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Self-Acceptance - Making Life Easier
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Wie das Leben leichter wird)
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Sample translation by Bryn Roberts
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Preface

It was a discovery that grabbed me and wouldn't let go. The words in this book electrified me: the philosophy inviting you to *care for yourself*, to – thoughtfully – go your own way, to retire within yourself in times of trouble, then turn to others again. Not to take issue with what life deals you, but to love it, and respond to it as your talents provide for. Not to tangle yourself in discussions of what it means to be a good person, but simply to be one, and in this way lead the most beautiful life.

These lines helped me to a place of stability in my life, which up to then I had rather fumbled my way through, romantic, idealistic, introverted, melancholic. I had never quite known what to do with myself, and promising relationships had foundered one after another. The book showed me the way: begin with yourself first of all, this is your life, make something of it that brings you joy and brings joy to others. Of course these “ways to one's self”, *Ta eis heauton*, were no novelties: they were the introspections of the Stoic Marcus Aurelius, written in Ancient Greek in the 2nd century. Luckily, they had found their way to my hands.

It came as it so often does: what I held to be my own personal discovery was discovered by others too, each in their own way. Two, three decades went by and the focus on the self grew into a great movement, which more and more people were joining. Only gradually did I realise that this was not producing the restrained culture of the self one might wish for, but that many were drifting towards an unrestrained cult of the self. The project of strengthening the self was getting out of hand, and perhaps I too had played a part in that

with one of the many books on the topic.¹ Something unintended had been set in motion.

When I try to think about the causes, my conclusion is that the slippery slope began with ever more uninhibited propagation of “self-love”, which is open to *excessive* narcissism. To this could be added the circumstances in which it emerged: loss of meaning, failing relationships, and the other challenges of the modern world are clearly leading people to try to stem the tide with a hefty portion of self-assertion. Besides that, it is possible that the inflation of the relationship with the self is due at least in part to the usual pendulum swings of history: one extreme is answered with another. Logically, centuries of underestimation of the self would need to be followed by its overestimation. Equally plausible is a reaction to the heavy emphasis on *society* since the student movements of 1968, in whose wake people began to ask: “But what about me?” All talk of ‘I’ was pushed firmly to one side – all the more firmly, the more freely the propagandists of the selfless society themselves paid homage to a conceited narcissism.

There is not much to be said against *a little* narcissism: someone who likes themselves even just a little radiates more peace than someone who doesn’t know what to do with themselves, possibly even hates themselves. How else are people supposed to orient themselves, in tough times especially, if not by focusing on themselves first? In the digital age, this can help people avoid becoming lost in the many new possibilities.

Difficulties begin to loom, however, if everything starts to revolve around the self, and this is easy to observe: the crucial qualification for the fast-track in the business world seems to be unconcealed narcissism, just as much as in the pop business. It assumes destructive dimensions in young people, who are prepared to advance their ‘I’ with violence, as well as aging presidents who see states as a continuation of their ego by other means. It is a symptom of failure of a culture of the self when erratic egos triumph. They use arbitrary reasons as a pretext to terrorise others, fully in keeping with the mantra: *Love yourself and it doesn’t matter what damage you do.*

Excessive self-love is a wrong turn. It is equally exhausting for the ‘I’ that wants to realise an ideal image of itself as for everyone else caught in the crossfire. Following an era of fright at the excesses of narcissism, the time may be ripe to concentrate on opening another route to self-empowerment. *Self-friendship* means caring for the self. This makes life easier, because it gives the individual the chance to have a better relationship with themselves and therefore with other people too. The friendly relationship with the self represents the basis for calm, and the foundation of a self-confidence that can endure. When they speak of self-love, this is what many are thinking of. Yet a greater clarity of terms does help to avoid misunderstandings.

¹ Wilhelm Schmid: *Mit sich selbst befreundet sein* (To Be Friends With Ourselves)

Even in relationships between couples, love and friendship are not one and the same. Nor are they in the relationship with the self. Self-friendship is less prone to passionate excess, and allows for more distance from the self. With self-friendship, an 'I' chooses itself as the starting point for its efforts to make the world more bearable, one characterised by less narcissism and more *humane charm*. Without further ado, the self can begin working on itself, with no need to wait endlessly for externalities to improve. It can prove to itself that altering its own behaviour is a first step in improving the world in which it lives day to day. Self-friendship, then, shows itself to be a way to bridge the gap from 'I' to 'we', so that the self can coexist with others in social surroundings that are worthier of saying yes to. And finally, the self can join with others to pursue desirable changes in society too, for self-friendship doesn't end with the self and its immediate environment.

It is dedicated individuals who build and rebuild, preserve and transform a society and its institutions. If, in their opinion, their society should become a different one, then they are already in a position to start that process with their treatment of themselves and others. The credibility of commitment to change is greater when the exertions that go with it are not imposed on others. And each change gains greater capacity to convince when it is put into practice by real people, becoming more than mere ideological diktat. Given that the individual is part of society and that all parts influence the whole, the manner in which the individual lives will always have an impact on others and on society, however imperceptible it might seem. The effect might be small, but the way in which many small impulses can gradually gather into a great movement is what enabled the return to the self to happen in the first place, against all initial resistance.

The guidance on the way to self-friendship that this book wishes to provide was the result of many observations, encounters, deep thought, experiences, and discussions. During this process it became clear how helpful every individual pointer can be, especially in hard times, and that the way here is itself the destination, then at no point in time is the process of befriending the self complete.

