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The Self in Self-Help

We have no idea what a self is. So how can we fix it?

By **Kathryn Schulz** Published Jan 6, 2013



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(Photo: Asger Carlsen/CASEY)

In *The Age of Anxiety*, W.H. Auden observed that we human beings never become something without pretending to be it first. The corollary is more prosaic but, regrettably, at least as true: We humans never become most of the things we pretend we will someday be. Nevertheless, last Monday, you and I and several billion other incorrigible optimists raised our glasses and toasted all the ways we will be different in 2013.

It's easy to understand why we want to be different. We are twenty pounds overweight; we are \$20,000 in debt; we can't believe we slept with that

guy; we can't believe we didn't. What's harder to understand is why transforming ourselves is so difficult. Changing other people is notoriously hard; the prevailing wisdom on that one is Don't hold your breath. But it's not obvious why changing *oneself* should present any difficulty at all. And yet, demonstrably, it does.

The noted self-help guru Saint Augustine identified this problem back in the fourth century A.D. In his *Confessions*, he records an observation: "The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted." I cannot improve upon Augustine's insight, but I can update his examples. Say you want to be skinny. You've signed on with Weight Watchers, taken up Zumba, read everything from Michael Pollan to *French Women Don't Get Fat*, and scrupulously recorded your every workout, footstep, and calorie on your iPhone. So whence the impulsive Oreo binge? Or say you are a self-identified co-dependent. You know your Melody Beattie, listen to your therapist, and tell yourself every morning, quite firmly, just what you will and will not do that night. So what are you doing back in bed with that man? Or say you are a professional

writer who values being conscientious, respects her editors, and passionately believes that good writing requires time. So—well, let's drop the pretense. Why am I sitting here typing this at 4 a.m., two days past deadline?

I don't know, but misery loves company, and such acts of auto-insubordination happen all the time. They go some way toward explaining the popularity of the self-help movement, since clearly we need help, but they also reveal a fundamental paradox at its heart. How can I want to achieve a goal so badly that I will expend considerable time, energy, and money trying to reach it while simultaneously needing to be coaxed, bribed, tricked, and punished into a compliance that is inconsistent at best?

This is where the cheerfully practical and accessible domain of self-help bumps up against one of the thorniest problems in all of science and philosophy. In the 1,600 years since Augustine left behind selfhood for sainthood, we've made very little empirical progress toward understanding our own inner workings. We have, however, developed an \$11 billion industry dedicated to telling us how to improve our lives. Put those two facts together and you get a vexing question: Can self-help work if we have no idea how a *self* works?

I know people who wouldn't so much as walk through the self-help section of a bookstore without *The Paris Review* under one arm and a puzzled oh-I-thought-the-bathroom-was-over-here look on their face. I understand where they're coming from, since some of the genre's most persistent pitfalls—charlatanism, cheerleading, bad science, silver bullets, New Age hoo-ha—are my own personal peanut allergies: deadly even in tiny doses. And yet I don't share the contempt for self-help, not least because I have sought succor there myself. The first time was for writer's block—which is, I realize, a rarefied little issue, sort of the artisanal pickle of personal problems. (I got over it: QED.) The second time was for its very nasty older brother, depression—of which more anon. In both cases, I ventured into the self-help section for the usual reason: the help. Last month, though, I went back to investigate the other half of the equation: the self.

If, like me, you have read your way through sober Stephen R. Covey (*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*) and godly Norman Vincent Peale (*The Power of Positive Thinking*), through exuberant Tony Robbins (*Unleash the Power Within*) and ridiculous Rhonda Byrne (*The Secret*), through John Gray who Is From Mars and Timothy Ferriss who has a four-hour everything and Deepak Chopra who at this point really is one with the universe (65 books and counting)—anyway, if you, too, have reckoned with the size and scope of the self-help movement, you probably share my initial intuition about what it has to say about the self: lots. It turns out, though, that all that surface noise is deceptive. Underneath what

appears to be umptebajillion ideas about who we are and how we work, the self-help movement has a startling paucity of theories about the self. To be precise: It has one.

