possibilities and negative thoughts." In *The Last Self-Help Book You'll Ever Need*, psychologist Paul Pearsall writes that "striving to keep your hopes up at the worst times in your life can be exhausting."

I'll do something unusual for this essay and agree with this argument, at least partly. In my experience, some people

seem to love deliberate positive thinking. To them, saying affirmations, visualizing success, and similar techniques don't feel like "work" at all. But to others — myself included — making an effort to think happy thoughts or generate positive emotion can feel draining.

However, I think critics of personal development go astray when they suggest that, because positive thinking feels draining or self-deceptive to some people, no one should practice it. Another common mistake is to equate *all* personal development with positive thinking, and then dismiss it all as "feel-good fluff," when in fact many personal growth techniques take a very different approach.

The "Art" Versus "Drug" Models Of Personal Growth

Positive thinking may feel false and self-deceptive to some people, but that doesn't mean that, objectively, it *is* false and self-deceptive. It won't be controversial for me to say, I think, that different behaviors feel authentic (or fake) for different people. For example, I would feel inauthentic speaking with a Portuguese accent, because I'm not from Portugal. However, a native of Portugal wouldn't feel that way.

Similarly, perhaps thinking optimistically in the face of adversity causes some people to feel better, but not others. But it doesn't follow that positive thinking "doesn't work" or is "fake." For instance, suppose I happen to enjoy looking at Monet paintings, but you don't. No one would claim that, simply because our opinions differ, the pleasure I feel when looking at Monet's work must be "false."

Yet, when attacking positive thinking, critics often make this kind of argument. They treat optimism as if it were a drug that we shouldn't take until clinical trials have proven it's safe. If some people react negatively to it, you shouldn't use it. But I don't think that analogy works, because — unlike drugs with dangerous side effects — people don't physically hurt themselves simply by thinking.

I think what I've said applies to many forms of personal growth. It makes more sense to think about these practices as if they were pieces of art or music than to liken them to harmful drugs. Because everyone's mind and body is unique, it stands to reason that each technique "works" for some but not others, and each person must do their own exploration to find out what "works" for them.

The "Change" Versus "Acceptance" Models

When I talk with people about meditation, they often tell me they "can't meditate." This is because, they say, they can't seem to force their minds to empty, or compel themselves to feel peaceful.

It struck me recently that these people's understanding of meditation is completely different from mine. I don't see meditation as being about "forcing" anything to happen. To me, it's about allowing whatever thoughts and feelings arise to be there, without resistance.

I think this mirrors a distinction between two schools of thought in personal development. I'll call one of them the "Change" model. On this view, personal growth is about seeking positive experiences or emotions, and avoiding negative ones.

I think positive thinking, as it's usually understood, falls in this category — as Norman Vincent Peale, the father of positive thinking, put it, "whenever a negative thought concerning your personal power comes to mind, deliberately voice a positive one to cancel it out."

Let's call the other model "Acceptance." From this perspective, the purpose of personal development is not to seek the "right" kind of experience, but to drop our resistance to the experience we're having right now — even if, in this moment, we're feeling sad or angry.

The end goal of the Acceptance approach is to find what Buddhists call "equanimity" — when we learn to allow all of the experiences life has to throw at us, the distinction between

"positive" and "negative" feelings disappears, and we are always at peace.

Why This Matters

This distinction is important to our discussion, because critics of personal development often neglect it. In *Artificial Happiness*, for instance, anesthesiologist Ronald W. Dworkin criticizes meditation, citing the example of a patient who "escapes her own consciousness through meditation, and keeps her unhappiness at bay," but thus "also postpones any serious analysis of her situation."

True, some people may use meditation from what I've called a "Change" perspective — to repress or transform their grief, anger, and so on. But this certainly isn't the only way people use meditation (nor do I think it's the most helpful way). As I noted, many forms of Buddhist meditation have the goal of "Acceptance" — that is, learning to simply allow the anger and grief to arise and pass away.

So, in a nutshell, even if you aren't a fan of the "never let a negative thought enter your mind" approach, I think personal development still has much to offer you.

3

Is Self-Help Selfish?

Critics often put down personal growth practices on the ground that they're selfish, or at least self-absorbed. The time people spend meditating, saying affirmations, taking workshops, and so on, according to the critics, could be better spent helping others.

