

Mars 2, Venus 0: Exploring Self Help Books

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The self help book is the most tangible narrative produced by the self improvement movement, and it regularly tops the best seller lists both here in Australia and in the United States. The idea of combining know-how with personal transformation is a potent offshoot of the North American psyche, one which is prone to regular satirical treatment in Australia, but continues to dominate our non fiction market. This article will examine a few of the particularly persistent qualities of the self-help tradition. It will then examine how they are expressed in John Gray's well-known book, *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, which was a New York Times best-seller for 140 weeks, and has sold more than four million copies in 86 languages worldwide since its release in 1992 (Bader 1). Examination of this text will show that *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* is another manifestation of the mind cure tradition, a movement that emphasises individual empowerment and simultaneously removes it.

I wish to emphasise from the start that I am not against the entire self-help movement. My own reading of self-help books, and talking with others who read them, leads me to believe that there are a great number of these publications that can assist people. If one is to define self-help books as publications which aim to resolve individual problems or provide knowledge to enhance individual decision making, then the aims of such books are not harmful per se. But within the genre of self-help, the means offered to reach such noble-sounding ends can differ wildly, from books of the 'know-how' variety (how to manage money, or deal with a life-threatening illness) to the more radical, sometimes harmful, end of the spectrum.

We can view the self-help book as a particular outcome of Western, particularly North American, democracy.

Nikolas Rose, in looking at the notion of psychological expertise, talks about the 'particular characteristics of the social arrangements and ethical systems that have emerged in the capitalist, bureaucratic, and democratic system of Northwest Europe and North America' (Rose 358). What these characteristics have given rise to is the 'age of the calculable person', the person 'whose individuality is no longer ineffable, unique and beyond knowledge, but can be known, mapped, calibrated, evaluated, quantified, predicted and managed' (ibid). The net effect is that people are made conscious of their individual qualities, while at the same time, encouraged to adopt a homogenous view of selfhood. It is this exact quality that makes self help so appealing, because our specific problems have a universal answers.

The rise of psychological languages and evaluations, in Rose's words, have

transformed the ways in which we construe and conduct our encounters with others ... each mode of encounter has been reconfigured in terms of personal feelings, desires, personalities, strivings, and fears. Psychological techniques have come to infuse, dominate, or displace theological, moral, bodily, dietary, and other regimens for bringing the self to virtue or happiness, and also those deployed for reconciling the self to tragedy or disappointment. (368)

Rose's description of psychological techniques resembles Foucault's notion of the techniques of self, which are 'found in all cultures in different forms' (Rabinow 369). They are often invisible, not requiring the same 'material apparatus as the production of objects' (ibid), and they are 'frequently linked to the techniques for the direction of others' (ibid 370). Self help books tap into the 'invisibles' of self monitoring in order that they may offer direction on self regulation. Whether one is too fat, too hopeless or too lonely, there is a self help book to describe the problem and offer solutions that the individual may adopt.

Foucault's analysis of Western society also describes the central role of confession in modern discourse. Identified as 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' (Foucault 1976 59), confession developed from a specific act in the Catholic church of the middle ages to a set of diverse, widespread practices including justice, love relations, 'and the most ordinary affairs of life' (ibid). It remains the 'general standard governing the production of true discourse' (ibid 63). Confession in its many forms provides a technology of the self, a means

of mapping one's outer limits and regulating them within discourse. Self help books ground themselves in the 'truth' of the author's personal experience and case studies of fellow sufferers (who have confessed all to the author). Foucault's argument that the couple has become the sole locus of sexuality is also borne out by the main topic of self help books: from *Women Who Love Too Much and the Men Who Hate Them* to *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, techniques to regulate relations between heterosexual couples dominate the market.

Specific techniques for the regulation of self are so integrated into Western society they are sometimes difficult to even identify. But from time to time, there are particular types of technique that are heavily promoted as the single answer to virtue or happiness. These are nearly always a variation on either the self-help book or the inspirational work, the first dealing with the realities of everyday self management, the second appealing to a notion of a higher, inner self.

