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How to get on (with advice)? Observations of a reader of how-to books

There is a paradox inherent in the phenomenon of self-help advice publications: on the one hand, we don't particularly like to be given advice, especially when we haven't asked for it, yet on the other, we buy how-to books in massive quantities and seek advice on the Internet. The reason for this may be the fact that advice is an intimate kind of merchandise, much like a sex toy. Admitting that we need it is tantamount to acknowledging that something is missing – from our sex life or any other aspect of our life. Online shops selling sex toys reassure us that the goods we order from them will be shipped to us in discreet packaging: neither the courier nor our neighbours will be able to tell what we have purchased so we won't have to explain ourselves. Likewise, while bookshop shelves groan under the weight of how-to books, they're usually situated in the less conspicuous parts of the establishment, so we can look through them in at least a little privacy, unexposed to the prying gaze of other customers or the staff. After all, how would a man feel if caught red-handed (and red-faced) reading a book on how to be a real man! That would be tantamount to admitting that something is lacking in him, that he'd like to be someone else, that others (females?) are dissatisfied with him.

Advice is usually 'given' but it can also be imparted in other ways, for example 'granted', which makes you think of a loan. Advice is always good; there's no such thing as bad advice, though it may sometimes be ineffective, or even harmful. Advice is a kind of barter currency. The imparter of advice is like a bank, an institution in possession of knowledge or experience. If someone assures us that we can get on well by relying on our own advice, they apparently assume that we have this currency in a quantity sufficient for that specific situation. Taking our own advice may resemble an inner monologue. It means utilizing what we know from others, what once was somebody else's advice but has since been internalized as our own. Or, to put it differently: taking our own advice is like using magical objects, or rather magical powers obtained when playing an adventure video game, even though it's only (no less than?) a game of words.

Advice is similar to a compliment: we often receive it without asking for it and we're still supposed to say thank you for it in return. However, advice is actually the

opposite of a compliment; it involves the suggestion – or insinuation – that something is lacking in us. Advice is given by a ‘person of good advice’ (i.e. someone who has at least an adequate supply of it) to someone (perceived as) ‘under-advised’. Whoever gives unsolicited advice positions themselves above the targeted recipient, thus imposing a patronizing relationship. When we ask for advice, we put ourselves in this situation of our own accord, which is a compliment to the person that we’re asking for it. In the process, we give them to understand that we trust them, as though we were confiding a secret in them. We admit that we are lacking something that they have in ample supply. But the more time someone spends giving advice the more complicated the whole situation becomes: after all, instead of giving advice they themselves could be utilizing the knowledge or experience that they are sharing with us. Hence the belief that advice is gladly given by someone who is unable to make use of it themselves; that, for example, books telling us how to write detective stories are written by authors who have failed to make a career as a detective story writer. Because if they had succeeded, they wouldn’t be wasting time writing how-to books, but would be writing their own detective stories instead.

Advice is transferable in nature. After all, we pass it down from generation to generation. If we don’t, we weaken the family bonds. Advice is a family asset, often the only one. Advice is a form of family communication, often the only one. Until recently, advice was given exclusively by the older generation to the younger; recently, though, it’s also been the other way around, because the younger often have a better understanding of today’s world, for example of new technologies. But these technologies can also interfere with communication. No, not because the elderly refuse to accept advice from youngsters in protest at the reversal of the direction of information flow, but because technologies facilitate remote communication, i.e. not with the people sitting next to us at our table, but rather with those seated at other tables, in front of their smartphones or computers. So if we’re in need, we don’t ask our friends and relatives for advice any more because we’ve already lost the ability to converse with them. Instead, we order how-to books online or ask Google for advice. Hence the popularity of how-to books and the growing frequency of phrases starting with the word ‘how’ entered in search engines, which are in fact desperate requests for advice.

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The growing popularity and quantity of how-to books may be evidence of our growing curiosity about the world around us and desire to gain a better understanding of ourselves. But this is the optimistic version, because we can always ask ourselves why we are unwilling to seek our knowledge about the world and ourselves from popular scientific literature, which is actually written specifically for the purpose. Perhaps we are just less and less self-confident? Perhaps we are no longer able to ask

a person close to us how we should live? Perhaps we are desperately trying to be someone else? Perhaps we are desperately looking for answers in how-to books because we have been disappointed by textbooks and manuals?

The ancient Greeks had two different words for knowledge: *episteme* and *doxa*. Let me rephrase that: the ancient Greeks made a distinction between empirical, scientific knowledge (or *episteme*) and opinion or belief (*doxa*). How-to books are the domain of belief. They are seldom based on scientific knowledge; true, they may offer supplementation to it, but are just as often its contradiction. They are its supplementation only when they offer alternative treatment methods, for example, and it would be hard to blame a terminally ill person whom scientific medicine (*episteme*) has nothing more to offer for looking to how-to books for alternative treatment methods which haven't been scientifically tested and confirmed. A drowning man will clutch at how-to books. These become a contradiction of scientific knowledge when the proverbial straw poses a greater danger than the water.

It is no coincidence that I cite this particular example, because how-to books on self-treatment and self-medication are truly legion, possibly forming the largest sub-genre (next to books on how to lose weight). The most frequent word in them is the adjective 'alternative', i.e. one offering an approach different from that recognized by science. The word 'alternative' always refers to knowledge understood as *doxa*, and therefore the expressions 'alternative medicine' or 'alternative science' are a manifestation of a misguided mixing of these two once separate spheres – those of *episteme* and *doxa*. Generally, when faith in reason wanes (for a variety of reasons), as has increasingly been the case recently, *doxa* masquerading as *episteme* is triumphant as 'alternative fact' or 'post-truth'.