"The question is why one should be so inwardly preoccupied at all," writes Barbara Ehrenreich in *Bright-Sided*. "Why spend so much time working on one's self when there's so much real work to be done?" Similarly, in *The Last Self-Help Book You'll Ever Need*, Paul Pearsall writes, in questioning the value of much self-help literature, that "most of the problems we think we have stem from too much self-focus rather than too little." The phrase "selfish help" has also become popular on blogs that are critical of personal development.

This criticism may have some appeal on the surface. After all, when I meditate, I'm the only one who gains calm and clarity. My meditation practice doesn't cause food to appear on the tables of impoverished people. Similarly, if I see a therapist, that can only help resolve my mental health concerns — it does nothing

for catatonic people in psychiatric hospitals.

But if we look a little deeper, I think it becomes clear that this critique has some flaws, and I'm going to discuss them in this essay.

Does Self-Help Mean No "Other-Help"?

I think the most obvious problem with this argument is that it assumes that a person can't do both personal growth work and charitable work, or at least that people involved in personal development are less interested in helping others.

Clearly, the first of these is not true. It's surely possible for me to lead a life that includes both, say, meditation and volunteering at a homeless shelter.

I suppose one could argue that the time I spend doing personal growth activities detracts from the time I could spend being generous to others. But if we take that argument seriously, most of what we do in life — apart from, I guess, eating and sleeping — becomes "selfish" and reprehensible.

After all, every minute we spend hanging out with friends, watching a movie, hiking, and so on is one less minute we could spend serving others' needs (whatever that may mean to you). This argument holds people to an impossible moral standard that I doubt even the most generous critic of personal development could meet.

Nor have I seen any evidence that people who do self-development work are less inclined to help others. I've yet to see a study suggesting that, say, people who have read *The Secret* are less likely to give to charity.

Emotions Influence Actions

More importantly, I think the claim that "self-help is selfish" misses the deeper point that *our emotional state affects how we act*. If my personal growth practices put me in a happier or more peaceful state, that's likely to change — for the better —

the way I relate to others.

It may be that, while I'm in the process of meditating, I'm the only one gaining peace and clarity. But when I'm done meditating, I take that peace and clarity out into the world. Doesn't it stand to reason that, if I'm feeling more peaceful, I'll behave more peacefully toward other people?

This idea is more than just common sense — there's substantial research supporting it. You may remember that, earlier, I pointed to several psychological studies suggesting that happiness actually causes people to be more giving toward others. I've also discussed the evidence showing that people who believe they're responsible for their life circumstances — a belief often promoted in personal development — behave more generously.

However, there is also research bearing more directly on the relationship between self-development practices and qualities like kindness and compassion. One study, "Mindfulness-Based Relationship Enhancement," found that couples who meditated reported more satisfaction with their relationships. Another found that Buddhist metta meditation "increased feelings of social connection and positivity toward novel individuals" in study participants.

On a subtler level, the way we feel affects those around us, even when we aren't doing or saying anything. Daniel Goleman's *Social Intelligence*, for instance, describes how our bodies instinctively detect and mimic the emotions of people we're with. Goleman, for example, points to studies of couples showing that one partner's anger or sadness induced the same emotions in the other person.

In other words, because humans are empathic creatures, it makes sense that the emotional benefits we get from personal growth would "rub off" on others. This is why, I think, one of my mentors says that "the greatest gift you can give to others is to work on yourself."

So, I think it's important to look not only at how a personal growth practice benefits its immediate "user," but also how it affects their actions toward others and the way they show

up in the world.

The "New Atheist" Parallel

Another observation worth making about the argument that "self-help consumes time we'd otherwise spend serving others" is that it closely parallels a similar objection frequently made by critics of what's often called "mainstream religion."

People who pray to God to relieve suffering in the world are misguided, critics say, because there is no God. But more importantly, churchgoers are squandering time they could be spending on real charitable work. (This is the sort of thing we often hear from "New Atheist" writers such as Sam Harris.)

Religious People Give More

If this argument is right, we should expect religious people to do less charitable giving than unbelievers. While believers are uselessly propitiating their imaginary sky-god, atheists are down in the trenches, solving real people's problems — right?

Actually, much evidence suggests the opposite: religious people tend to be *more* generous than unbelievers. In *Who Really Cares*, a study of charitable donation, economist Arthur C. Brooks found that religious belief was the strongest predictor of giving to charity among the factors he looked at — more so than any political orientation, age group or race.