Let us call it the master theory of self-help. It goes like this: Somewhere below or above or beyond the part of you that is struggling with weight loss or procrastination or whatever your particular problem might be, there is another part of you that is immune to that problem and capable of solving it for the rest of you. In other words, this master theory is fundamentally dualist. It posits, at a minimum, two selves: one that needs a kick in the ass and one that is capable of kicking.

This model of selfhood is intuitively appealing, not least because it describes an all-too-familiar experience. As I began by saying, all of us struggle to keep faith with our plans and goals, and all of us can envision better selves more readily than we can be them. Indeed, the reason we go to the self-help section in the first place is that some part of us wants to do something that some other part resists.

Of course, intuitive appeal is a poor indicator of the merits of a model; the geocentric universe is intuitively appealing, too. But even though this master theory of self-help is coarse, misleading, none too useful, and probably just plain wrong, it does capture something crucial about the experience of being human. One of the strange and possibly unique facts about our species is that we really can intervene on ourselves. Get a lab rat addicted to alcohol and you will have yourself an addicted rat. Get a teenager addicted to alcohol and eventually you might find yourself celebrating his 30th year of sobriety. It isn't consistent, it isn't predictable, and God knows it isn't easy—and yet somehow, sometimes, we do manage to change. The self really can help itself. The question is: How?

Master theories—of self-help or anything else—don't really answer questions like that. Instead, they dictate the shape an answer must take. Consider, for example, the way language works. English is a subject-verb-object language, meaning that the sentences we produce must all conform to that grammatical pattern. Within that constraint, however, the number of sentences we can generate is infinite: "We have not yet begun to fight." "A screaming came across the sky." "I'm intercontinental when I eat French toast." The master rule controls the form, but it's completely agnostic about the content.

So too with the master theory of self-help: It mandates a conflict between two parts of the self, but beyond that, it makes no particular demands and answers no particular questions. Who is divided against whom, who has the power and who is

powerless, how to ensure that the “right” part of yourself winds up in charge: All this is up for grabs. Accordingly, self-help strategies distinguish themselves from one another—and pledge to solve your problems—by carving up the self at different joints: a mind and a brain, a consciousness and an unconscious, an evolved self and a primitive self—you get the picture. Such distinctions inevitably reflect different beliefs about what kind of creatures we are and often reflect different beliefs about our place in the universe. That makes them philosophically interesting—but, alas, it does not make them particularly useful.

To see why not, consider two examples. In self-help programs that draw on religious or spiritual practices, the locus of control is largely externalized; the real power belongs to God (or a supreme being, a universal consciousness—whatever you care to call it). But these programs also posit a part of the self that is receptive to or one with that external force: an internal fragment of the divine that can triumph over human weakness.

This is pretty much the oldest kind of dualism in the book: your sacred soul against your mortal flesh. You can see it at work in 12-step programs, where addicts begin by admitting they are powerless to control their addiction and then make “a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.” But think about that for a moment: How do recovering addicts simultaneously exercise and abdicate their right to make decisions? How do they choose to let a higher power do the choosing—not just once but every time temptation comes along? Twelve-step programs are reputed to be one of the more effective ways to treat addiction, yet how their followers pull off this sleight-of-self remains a mystery.

Now consider what seems, at first, like a completely different model of selfhood. “Everything you and I do, we do either out of our need to avoid *pain* or our desire to gain *pleasure*,” Tony Robbins writes in *Awaken the Giant Within*. Robbins’s vision of the self is Skinnerian rather than spiritual: We are conditioned, like dogs to a whistle or unluckier dogs to a kick, to certain habits of thought and action. How, then, are we supposed to change? “The most effective way,” he tells us, is to “*get your brain to associate massive pain to the old belief.*”

Well, wait a second: Who is the “you” who gets “your brain” to rewire, and how does it do so? Through “the power of decision,” Robbins says, which “gives you the capacity to get past any excuse to change any and every part of your life *in an instant.*” But if we are creatures of conditioning, how did this one part of ourselves remain independent? Where did it hide while we were being conditioned, and how will it emerge, and by what mechanism will it make decisions for the rest of us?