In order to trace the particular origins of self help tradition, we need to go back, as with many things American, to Puritanism. Central to Puritan belief was the individual drama of salvation. Calvinism emphasised, as Haller puts it, 'the immanence of God in the individual soul' (8). The only two places in which Calvinism 'triumphed' were Scotland and the early American colony of New England (ibid). Confession to priests had been abolished in the Reformation, which meant that, in addition to the diary (private confession), public confession--the testimonial--became an alternate means of baring the soul. As Watkins puts it, 'Puritan culture provided a body of theory, a technique and a language' (2) with which to communicate religious experience, that is, the religious experience of the individual. With the testimonial came the ability to display the inner life, and the power of the public confession persists today on even the most secular of television shows.

At the same time that Puritanism receded, the rise of scientific discourse began to shape ideas about self mastery. The intersection of these two types of discourse, the individualised confession and scientific 'method', produced a range of techniques, one of the most obvious being the gospel of self help. One of the first books on this topic was *Science and Health*, published in 1875. Written by the daughter of two Puritans, Mary Baker Eddy, this text, which created the Christian Science movement, melded pseudo-scientific discourse and Scripture to argue the origins of all illness lay in weakened faith. Baker Eddy argued that by harnessing the mind's own perceptions through the operations of God's Grace, individuals could rid themselves of pain and disease. This 'Science of the Mind' differed from spiritualism, because 'spiritualism... (had) no scientific basis, nor proof nor power outside of human testimony' (Baker Eddy 71). 'Human testimony'-- by confession or possession--was no longer enough. The self had to be improved and managed according to a scientific method and the 'science' of the Scriptures. Thus, an extra discourse concerning self-regulation was created. Baker Eddy's *Science and Health* advocated the 'mind cure', that is, the belief that one can create one's own reality through mind power. The mind cure has gone on to become one of the most persistently lucrative self-help fashions for more than a century. We can trace it through Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* (1936), Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), to John Gray's recent *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). What ties all these movements is the conviction that it is possible to unleash your unknown potential by employing specific language and behaviour. By focusing on the problem, and applying special techniques, reality will quite literally alter.

In *I'm Dysfunctional You're Dysfunctional*, Wendy Kaminer critiques Norman Vincent Peale's account of a woman whose husband informed her that he wanted to leave her. She was advised to 'picturize' him in his favourite chair, and sure enough, he came back to her (Peale 62-63). By taking no action but the think about what she wanted, an unhappy situation altered to accommodate her wishes. This apolitical, passive approach to problem solving is one of the most distinctive features of the mind cure approach to self help. The subject's position as a God-like entity in their world abrogates responsibility to heeding others' needs or wants, and fails to account for the complexity of power relationships on a domestic level. At best, others' needs are manipulated to suit the individual.

This approach was pushed to its greatest extreme in the est movement. est's founder, Werner

Erhard had an epiphany on a California Freeway in 1963 which led him to establish est (Erhard Seminars Training). est removed any need to believe in God to enact a mind-cure, by moving the individual to centre stage. With a smattering of Zen Buddhism, and aggressive marketing, Erhard masterminded the first \$600 weekend workshops where people could be humiliated into locating another way of being (1). During seminars, participants would be called 'assholes' and encouraged to dispense with ideas of belief in God. This was the mind-cure stripped bare: you were all you had to deal with the modern world. It was realising this that turned a 'loser' into a 'winner'.

Despite the emphasis on individual empowerment, and 'you are all you have' mantras, central in all the mind-cure traditions is the presence of a pastoral figure. There is always a movement leader who acts as interpreter of his/her own message. Foucault is uncannily accurate in his description of the pastor in 'The Subject and Power' (1983), describing this 'very special form of power' in Western societies as being salvation-oriented, individualizing, and linked with 'the production of truth--the truth of the individual himself' (Foucault 1983 214). Foucault observes the tension between the global and the particular, so much a feature of self-help movements, when he describes pastoral power in following terms:

The multiplication of the aims and agents of pastoral power focused the development of knowledge of man around two roles: one, globalising and quantitative, concerning the population; the other, analytical, concerning the individual'. (1983 215)

The force which synthesises these tensions--the pastors, whether it be Mary Baker Eddy or John Gray PhD--exercise this power by convincing people that they know their innermost lives. Indeed, treatment the minutiae of everyday life is the most powerful 'evidence' of John Gray's book. He knows what people fight about, what they dislike doing, their preferences and options. Above all, Dr Gray knows that people dislike conflict. A purchaser of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* told journalist Eleanor Bader that 'my boyfriend and I were fighting about everything. I was in a bookstore and saw it and said, "Oh, a book that will help us get along"' (Bader).