So, while it may be true that believers spend time in worship that nonbelievers don't, it seems religious people nonetheless find the time to do more giving. But why?

One plausible explanation I've heard is that religious people are happier. They feel more secure, and grateful, living in a universe they see as orderly and benevolent. And psychological studies have found that happier people tend to give more generously.

In any case, all this suggests that we shouldn't be too quick to conclude that personal development aficionados are less

likely to be charitable, simply because they spend some of their time in arguably "self-focused" activities. Of course, because the ideas usually associated with self-growth are different in many ways from traditional religion, we shouldn't necessarily assume people interested in personal growth are more giving either.

The Promise of "Stealth Transformation"

I can imagine a critic responding that I'm painting an unrealistic picture of self-help methods and the reasons people use them. People don't get involved in personal growth to cultivate compassion for others, they might say. They do it because they want more money, better relationships, improved health, and so on.

I think this actually points to one of the great social benefits of personal development — what's sometimes called "stealth transformation." Yes, some people may meditate because they want to be calmer in business meetings; some may do yoga because they want a more attractive body; and so forth. However, no matter what their intentions are, the peace and focus they gain from their practices can positively affect their behavior toward others.

In other words, even if people go into self-development practices for purely "self-interested" reasons, they may find their relationship with the world changing in ways they didn't expect or intend. I know this happened in my own meditation and yoga practices. I didn't begin them with serving others in mind, but the composure I got from those practices has helped people feel more relaxed and open around me.

Cultivating Compassion

As I noted earlier, there's much research in psychology showing that, the happier we feel, the more generous we're likely to be toward others. This is why, I suggested, personal growth practices that help us develop peace and happiness benefit more

than just the immediate "user."

I can imagine a critic rejoining: "but why do all these things to 'develop' compassion? Why not just go out and *be* compassionate by giving your time and money to those who need it?" As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in her important book *Bright-Sided*, "why not reach out to others in love and solidarity or peer into the natural world for some glimmer of understanding?"

Do Motives Matter?

It seems that, to some personal development critics, being compassionate, kind or generous is simply a matter of taking the right *actions*. If you give your time, energy or money to someone, and receive nothing material in exchange, you qualify as a compassionate person.

From this perspective, it doesn't matter whether you actually *feel* a sense of love or kindness toward the person you're serving. Perhaps, for instance, you hope to tell others how generous you've been and receive praise. As long as your actions help someone else, by definition, you're being compassionate.

On the surface, this makes sense. If I give money to a foundation that helps children with a serious disease, for instance, those children will benefit even if I don't really care about them. Even if I only want to brag about how giving I am to my friends, or get mentioned as a "platinum-level donor" on the charity's website, I still serve those children with my contribution.

False Compassion Creates Suffering

However, this example becomes more troubling when we look at what I'm getting out of my donation. I'm giving to the charity because I want recognition from others. But what if I don't get the kind of recognition I want? What if my friends don't praise me for my generosity, or at least don't praise me as much as I'd like?

The answer, I suspect, is that I'll feel resentful. I'll see my

friends as insensitive and uncaring, and retaliate against them in overt or covert ways. So, by helping someone out of a desire for recognition, I actually set myself and others up for suffering.

This problem becomes clearer when we look at acts of false compassion within a family. In a common scenario, a parent gives a lot of time and energy to their child, in the secret hope that the child will please the parent in return.

If the child doesn't show the kind of appreciation the parent wants, the parent feels resentful, and strikes back at the child through abuse or neglect. In other words, when a parent serves their child out of a desire for recognition, rather than genuine love, both parent and child are likely in for suffering.

Compassion as a Way of Being

When we help others out of actual *feelings* of kindness, rather than a desire to prove that we're "good," we don't create this kind of suffering for ourselves and others. If our actions are solely motivated by a desire to help, it doesn't matter whether the other person falls over themselves to thank us, and we won't resent them if they don't.

This is why I think personal growth practices that help us develop genuine compassion for others, like Buddhist metta meditation, are so important. *Metta* may be the most obvious example, because it involves explicitly wishing all beings well, but many other self-development methods help us cultivate kindness in subtler ways.