You see the problem. The self-help movement seeks to account for and overcome the difficulties we experience when we are trying to make a desired change—but doing so by invoking an immortal soul and a mortal sinner (or an ego and an id, a homunculus and its minion) is not much different from saying that we “are of two minds,” or “feel torn,” or for that matter that we have a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. These are not explanations for the self. They are *metaphors* for the self. And metaphors, while evocative and illuminating, do not provide concrete causal explanations. Accordingly, they are not terribly likely to generate concrete solutions. True, self-help literature is full of good advice, but good advice is not the issue; most of it has been around for centuries. The issue is how to implement it. In the words of the emphasis-happy Robbins, “*Lots of people know what to do, but few people actually do what they know.*”

When it comes to solving that problem—which is *the* problem—all self-help literature offers is a kind of metaphysical power of attorney for our putative better halves. But if you identify with the above-mentioned Oreoeater or healthy--relationship saboteur or procrastinator, you yourself are evidence that this is a nonsolution. If giving your better half executive control by fiat could change your life, sales of self-help material would plummet overnight. It is a somewhat beautiful fact that the underlying theory of the self-help industry is contradicted by the self-help industry’s existence.

But, in the spirit of being a better person, I should not be so hard on self-help. The fact is, selves are profoundly difficult to understand. “There is nothing that we know more intimately than conscious experience,” the contemporary philosopher David Chalmers observes, “but there is nothing that is harder to explain.”

Part of why we can’t explain the self is that we can’t even find it. Here’s William James, an exceptionally acute internal observer, giving it a try. “My present Me is felt with warmth and intimacy,” he wrote in *Psychology: Briefer Course*. “The heavy warm mass of my body is there, and the nucleus of the ‘spiritual me,’ the sense of intimate activity is there. We cannot realize our present self without simultaneously feeling one or other of these two things.” That was as close as James ever got to figuring out how to find a self: on the basis of a warm fuzzy feeling, emphasis on fuzzy.

David Hume, meanwhile, couldn’t find himself at all. “When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*,” he wrote, “I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” If there was an essential “I” beneath all that, Hume

couldn't find it. Ultimately, he proposed that it doesn't exist—that we are not sum, only parts: “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions.” That idea poses a major problem for the master theory of self-help, with its internal governor, its *you ex machina*. Apparently, self-help has assigned the lead part in our show to an actor who is nowhere to be found.

Nor has science made much progress in locating the self, let alone explaining it. These days, most people who study the mind believe that our sense of having an “I” somehow arises from cognitive processes like the ones Hume described. That rules out Descartes's theory that our inner essence was rooted in the pineal gland, but it still leaves us intellectual light-years from anything like a fully developed scientific theory of the self. To put the problem in perspective, consider that, three centuries after Isaac Newton pioneered the study of optics, vision scientists are just starting to understand how our brain handles the problem of recognizing faces. Those discoveries are interesting and admirable on their own merits. But it is a very long way—probably many more centuries—from understanding how the mind sees faces to understanding how the mind sees itself. In the meantime, perhaps we should start looking beyond the constraints of the master theory of self—and, indeed, beyond the self entirely—for ways to improve our lives.

The expression “self-help” comes from a book of that name, published in 1859 by the great-grandfather of the modern movement, one Samuel Smiles. (I kid you not.) These days, the phrase is so commonplace that we no longer hear the ideology implicit in it. But there is one: We are here to help ourselves, not to get help from others nor lend it to them. Unlike his contemporary Charles Dickens, Smiles was unmoved by appalling social conditions; on the contrary, he regarded them as a convenient whetstone on which to hone one's character. As a corollary, he did not believe that altering the structure of society would improve anyone's lot. “No laws, however stringent, can make the idle industrious, the thriftless provident, or the drunken sober,” he wrote. “Such reforms can only be effected by means of individual action, economy, and self-denial; by better habits, rather than by greater rights.”

Smiles was Scottish, but it makes sense that his ideas received their most enthusiastic and enduring reception in the United States: a nation founded on faith in self-governance, belief in the physics-defying power of bootstraps, and the cheery but historically anomalous conviction that we all have the right to try to be happy. But this now-ubiquitous model of self-help might do an injustice to both the source of our problems and their potential solutions. We are social creatures, and we function (and dysfunction) in context. All of us know that we are notably different from one environment (Grandma's assisted-living facility) to the next

(Pyramid Club, East Village, 3 a.m.). What none of us knows is who we would be—or could be—if our context were altered in crucial ways at critical times. It's entirely possible that socioeconomic background and current community exert a more powerful influence over us than our ostensibly independent inner selves. In that case, the best self-improvement effort would be to better society.