There is significant overlap here with pastoral power and psychological expertise, which Nikolas Rose defines as ...a particular kind of social authority, characteristically deployed around problems, exercising a certain diagnostic gaze, grounded in claim to truth, asserting technical efficacy, and avowing humane ethical values. (356)

The exercise of authority, teamed with the appearance of being able to diagnose, meshes with the x-ray vision of the pastor, to form a particularly powerful movement leader. The leader 'knows how', because he or she has assembled an eclectic range of knowledges and symbols to create a distinct self help technique. This accords with Rose's description of a characteristic mode of psychological expertise, that of 'bricolage'. Bricolage 'amalgamates knowledges and techniques from different sources into a complex "know-how"' (ibid).

John Gray's skilful use of the above techniques has resulted in the runaway success of *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus*. The book, and its sequels (as well as Gray's television appearances and personal success seminars), are based on a mixture of personal transformation, new age and psychological techniques. Though a mixed salad of ideas, the metanarrative that emerges is deeply conservative. Bricolage and pastoral authority shape the book's narrative into a new manifestation of the mind cure tradition. The power of the story of Mars and Venus injects not scientific discourse, but a metaphor that only Gray is able to interpret through a methodology involving charts, 'case studies', and lists of observed behaviours. Thus, Gray's technique resembles Christian Science in its melding of two essentially conflicting discourses: the man/woman genesis 'scripture' of his own making, and the pseudo scientific evidence that supports it. Both of these will now be discussed in detail.

The title page reads as *Men are from Mars, Women are From Venus. A Practical Guide to Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships* by John Gray, Ph.D. It displays several features characteristic of the self-help book. Firstly, it has a catchy, catch-all title, with an emphasis on 'practical', to show that it is based on commonsense rather than book-learning. The use of second person 'you' in 'getting what you want', serves, as Hilary Radner puts it, to invoke 'intimacy and the idea of the private realm' (3), thought to be

essential criteria in appealing to a female readership. The PhD enhances Gray's authority to diagnose and direct, although its origin has been the source of much investigation and mirth for his critics. It suffices to say that Columbia Pacific University, the granting body, is not a recognised or registered tertiary institution (Hamson 1999).

While lengthy, it is necessary to reproduce the opening anecdote of the book, as it encapsulates the passive, apolitical approach of mind cure techniques.

A week after our daughter Lauren was born, my wife Bonnie and I were completely exhausted. Each night Lauren kept waking us. Bonnie had been torn in the delivery and was taking painkillers. She could barely walk. After five days of staying home to help, I went back to work. She seemed to be getting better.

While I was away she ran out of pain pills. Instead of calling me at the office, she asked one of my brothers, who was visiting, to purchase more. My brother, however, did not return with the pills. Consequently, she spent the whole day in pain, taking care of a newborn.

I had no idea her day had been so awful. When I returned home she was very upset. I misinterpreted the cause of her distress and thought she was blaming me...

After exchanging a few harsh words, I headed for the door...Then something started to happen that would change my life... Bonnie said: '....I just need to feel your arms around me. Please don't go.'...I walked over and silently held her... ..At that moment I started to realise the real meaning of love...

I would never have believed we could resolve conflict so easily... (Gray 1-2)

The most striking feature of this anecdote is that fails to provide the most important answers. What happened to the brother? Is John's anger as important as Bonnie's pain? Was conflict genuinely resolved? The purpose of the story is not to get these messages across. Instead, it serves the purpose of intertwining the private and the public to 'create a specifically female criterion of validity' (Radner 3). Gray refers to his wife Bonnie repeatedly in the book as a source of knowledge, making it clear that the book is specifically targeted at a female audience. In addition to the 'practical' evidence of having been married himself to a 'vulnerable' person, Gray claims to have done 'seven years of research' (3), an additional appeal to scientific method. However, apart from anecdotes about couples called 'John' and 'Susan' (never Bitlan or Consuela), no quantitative or qualitative measures of the Mars and Venus technique are ever provided.