The Promise of Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a great, and frequently misunderstood, example. Critics often talk about therapy as if it's merely a self-indulgent exercise in griping about the past (an issue I'll deal with at length later). I think this ignores many key goals of therapy — the most important one being, for our purposes, to meet needs that went unrecognized in a client's early childhood.

As I touched on earlier, psychologists often observe that, when a parent's early needs for love and recognition were unmet, they unconsciously seek to meet those needs in their relationship with their children. In other words, the parent expects the child to give them the affection and appreciation they never got when they were little. When the child doesn't meet these needs, the parent gets angry and withdraws their love. (There's an illuminating discussion of this in Kathleen Faller's *Social Work with Abused and Neglected Children*.)

As long as the parent's childhood needs are unmet, we might say, the parent will have difficulty experiencing real love and compassion for their children. However, a skilled therapist can help the parent meet those early needs outside the family structure. When the parent no longer seeks validation from their children, genuine love becomes possible.

Once we can see why actually *feeling* compassion — not just *looking* compassionate — is important, we can understand why "working on ourselves," and our own peace and happiness, can actually be a gift to the world.

Compassion and Justice

As I noted earlier, there's a good deal of evidence that effective personal growth practices actually help us develop more compassion and generosity toward others. So, it seems to me, personal development can actually serve as a source of positive social change.

Why don't the critics see it this way? Why do they often treat personal development as, in fact, an obstacle to "social justice"? My sense is that they, like much of Western political philosophy, think of justice as a set of abstract rules to follow. Our society, in this view, will be good and just once it starts complying with the right set of rules.

For people who are usually called conservatives, these rules are mostly concerned with preventing forms of violence like killing and theft. A just society, from this perspective, is one

where that conduct is minimized. For those who tend to be called liberals, the rules are more about how resources are distributed — to them, a just society is one where the right distribution of money, medical care, and so on exists.

Justice: Just A Philosophical Abstraction?

For all their differences, these models of justice have at least one thing in common, which is that they treat the way people feel about each other as irrelevant. Even if citizens of a given society don't care one whit about each other, that society is nonetheless just if it follows the correct rules — whether through preventing violence, equitably parceling out resources, or something else.

Given these typical ways of thinking, it's no surprise that critics of personal growth see self-development practices as basically irrelevant to achieving justice. Meditating, for example, may well make people more compassionate, but that emotion alone does nothing to further the cause of a just society. If anything, practices like meditation waste time that could be better spent fighting real-world injustice. As Barbara Ehrenreich puts it in *Bright-Sided*, "why spend so much time working on one's self when there's so much real work to be done?"

At best, if meditation causes people to be kinder, people may do more charitable giving, and thus advance the goal of equitably dividing resources. But that's hardly the shortest path to a fair distribution of wealth. Why not simply have the government take some people's property and give it to others? Meditation, from this perspective, is an inadequate and unnecessary solution to the problem of inequality.

Compassion Is Critical To Justice

It's important to realize, I think, that compassion is not only relevant to justice — it's actually the *foundation* of justice. Our rules of right and wrong stem from our instinctual concern

and respect for each other. The reason people want a society without killing and stealing, or with a certain distribution of wealth, is because they see such a society as the best vehicle for relieving human suffering.

Of course, as human beings, we are not always in touch with our sense of compassion. We're also aggressive, competitive, and survival-oriented creatures. When those drives completely take over, we're unconcerned with others' suffering, and we think only of our own survival and power.

When we're under the sway of these instincts, no abstract principles will keep us from harming others. Reminding a mugger of the Golden Rule, for example, probably won't stop him from taking your money. Throughout history, governments have used the concept of justice itself as a weapon, excusing tyranny and murder in the name of "equality" and "fairness."

Look at typical political debates, for example. Each side accuses the other, in venomous and belittling terms, of lacking compassion, honesty, morality and so on. Ask yourself: would they make such accusations against each other if they actually experienced compassion as a *feeling* — that sense of warmth and openness in the heart I described?

On a larger scale, many political and religious ideologies have claimed to be rooted in compassion. Christianity is said to be based on the compassionate teachings of Jesus. Marx claimed that communism was a compassionate political philosophy. And yet, of course, people have committed atrocities in the name of both worldviews. Would these abuses have occurred if the people responsible had genuinely experienced the feeling of compassion, rather than simply believing in the abstract ideal?

