



REVIEW

Mark Coeckelbergh, *Self-Improvement: Technologies of the Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2022. Pp. 144. ISBN: 978-0-231-20655-6 (paperback).

I think that it would be no exaggeration to say that ‘self-improvement’ has become a pressing ethical and political problem in the 21st century. Thankfully, it has also been problematized recently across numerous academic disciplines and in both specialist literature and popular writing. Mark Coeckelbergh’s *Self-Improvement*, belonging somewhere between the latter two registers, addresses this serious and complex issue and strives to offer a clear analysis for a general public, using short sentences and simple prose.¹ The moment is right for such a work. As Coeckelbergh writes, “self-improvement is no longer optional; it has become an imperative. [...] We are self-improving ourselves until we have to give up. We are burned out by our jobs and family lives but also, ironically, by the self-improvement work that was meant to do something about that” (p. 3). We seem to be at an impasse. We do not (or should not) wish to continue “improving” in this way, but we are not free simply to opt-out if we wish to remain competitive – and therefore survive – in our neoliberal economy.

Quite often now, the response of our various professional institutions to a crushing work environment built on an expectation of constant and constantly improving performance is to proffer more “wellness”: wellness newsletters, ten-minute chair messages for employees, meditation app suggestions, cat and dog petting sessions, etc. As it becomes increasingly clear that we are now (sometimes literally) killing ourselves in and for our self-improvement culture (p. 2), these responses seem to many to be, at best, highly ineffective and, at worst, complacent or complicit responses. This wellness culture provides something akin to food and sleep in the classic Marxist theory of labour: a merely necessary moment in the cyclical reproduction of our productive forces. Or, as Coeckelbergh puts it, wellness capitalism now “exploits people doubly: first as workers who try to improve their performance during the working hours, then as consumers of ‘wellness’ during their leisure time, when they try to recover from their work” (p. 47).

¹ Indeed, the prose might at times be too simple to be entirely effective. The reader may also find themselves at times frustrated by persistent typos.

For those who find this state of affairs frustrating or frightening, this book will provide and combine many easily graspable insights that will make the situation — and what we might do about it — even clearer. And for those who have not yet noticed this problem or who are suspicious as to whether there really is a problem here, *Self-Improvement* just might change that.

While the analysis is at times uneven in its depth and rigour, the primary argument of the book is lucid and compelling, and it is organized around several key claims. (α) Self-improvement is not a purely personal, private, or psychological matter, but can and must be understood in its historical and socio-political context. (β) Specifically, self-improvement has become entwined with the neoliberal economy and a culture of radical individualism in such a way as to render it dangerous. It is an unavoidable tool in our competition culture that exhausts its practitioners while generating immense wealth for the self-help industry and its entrepreneurs. (γ) Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, technology has an important role to play in all of this — and in particular contemporary AI technology, which has made the surveillance of self and other more efficient than ever. AI has thereby contributed to the acceleration of self-improvement but also to our feeling of helplessness, that is, our feeling that we cannot ‘opt out’ of self-help.

Coeckelbergh's response is measured: it is likely neither possible nor desirable to throw away this technology wholesale, nor to cease to improve ourselves entirely; but we can and should radically rethink our relation to technology *and* to self-improvement in productive ways. His argument proceeds as follows.

After a brief introductory chapter, the primary task of which seems to be to make clear the urgency of the problem of our self-improvement obsession, the book continues (Chapter 2) with what the author refers to as a search “for the intellectual sources of our ideas about self-knowledge, self-care, and self-improvement in the history of ideas” (p. 6). He traces the development of the notion of self-improvement in various philosophical movements, following sources that will be familiar to readers of Foucault: Socrates, the Stoics, and the early Christians all have their role to play as so many versions of programs of *askesis* — that is, of training or exercise, in the Foucauldian and the Greek-etymological sense. Indeed, while Foucault's influence is visible throughout the pages of this book, this chapter is the most clearly indebted to his late work on the genealogy of the practicing self in antiquity.²

Chapter 3 paints an image “of the modern society that resulted from these developments” (p. 6) in the history of self-improvement, paying special attention to the 1960s counterculture movement and the imperative — both in philosophical and popular discourse — to be an ‘authentic’ self. The author does not fail to notice the extent to which the discourse of authenticity has been commodified; nor the extent to which this

² Perhaps precisely because it follows on the heels of Foucault in such a promising way, I also suspect that historians and genealogists might find the historiography of this chapter unsatisfying. It reads more like a list of self-improvement schools and hence like an introductory textbook to philosophy as a way of life than a compelling historical account of the origins and development of self-improvement.

commodification arose from out of that Californian ‘cult of the self’ which Foucault found so fascinating in the 1980s.

Chapter 4 undertakes to critique the political economy of our contemporary culture of the self, drawing on both Nietzsche and Marx to show (α) that “neo-Stoicism” or “the turn inward” (p. 7) can have de-politicizing effects by drawing attention to the self rather than the social order; and (β) that the wellness economy is exploitative in the Marxist sense: it extracts surplus value from our self-improvement, not for those who practice but for owners of (technological) capital. This occurs in the form of data sales and also simply via the commercializing and promoting of self-help products as such. In true Foucauldian form, then, we must recognize that far from inhibiting our work on ourselves, contemporary capitalism “stimulate[s] self-improvement” (p. 46).