In the Middle Ages – as Michel Foucault (2001), among others, wrote – people were convinced that the world was filled with signs through which God spoke to us. These signs were based on the principle of resemblance: 'The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man.' How were we to know the appropriate use of each plant? Well, by its very shape, which resembled the organ which it was supposed to heal. And it did just that until the advent of the Enlightenment, which replaced that simple and commonly intelligible resemblance with all manner of complicated interrelations, comprehensible only to a chosen few. One might say that it continues to complicate things in this manner to this very day, and increasingly so, because, after all, medical science continues to advance. But perhaps the eras in the world's history are not consecutive. Ernst Cassirer (1962) claimed that the era of magical thinking was followed by the age of science; however, there is much to suggest that he was wrong and that the two eras overlapped. And continue to do so, because magical thinking remains with us today. And recently it appears to be becoming more and more unabashed.

What is striking in 'medical' how-to books is the confusion of roles. At a post office in Poland today you can buy a publication in several volumes entitled

Grandma's Pharmacy, which is modelled on the kind of cookbooks that compile recipes sent in by magazine readers. While the danger posed by culinary recipes to readers' stomachs is next to none, the harmfulness of such quasi-medical advice to patients willing to apply it can be quite considerable. The suspension of the boundary between author and reader, between actor and spectator, between professional juror and amateur juror texting their vote to support a specific artist is a rather widespread phenomenon in today's culture. For a long time this boundary was sacred. Its violation is well illustrated by the term 'reality show'. This is actually an oxymoron: something is either part of reality or just a spectacle. A show in which the spectator is not only an observer but also a participant is no longer a spectacle. Or, to be more precise, shouldn't be one.

Again, on television or in art generally, this may seem a harmless experiment. However, it places amateurs in the position of professionals. And it convinces those amateurs that they are very successful in that role, that there's nothing to it really, you don't need to make the effort to acquire knowledge, experience, or skills. Viewership figures are all that really matters, and given that we are vain, rather lazy, and highly narcissistic, we obviously prefer to view ourselves. Reputedly, in the past people were able to believe in their own existence beyond any doubt only upon seeing themselves in a mirror. Nowadays, a person only believes that they actually exist when they see themselves – or at least the outcome of their actions or decisions – on the television screen.

The boundary between *episteme* and *doxa* has ultimately been undone by the Internet. This is indeed a perfectly democratic space, where we not so much read what others – specialists, professionals – have written as treat it as a pretext for writing of our own, e.g. posting comments on forums. What is more, information, news, and articles are published online outside news portals as well, so they are not subject to any fact-checking or scientific verification. The statement 'It must be true because I read it on the Internet' is fundamentally wrong. The Internet probably contains more 'arguments' *against* inoculating children than *for* it. There is thus much to suggest that mankind will soon be extinct – or at least decimated – if only due to the activity of the anti-vaccinationists.

And this seems like a good cue to return to quasi-medical how-to books. The advice they contain – sent in by readers – is always supported by the adjective 'tried', not unlike advertising discourse. The books in the *Grandma's Pharmacy* series are divided into chapters which structurally resemble a work of fiction more than a medical textbook. An important role in these chapters is played by *exempla*, or 'true life stories', as substitutes for scientific arguments to prove that a specific line of treatment is correct. They start with a description of an accident or a dramatic initial stage of an illness, followed by the patient's attempt to avail themselves of mainstream medical assistance, an attempt that always proves unsuccessful. The next step is their dramatic escape from the hands of murderous doctors. Then our protagonist's path crosses with that of a character well known from folklore, once

so meticulously analyzed by Vladimir Propp (1968): the ‘old woman’, or even the ‘old beggar woman’. While in traditional folktales she usually gave the protagonist a magical object, here she gives them a recipe for a cure. The outcome is easy to predict for the reader of the how-to book, while always eliciting theatrical astonishment from all the other characters in the story – especially the doctors. One way or another, in no time at all, the patient is completely cured.

We thus have here another confusion of orders and a violation of another boundary – that between science and literature, i.e. between fact and fiction. True, it is a sign of the times, but I have my doubts whether this is actually progress. It seems more like a regression to the pre-scientific age of which Erich Fromm (2013) wrote – the age when the only accessible and cultivated discourse was the literary, or actually proto-literary – mythological – discourse. The scientific discourse required civilizational development, progress, something that hardly anybody seems to believe in any more.

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What does this have to do with how-to books? I believe they can be read as documents of our time; as evidence of man’s bewilderment in today’s reality, of his mistrust of reason and of science; as a record of the confusion of the *episteme* and *doxa* spheres; as a consequence of the breaking down of the boundaries between spectacle and reality, between fact and fiction. And finally as a substitute for our impaired human relations. In light of the foregoing, those how-to books may – possibly – provide us with advice unintended by their authors. They may – possibly – make us realize what kind of reality we are living in, who the readers of how-to books (our fellow citizens) are, and why they act this way rather than that. Perhaps, by taking a critical look at these books, we will reach a conclusion as to how to get on in the age of how-to books.

And how to survive it.

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