How Personal Growth Can Help

This is why, I think, merely following the right set of abstract principles isn't enough to create a just society. As legal scholar Robin West puts it in *Caring For Justice*, it's important to recognize the "injustice — not the justice — of divorcing the

pursuit of justice from natural inclination, from the sentient, felt bonds of friendship, and from the moral dictates incident to the pull of fellow feeling."

Instead, we must experience — firsthand, viscerally, in the body — the emotions and instincts at the root of those principles. We must actually *feel* compassion for one another — not simply make and follow a logically consistent set of rules.

At their best, I think, personal growth practices help us genuinely experience concern for each other. Techniques like meditation and yoga work to accomplish this goal at a level deeper than the rational mind, which is why intellectuals are often wary of them. But I think they're worth taking seriously if we truly want a more peaceful world.

4

Personal Growth: A Culture of Victimhood?

In our earlier discussion of the "responsibility ethic," we talked about critics' common claim that self-development promotes an unrealistic sense of personal responsibility.

In this article, I'm going to respond to critics who take the opposite view — that much self-help writing actually teaches people *not* to take responsibility for their lives. A frequent criticism of personal growth is that it encourages people to sit around whining about their emotional issues, rather than getting up and accomplishing something in the world.

Is Therapy Just A Blame Game?

The biggest offender, to the critics, is psychotherapy, because it often involves exploring how our past — particularly our childhood development — shaped the way we think and behave today. Therapy, in the critics' view, often gives us an excuse to blame our present problems on our parents, rather than simply bucking up and dealing with them.

For instance, in *SHAM*, Steve Salerno accuses psychiatrist Thomas Harris and similar authors of claiming that "you were

basically trapped by your makeup and/or environment and thus had a ready alibi for any and all of your failings." Similarly, in *One Nation Under Therapy*, Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel lament that "what the older moralists spoke of as irresponsible behavior due to bad character, the new champions of therapism . . . speak of as ailment, dysfunction, and brain disease."

I think these critics take a misguided view of psychotherapy. To them, it seems, people turn to therapy simply because they wish to stop blaming themselves for parts of their lives that aren't going well, and instead blame their parents or somebody else.

I doubt most therapists who explore their clients' histories would explain their methods this way. Of course, there are many possible reasons why a therapist and client might delve into the client's childhood. However, I suspect one common goal is to help the client let go of dysfunctional behaviors they continually find themselves doing.

Why Our Histories Matter

The theory goes, roughly, like this: many behaviors we do today developed in response to our childhood circumstances. For example, if our parents often scolded us when we asked them for something, we may have decided it was best to act totally self-sufficient, and never tell others what we want and need.

This show of self-sufficiency may have "worked" for us as children, because it protected us from our parents' anger. However, it may not work quite as well for us as adults. If we can't ask for what we want and need, intimacy with another person becomes very difficult.

Suppose a client came to a therapist with this sort of concern. The therapist might explore the client's past in order to show the client that this self-sufficient facade developed in response to the client's childhood.

The Power of Awareness

Now that the client is grown up, the therapist may help the client see, they no longer need this behavior to protect themselves from their parents. This awareness may help the client understand that it's now safe to let others know what they need and want.

As psychologist Kevin Leman whimsically puts it in *What Your Childhood Memories Say About You*, therapists' common practice of "asking about dear old Mom helps reveal patterns, and psychology is a science of recognizing patterns in human behavior."

For the therapist, then, exploring the client's past is not simply intended to help them blame their parents for their problems. Instead, the purpose of this exploration is to help the client let go of behaviors that aren't serving them — to solve their own problems, we might say — and thus to lead a more fulfilling life.

In that sense, I think it's fair to say that therapy actually promotes, rather than retards, the growth of personal responsibility.

Recovery and Responsibility

Recovery groups — most notably, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) — are another frequent target of anti-personal growth authors. The critics have many concerns about these groups, as we'll see, but a common complaint is that, by encouraging members to share about their personal suffering, they trivialize the suffering of genuinely needy people.

The "Trivialization" Argument

The argument goes like this: recovery groups tend to serve as a forum for people to talk about challenges they're facing, or their past hurts. Giving people a place to talk about

their emotional "issues" implies that those issues are really important — that the suffering these people are enduring is significant. If I'm part of a support group, for instance, and the group gives me time to "check in" about marital troubles I'm having, that necessarily implies that my marital issues are important enough to merit the group's attention.