The idea of self-friendship can put heart in anyone who feels exhausted and burned out. It can be balsam for those for whom the self has become a wound torn open by others, by life, by difficult circumstances. Strengthening the relationship with the self can provide perspective to those who have to manage with their self alone, and are unable or unwilling to change. Not least, it can help people who are familiar only with duty and self-denial, and who feel themselves liberated when permitted to care about themselves too, without having to expose themselves to the risks of excessive self-love.

I. Love yourself or befriend yourself?

Friendship is precious. This also applies to friendship with the self, that unconstrained form of relationship with the self. It remains open to relationships with others, whereas inordinate self-love binds interest in others closely to self-interest.

Self-friendship and self-love: they can rarely be found in pure form in real life, but frequently as mixtures in one and the same person. Which form predominates in a person is down to their disposition and social surroundings. But they are not defined by this influence for a lifetime. They can decide for themselves in which direction they wish to develop and whether or not they are ready for a confrontation with their self, ready to move their own centre of gravity. Therefore, the target of the first pointer towards self-friendship is to choose consciously the form of relationship with the self.

Disquiet at the form the relationship with the self takes is not new. In Western culture, the argument as to whether attachment to the self, *philautia*, encourages excessive self-love dates back to Plato and Aristotle. Plato feared it did, while Aristotle saw therein a friendship (*philia*) that related to the self (*autos*). In Marcus Aurelius' book, this state of friendship with the self, *philein heauton*, typifies a relationship with the self that is also capable of relativising the self.

When the Christian gospels called for brotherly love, they presumed a strong relationship with the self: "Love your neighbour as yourself." This certainly did not mean any kind of narcissism, but rather an affection for the self that was a prerequisite for affection for others. For fear of excess, however, all relationships with the self were soon eliminated, and brotherly love was thus robbed of its foundation. It needed to be preached all the harder as a result, but the wished for success refused to arrive.

The differences go on: *self-love* tends towards excess when the self is as extremely idealised as in an excessive love for another. Self-love can be just as claustrophobic as overly passionate love of others. Figuratively speaking, someone loving their self to excess is fond of wrapping their arms around themselves. Gazing out dreamily across the water from the shore, they nearly smother themselves with their embrace, without at any point making themselves happy.

In the case of *self-friendship*, in contrast, similarly to friendships with others, the self refrains from idealisation. It remains capable of a realistic estimation of itself. Closeness also permits distance at any time. Perhaps in a state of cheery drunkenness or a serious life crisis will the self-friend take itself arm in arm, to lend itself undeniably pragmatic support. In turbulent times above all, it enjoys the option of retreating to itself as a friend who can be relied on. In cheerless times there is much joy to be had from the familiar togetherness with the self.

The admiration of others is welcome to the self-friend, as long as there is a good reason for it; and the self-friend is also prepared to grant a small share of it to itself. The excessive self-lover in contrast is dependent on the admiration of others. They also need to see their perfect image reflected in a mirror at every opportunity, gazing into it like Narcissus once looked down at the edge of a mirrored sheet of water. Since no mirror image can remove real defects, they are in constant danger of being disappointed by themselves. In order to avoid being forced to abandon their self-image – forever young, flawless, being and becoming successful, free from aging, from deformation and depression – without blinking they will lay the blame for disappointments on other people, society, even life itself. In the most extreme cases, if they fail to meet up to their high standards for themselves, they no longer wish to live. Suicide out of self-love, a *narcissistic suicide*, can be motivated by a desire to purify the self-image of stains, and possibly as a final punishment of those other people who were incapable of recognising the greatness of this self. To expect perfection from yourself is not just an individual problem. It may be that it is the individual who is holding up the yardstick of expectations to themselves and their life, but often they will be conforming to cultural norms. In modern times, these suggest to them a standard derived from religious expectations of divine perfection in the hereafter. With images transmitted through the media, the advertising industry offers the self products that are supposed to ease it to perfection in the here and now. More than the self-friend, excessive self-lovers feel spoken to by these brazen insinuations of divine power, with which, for example, wellness businesses advertise their wares: “Create a new you!” If that becomes the standard, a period of suffering with no end in sight begins, for from now on every scratch, every slightly crooked nose, each one gram too many, cellulitis going without saying, every fleeting shadow cast over happiness, every jarring gap in the positive train of thought will be felt as a painful loss. *Seeking perfection means finding reasons to despair.*

This was one reason why in ancient times the famous inscription on the temple at Delphi admonished: “Know thyself” (*gnothi seauton*). The message was to recognise that you are human, not a god, that is: not perfect. Don’t overestimate yourself, you might get hurt. You cannot create anything, least of all yourself. You will never be like a god, if you try anyway you will never stop giving yourself a hard time about your imperfection, vulnerability, ignorance and mortality. – But this attitude has not become influential in Western culture, rather the teaching of mankind’s creation in the “image of God”, which constantly misleads people into new attempts to attain it.

In the 21st century the old human dream of perfection, invulnerability, omniscience, and the conquest of death has been reanimated by so-called *transhumanism*, the gospel of a number of gurus of the Silicon Valley religion. The church founded on the internet in 2015 to worship artificial intelligence (wayofthefuture.church) is more than just a joke. With the help of technology,

death is to be slain and all of humanity's other design flaws deleted: a secular continuation of the religious dream to be without sin. The modern sin is imperfection, which is finally to be eliminated. Perfection, however, is nothing more than an idea, which in reality can only be approached; no human will ever be able to achieve it. With every new piece of knowledge, with each new piece of technology unexpected problems will once again appear. This is no cause for regret: it means there will always be something to be done.