The genesis myth that underpins the book is as follows. Originally, men lived on Mars and women lived on Venus. The Martians fell in love with the Venusians from afar, quickly invented space travel, and traveled to Venus. The Venusians fell in love with them on sight. They then flew to Earth, and everything was harmonious for a while. But the effects of the Earth's atmosphere meant that everyone woke up with selective amnesia, so they forgot that they were from different planets and from that day forth have been in conflict. From this story, Gray extrapolates specifically 'male' and 'female' characteristics, which are fixed to gender, with only minor allowance for each to incorporate aspects of the other.

Essentially, Martians 'value power, competency, efficiency and achievement' (3). For them, autonomy is the symbol of these things. Venusians on the other hand, value love, communication, beauty and relationships. They experience fulfillment through sharing and relating. Because Martians are autonomous, they deal with problems differently to Venusians. If a man cannot find a solution, he does something to forget his problems, like reading the news or playing a game. This is contrast to a woman, who needs to talk. By conflating 'woman' with 'Venusian', and 'man' with 'Martian', Gray is able to dip in and out of the metaphor he has created in order to prove the case. Gray's notion of the 'cave' is an example of this. The 'cave' explains men's unwillingness to talk through problems:

...(W)hen a man is stressed he needs to withdraw into the cave to focus on solving a problem. At such times he is distant, forgetful, responsive. At such times he is incapable of giving a woman the quality

attention and feeling that she normally receives and certainly deserves. But he is powerless to release his mind! (30-31)

The cave is one of the most discussed features of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. It simultaneously relieves men of the responsibility of explaining themselves and effectively silences women. Although describing the man as 'powerless to release his mind', the man is in fact exercising complete control over a woman by removing her right to speak. Gray adds that to expect a stressed man who is in his cave instantly to become 'open, responsive, and loving' is as unrealistic as expecting a woman 'who is upset to immediately calm down and make sense' (ibid). A woman who tries to come into the cave will be 'burned by the dragon'!

In order that men and women may communicate, women must learn to accommodate the cave, while men (when they are not in the cave) must learn to put up with women's incessant chatter. Further complicating this is the fact that Martians and Venusians speak different languages. Gray offers a Martian/Venusian 'phrase book' to help us understand each others' true meanings. There are many of these sample dialogue or behaviour boxes throughout *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, but it is important to note that only 10 are directed at men, while 20 are directed at women. As with most of these dialogues, the intention is to prevent a fight occurring. This is achieved by one party (more often the woman) acquiescing to the other's wants. A sample exchange is as follows:

(Gray 263)

What we have in Gray's dialogues is the notion of woman as 'shrew', or 'harpy' (Radner). Gray argues that the more a woman nags a man, the less responsive he is. Using dialogues such as the above, the less-harassed man will be 'trained' to respond more quickly to requests. The use of 'would' rather than 'could' gives the man a sense of options--something a man needs in order not to be hemmed in by a shrewish woman.

We can also interpret the silence at the end of Gray's dialogues--the gracious and simple 'OK' of the woman-- as reflecting the limitations of the *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* technique. Gray's formula cannot account for things beyond the white, middle class solar system it describes, and these limitations are shown very clearly indeed in this following dialogue from the Oprah Winfrey Show.

CHRISTY: All I want is--
DR GRAY: He gets the message that you want to change him, and that hurts a man. That's the most painful thing.
CHRISTY: I don't want to change him. I just want him to work.
[LATER]
DR GRAY: That's what men want to do, they want to solve the problem They want--instead of listening--
-
STEPHEN: That's right. I want to solve the problem.
DR GRAY: She doesn't want the problem solved. She wants you to understand, empathise. Here. Give her a hug. This lady's starved for a hug...
(Andersen 161-163)

In this exchange, an unemployed man and his wife are frustrated over his inability to get a job, a problem caused largely by economic circumstances. This complex and very real situation is reduced to the basic terms of Gray's gender relations formula. Gray assists Stephen in grabbing back the upper hand of the argument and places Christy as passive-- 'she doesn't want to solve the problem...'--when it was Christy who was most concerned about resolving Stephen's unemployment in the first place. For Stephen to change, even career paths, is not an option, as being made to change 'hurts a man'.