However, even if I'm having conflicts with my wife, there are clearly people in the world who are suffering worse than me — people with terminal illnesses, living in war-torn countries, and so on. By treating my suffering as if it deeply matters, my group may encourage me to see these people's suffering and mine as equivalent. And if I start to see the world that way, I may become less interested in helping genuinely unfortunate individuals.

Wendy Kaminer, in *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, seems very concerned about this possibility: "Recovery gives people permission always to put themselves first, partly because it doesn't give them a sense of perspective on their complaints," she writes. "The failure to acknowledge that there are hierarchies of human suffering is what makes recovery and other personal development fashions 'selfist' and narcissistic."

What About The Facts?

Like many critiques of personal growth, this argument is usually presented as if it were common sense. Kaminer, for example, doesn't offer evidence that people in recovery groups, on average, give less to charity, express less concern for people in third-world countries, or do anything else suggesting a "selfist" mentality — except to say that, in her own visits to recovery groups, she didn't hear a member remark that another person's suffering was worse than their own.

What's more, there's psychological evidence suggesting that people who join support groups actually tend to become *more* generous as a result. For instance, a New Zealand study of a

support group for chronic pain sufferers found that participants in the group became more inclined to help others as a result of their participation. Similarly, a study in Communication Quarterly reported that people in an HIV/AIDS support group "experience[d] increased self-esteem associated with helping others."

Granted, no two support groups are the same, so this research doesn't prove that the recovery movement in general creates more compassionate people. It does, however, cast doubt on Kaminer's claim that support groups foster selfishness in their members.

What's more, these studies make intuitive sense — oriented as they are toward mutual support and caregiving, it seems natural that recovery groups would help members come to understand the joys of serving others.

How About The Philosophical Navel-Gazing?

On a philosophical level, we can begin to see the oddness of Kaminer's argument if we look at the following example.

Suppose you and I were close friends, and I griped to you about marital conflicts I was having. I don't think you'd somehow conclude, with righteous indignation, that I must be equating my relationship troubles with the plight of, say, paraplegics. Nor would an outside observer conclude that, because you allowed me to "vent" about my problems, you must be encouraging me to see my marriage and things like paraplegia as morally equivalent, and thereby turning me into a self-centered person.

In other words, no one would morally condemn the kind of conversation Kaminer is complaining about if it took place outside a support group. There's no reason to make it wrong simply because it occurs in an AA meeting or a similar context.

Reading List

For those interested in further reading on these issues, I've created the list of books and blogs critical of personal development below.

Books

- Jeremy Carrette & Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*
- Ronald W. Dworkin, *Artificial Happiness: The Dark Side of the New Happy Class*
- Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*
- Stewart Justman, *Fool's Paradise: The Unreal World of Pop Psychology*
- Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional: The Recovery Movement and Other Self-Help Fashions*
- Micki McGee, *Self-Help Inc.: Makeover Culture in America*
- Paul Pearsall, *The Last Self-Help Book You'll Ever Need*

- Steve Salerno, *SHAM: How the Self-Help Movement Made America Helpless*

- Christina Hoff Sommers & Sally Satel, *One Nation Under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance*

- Tom Tiede, *Self-Help Nation*

Blogs

- Beyond Growth

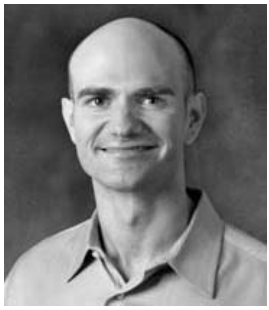
- Cosmic Connie

- Guruphiliac

- Self-Help, Inc. (Micki McGee)

- SHAMBlog (Steve Salerno)

About the Author



Chris Edgar is the author of *Inner Productivity: A Mindful Path to Efficiency and Enjoyment in Your Work*, and an attorney, consultant and workshop leader. At his blog Development In Context, Chris discusses common criticisms of personal growth, and makes the case for a life lived consciously.

Chris's articles have appeared in *Balance*, *Balanced Living*, *EdgeLife*, *LivingNow*, *Mystic Pop*, *New Age Journal*, *New Renaissance*, *Productive Magazine*, *Self-Improvement*, *WellBeing* and *Wisdom*.