The larger point is this: God knows we all need more help, but possibly we need less self. That has long been the political response to the self-help movement, and it is also, in a different sense, what Buddhists believe. Curiously, Buddhism is simultaneously a burgeoning influence on the Western self-help movement and entirely at odds with it: anti-self, and anti-help. It is anti-help insofar as it emphasizes radical self-acceptance and also insofar as it emphasizes remaining in the present. (Improvement, needless to say, requires you to focus on the future.) It is anti-self in that it treats thoughts as passing ephemera rather than as the valuable products of a distinct and consistent mind. The journalist Josh Rothman once wrote a lovely description of what a cloud really is: not an entity, as we perceive it, but just a region of space that's cooler than the regions around it, so that water vapor entering it condenses from the cold, then evaporates again as it drifts back out. A cloud is no more a thing, Rothman concluded, than "the pool of light a flashlight makes as you shine it around a dark room." And the self, the Buddhists would say, is no more a thing than a region of air with thoughts passing through.

I'm not just mentioning these two anti-self self-improvement measures because they appeal to me, although they do. I mention them because, when it comes to helping ourselves (and, okay, also in some other areas), I believe in heterogeneity and promiscuity. Most of the time, when we want to solve a problem, we try to eliminate hypotheses until a single one remains standing: a theory, in the scientific sense. But there's a case to be made that we should try to increase rather than decrease the available hypotheses about helping ourselves. I'll make that case by way of conclusion and by way of making my own small and questionable contribution to the large and questionable body of self-help advice. And since this is after all an essay about selves, I will also make it, if you'll forgive me, by getting momentarily personal.

I have no idea how I got over my depression. I spent a year doing the things one does: I read *Feeling Good*, went to therapy, got exercise, tried to eat well in the utter absence of appetite, and routinely forced myself into sympathetic company when every particle of my being—or, I suppose, every particle but one—wanted to curl up alone in the dark. I did all these things not out of any real hope that they would work but because the failure to do them seemed like it would cede more ground to the awfulness. And then some moon in my inner universe set silently,

and the awfulness went out like a tide.

The self helps itself. I know it firsthand, as well as second- and thirdhand, and so do you. But none of us—no matter what anyone says to the contrary—can tell you precisely how it happens. Maybe it was the therapy, in my case. Maybe it was the running. Maybe it was David D. Burns, M.D. Maybe it was two or three or all of the above in combination. Maybe it was some slight incident I didn't even register at the time. Maybe it *was* time.

Or maybe we humans change the way species do: through random variation. If that's the case, then the strategy we've arrived at out of necessity might be the best one anyone could design. Try something. Better still, try everything—throw all the options at the occluding wall of the self and see what sticks. Meditation, marathon training, fasting, freewriting, hiking the Pacific Crest Trail, speed dating, volunteering, moving to Auckland, redecorating the living room: As long as you steer clear of self-harm and felony, you might as well do anything you can to your inner and outer ecosystems that might induce a beneficial mutation.

The good news is that, in my experience, this is what most of us do anyway. We sample profligately from the vast universe of hypotheses about how to improve our lives: We try organizing our desk according to David Allen, our abs according to Timothy Ferriss, our hearts according to the Buddha. We obey a command: Know thyself. And another: Forget thyself. It might not work. It might not even be how *we* work. But it does at least pay homage to the day-to-day, problem-to-problem, mood-to-mood complexity of being human.

The bad news is that even if you succeed with this approach, you will never truly know which specific tactic worked—even after the fact, let alone beforehand. In other words, as scientists would say, this method of self-help is an uncontrolled experiment. But so what? *Life* is an uncontrolled experiment: confounded, confounding, and, above all, completely impossible to replicate—tragically so, and wonderfully so. I try to remind myself of that as often as I can. Sometimes it helps.