

BOOK REVIEWS

The Myths of Life and the Choices We Have

Clare Mann. (2005). NSW, Australia: Koromiko Publishing. £17.60.

This book states that it sets out to address the topics of the title by attempting to translate existential philosophical concepts into everyday language that people can understand and apply to their own lives. It is quite explicitly a self-help book aimed at the hypothetical woman or man in the street. In the section 'How to use this book' the author offers to *'explore in each chapter a specific myth and the existential concepts to which it pertains... in straightforward language'*

The book contains 50 exercises, which invite the reader to reflect on and apply the Myths to their own lives as they proceed through each chapter and is structured around eight myths and invites the reader to find freedom and to embrace personal change and mastery in their life. Some elements of the myths articulated will be familiar faces in most psychotherapeutic consulting rooms.

The eight myths are:

1. The Identity Myth - *'You should be someone other than the person you want to be'*.
2. The Selfishness Myth - *'You are selfish if you put your own needs before others'*.
3. The Group Myth - *'It is better to be part of a group than an individual'*.
4. The Commitment Myth - *'It is impossible to change certain things in our lives once we have committed to them'*.
5. The Certainty Myth - *'There is an enduring rightness in our decisions and this will lead us to a point beyond which we don't need to look any further'*.
6. The Morality Myth - *'You should follow a moral code decreed by others'*.
7. The Dishonesty Myth - *'It is preferable to be discreet, modest or embroider the truth in our interactions with others rather than be ourselves'*.
8. The Myth that You Can't Change - *'You are fixed and certain in your being and earlier choices negate future change'*.

Each section of the book starts with a simplified summary of the core ideas of one or two of the existential philosophers compressed into 200 to 300 words and then continues with a brief exploration of issues faced by the author or her clients interspersed with short exercises of the type *'think of a time in your life when..., and write down all the factors/feelings etc'*.

Each section concludes with a bulleted list of advice - essentially do's and don'ts.

In this reviewer's opinion chapter 3 *'The Selfishness Myth'* is one of the more successful chapters and can be used to illustrate the strengths and flaws of the whole work. The section opens with 170 words about the philosophy of Sartre. *'Sartre's (1948) notion of existential freedom suggests we must take responsibility for who we are, or fall prey to the myth that we have no choice.....there is no objective view of right or wrong....Human beings must take full responsibility for all actions.....since there is no human nature and no objective rightness for those choices.....views are criticised as painting a picture of the human condition as selfish. However he says that our choices always have implications for others since 'I am thus responsible for myself and all men, as I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him be.'*

Whilst simple, this over short summary of Sartre sets up the opportunity to explore the paradox of both being free and responsible. However having set up the chapter in an open and exploratory way the author immediately closes down the exploration by assuming that the predominant position of her readers is that they have been raised to subscribe to the ideal that it is right to put your happiness as second to others. The assumption that the reader will hold a particular value position is a flaw, in the mind of this reviewer, which permeates the entirety of the book.

The section continues with a commentary on the how the language used by a person indicates their attitudes to the world and encourages the reader to make lists of their own linguistic patterns and the implied value positions. The remainder of the chapter asks the reader to examine whether these are the choices they really want to make and how these choices are defensible against the criticism or value positions of others. Throughout, the author assumes that the exercises can be completed without support and that the choices and trade-offs are easy to articulate and are essentially simple bipartite choices, rather than a complex multivariate function.

The conclusion of the chapter is the assertion that *'The Selfishness Myth is that you are selfish if you put your needs before those of others. In reality, being selfish entails taking responsibility for the direction of your life and examining the options for your happiness'* and concludes with a checklist that starts with the bullet *'Get in touch with your own needs and desires and seek ways to satisfy them'*.

In this reviewer's opinion the book is lessened by the apparent assumption by the author that the myths articulated are universal and that every reader is likely to hold the position expressed in the text. The author also adopts an optimistic and cheerful position that runs the risk of creating the implicit promise that if the simple rules identified by the author are applied then happiness will prevail. This style also excludes any

exploration of, or mention even, of emotions. This is reinforced by the absence of any real exploration of how choosing something will deny something (or someone) else.

This reviewer believes the book is only partially successful in its objective - its primary message is you don't have to think this way if you happen to think this way now. In particular the selection of myths does seem to be quite personal and specific and drawn from a narrow set of life experiences and far from covers the range of experiences and beliefs carried by the clients the reviewer has met in his consulting room. Nor do the sections explore the paradoxes or consequences, practical or emotional, which result from holding a position or choosing to change. There may be a danger too that the reader seeking help adopts the certainty with which the author states her position and simply allows themselves to be directed.

This book is unashamedly a self help text and is not written for the experienced psychotherapist or counsellor. The references to the work of selected existential philosophers do give the book a structure and a theme but the essence of the book seems more derived from NLP than existential analysis or existential philosophy.

Robert Goodsell

Suburban Shaman

Cecil Helman. (2006). London: Hammersmith Press. 193 pages. £6.59.

Doctors as Patients

Edited by Petre Jones. (2005). Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing. 189 pages. £24.95

Although about the practice of general medicine, Helman describes *Suburban Shaman* as a '*mosaic of memories*' rather than a single story. His aim is to share some of the lessons he has learned from his patients and from different settings about the nature of healing and medical care. There are 24 chapters, arranged in topics such as Medical School, Possession, Boundaries, Healing Time, Shamans, Placebos. Helman is as much if not more concerned with the underlying emotional distress and meanings than with the outward physical ailments he encounters.

A South African, Helman comes from a family of 13 doctors starting with a '*village practitioner*' 200 years ago. He grew up and trained in medicine during the apartheid era and he describes some of his experiences in mental health there, such as the Whites Only wards and the different '*culturally appropriate*' treatments for Blacks, which led to his belief that diseases are partly a function of time, place and circumstances. For