Chapter 5 addresses the question of technology directly. The work of the self on the self is increasingly being taken over by technologies that efficiently track us, compile data, and generate profiles: “New technologies of the self are ready to tell us who we are, what we want, what we should know about ourselves and, of course, how we can improve ourselves” (p. 55). The self on which we work is no longer what it once was, nor is it known in the same way—no longer the “dark, mysterious, and complex self” (p. 62) of the humanist past but, in a word, data. “I am *many numbers*,” Coeckelbergh writes (p. 63).

The final two chapters propose and explore possible solutions to the economic, political, and ethical crises in which self-improvement has become enmeshed and which it enables. They ask, “how can we find a way out of these problematic self-improvement cultures, without abandoning the idea of self-improvement altogether and without rejecting technologies” (p. 8)?

Like any good book written for a general audience and in the shadow of a real contemporary danger, *Self-Improvement* offers both a diagnosis and a potential solution to the problem it diagnoses. Coeckelbergh proposes, in the first place, that we shift our efforts away from “*working on the self*” or “*self-optimization*” and towards a different modality of *souci de soi* that he calls “growth” (p. 80). The self for which we care ought to follow Lacan in accepting that it is an “extimate self” (p. 81), that is, a self permeated by the other: by the city, by other people, by our language, by our technologies, etc. This self is not a fully transparent one, and, in any case, it is not at our disposition in the way that an artifact is. Hence, we should look to intervene more directly in the environment in and by which the self is informed. We should also abandon some of the impulse for *control* of the self; the intensity of such an impulse having long since exceeded its usefulness and become *anxiogène* and self-defeating.

To save ourselves – and, at the same time, to rediscover our political agency – we must, paradoxically, let go of the self. “Living beings can grow and flourish only in and through their connectedness with other beings and with their environment” (p. 85). A growing plant, then, more than an aesthetic object on which we ‘work’ in the mode of artists or craftspeople, is the right image for the self-shaping efforts with which we should

be engaging. Coeckelbergh's ideal is a self and a practice of the self that, without submitting to social engineering and technological control, refuses the illusion of pure autonomy; a self that accepts its sociality without regret and yet resists being transformed into, manipulated as, and sold in the form of data. It is also a self that, bound up as it is with its contemporary social, economic, and political conditions, knows that a radical change of the self must actually pass through systemic change. For Coeckelbergh, "true self-improvement is only possible if we end exploitative socioeconomic relations" (p. 99). And in this vein, rather than reject technology as such, we can (and should) develop technologies that are less individualizing and less dominating, that are oriented towards an improvement of our social world, and that can aid us in connecting with others and in "understand[ing] ourselves in a relational way" (p. 107).

This approach has stakes that will be immediately apparent to readers of Foucault, but which extend well beyond his works and touch a nerve in the contemporary political-theoretical moment. Michel Foucault, who along with Pierre Hadot put 'self-improvement' on the philosophical agenda of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has often been accused of being a neoliberal theorist, not only because of his (apparently sympathetic) approach to neoliberalism as such but because of an (apparently) anti-political interest in self-care that is (apparently) complacent in the individualist market-society.³ We cannot enter into this charged debate here. But we should note that this book gives us resources with which to revisit it. As Coeckelbergh argues, we ought to be careful about demonizing self-care as such: "trying to know yourself and improve yourself are not themselves problematic; they become problematic when they go together with self-obsession and individualistic competition" (p. 26). In other words, there exists self-care *before, beyond* and, we can hope, *after* the neoliberal moment. With this insight in mind, Coeckelbergh poses what I take to be precisely the right question: how do we access and develop a form of self-care which is politically productive and not simply reproductive of existing relations of domination?

I am not sure that this book will suffice to radically transform our ways of thinking about technology, society, and self-improvement; and the popular format chosen by the author has likely limited the precision of the analysis and the proposed solutions given in these pages. However, precisely by drawing on and synthesizing a large body of literature (both contemporary popular works and philosophical writings from Aristotle to Zuboff via Arendt, de Beauvoir, Epictetus, Foucault, Lacan, Rousseau, Sartre, and many more), and by simplifying and compressing a potentially overwhelming problem, the author has done concerned citizens – both inside and outside of academia – a real favour. *Self-Improvement* offers an extensive roadmap to a problem that requires our attention now.

The book can stand on its own as an accessible introduction to the problem of the politics of *ethos* today. It can, however, also serve as a spur towards and a precious aid in

³ On this problem, see Mitchell Dean & Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (2021), a review of which is forthcoming in this journal. Note that Coeckelbergh has read and cites this book (e.g., p. 131 n. 4).

reformulating rigorously and philosophically some of the major questions posed by the Foucauldian research agenda that still matter today: is care of the self inherently un- or anti-political? Has care of the self been coopted beyond recovery by the neoliberal economic order? I would suggest that Foucault's research agenda enabled, at least to a certain extent, the reflections in these pages; and now, I think, these reflections have opened exciting avenues through which to deepen and 'update' Foucault in turn.

References

Mitchell Dean & Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*. London: Verso, 2021.

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