Such answers leave Stephen and Christy more confused than ever, because in order to use his technique, John Gray is forced to reduce a complex matter to the realm of feelings (in this case, hugs) alone. Above all, the role of expert must remain intact, even if it means making the subjects of the expertise unhappy. The test of a self-help technique is whether it can adequately explain or help a variety of situations. *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* fails to deal with situations (such as racism, poverty and, in this case, unemployment) that fall outside its parameters. By limiting the means of self-expression to a given discourse, a sense

of safety is created. All that we need to know is in the book.

If we are to consider Gray's theory as an exercise in the mind-cure tradition of Baker Eddy and Peale, a noticeable feature of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* is its lack of reference to a higher being. However, an account of a recent John Gray US\$250 'Personal Success' weekend seminar makes it clear that a deity was never far out of the picture. A participant describes the weekend as starting with new age style channeling of energy, but then moving onto something far more akin to a revival meeting:

It took someone from the crowd in the afternoon session to move us from the unending testimonials to what Mr Gray laughingly referred to as 'flower power'. 'Flower power' is a method in which one discharges negative energy into flowers. In groups of 20 we huddled around potted [chrysanthemums] and meditated/chanted to discharge the negative energy we had been accumulating.

On the Sunday morning, Mr Gray stated a couple of people had come up to him on Saturday who were possessed and he would be depossessing them that day. He truly went over the top when he went through a 'depossession' of a woman... he was screaming and wailing, and she was screaming and wailing... I found the crowd's willingness to believe all this... disturbing. (Hamson)

The contrast between new age practices and old fashioned faith healing of this passage show the bricolage of Gray's technique is a potent combination. The pastoral form of power, which 'cannot be exercised without knowing the insides of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets' (Foucault 1938 206) is manipulated to an extreme degree. But, as shown in the above account, the illusion of intimate knowledge and the confession of secrets is pushed further, so that it exploits of people's fear of what they would like to confess. In this way, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* prescribes anti-know-how, because it makes followers of the technique rely more on pastoral authority to understand its nuances.

The use of a dominant metaphor that only Gray can properly interpret for his followers--the story of Mars and Venus--precludes any interpretation by his followers. Rather than being based on Scripture, Gray creates his own script, a practice shown clearly in the dialogue from the Oprah Winfrey Show. Melded with the trappings of scientific discourse: the doctorate, the method, and 'research', the central incoherence of the Mars and Venus technique is smoothed over by the presence of Gray as pastor figure, who serves as both the master confessor and confessant. Like other mind cures, at the heart of it all is an almost contemptuous view of the individual, and of society at large. The *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* technique advocates disempowering women to an astonishing degree, and at the same time offers a static, highly depressing view of the male as troglodyte. This, along with a central aim to avoid conflict through passivity, adds up to a impoverished system of relations for all concerned.

Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus is another manifestation of the mind cure tradition. While the book promises individual empowerment-- 'getting what you want'-- it goes about removing it through creating a highly reductive view of human nature. The language of the Martian/Venusian world creates the illusion of intimacy and detail at an individual level, but then denies self-determination by making stock phrases and behaviours the only means of expressing the wants or desires of both men and women. Ironically, in divesting readers of the ability to relate in any meaningful way, Gray has built a hugely successful career as a relationship expert. By insisting that couples are a mystery to themselves and that conflict in any form is dangerous, Gray has hit upon a winning formula. Whether or not his ideas are truly dangerous is something this article is not able to answer. It concludes by emphasising the need to ask questions when any self-declared expert insists they have the answer to whatever ails us, as Mark Twain did in 1907 when attempting to understand Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*:

For all the strange and frantic and uninterpretable books which the imagination of man has created, this one is the prize sample. It is written with a limitless confidence and complacency, and with a dash and stir of earnestness which often compel the effects of eloquence, even when the words do not seem to have any traceable meaning. (Twain 29)

Marketing has made *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, and now its spin-off, *Children are from Heaven*, publishing sensations, but its origins in confessional and pseudo-

scientific discourse promise that it will only ever be another self help fashion.

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