

Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval

# The New Way of the World, Part I: Manufacturing the Neoliberal Subject

e-flux journal #51 — January 2014 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval  
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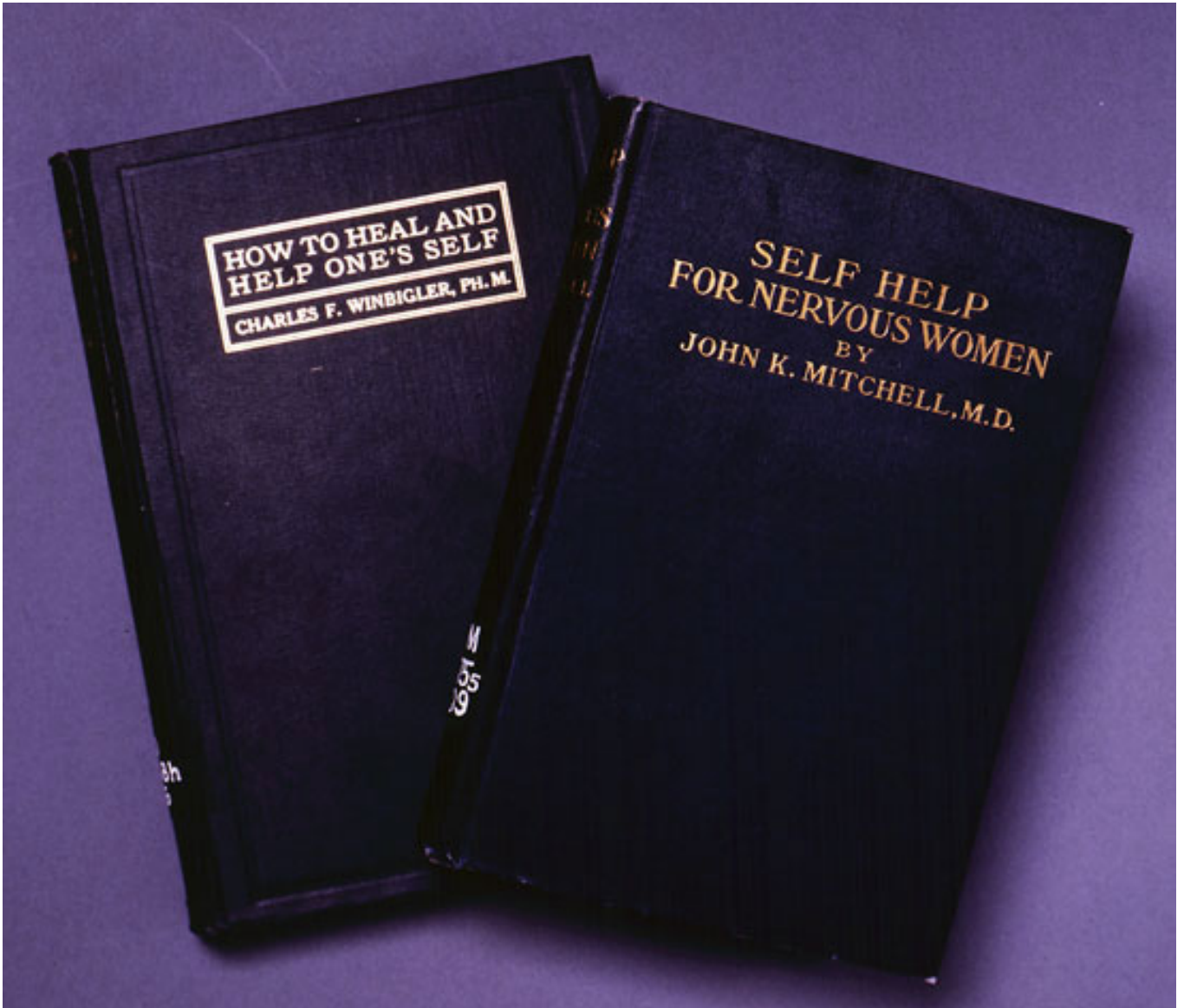
01/08

The conception of society as an enterprise made up of enterprises comprises a new subjective norm, which is no longer precisely that of the productive subject of industrial societies. The neoliberal subject in the process of being formed, some of whose main features we wish to delineate here, is the correlate of an apparatus of performance and pleasure that is currently the subject of numerous works. There is no absence of descriptions of hypermodern, uncertain, flexible, precarious, fluid, weightless man today. These valuable, often convergent works at the intersection of psychoanalysis and sociology register a new human condition, which according to some even affects the psychic economy itself.

On the one hand, numerous psychoanalysts say that in their consulting rooms they are receiving patients suffering from symptoms that attest to a new era of the subject. The new subjective condition is often related in the clinical literature to broad categories like “the age of science” or “capitalist discourse.” That the historical should take possession of the structural should come as no surprise to readers of Lacan, for whom the subject of psychoanalysis is not an eternal substance or transhistorical invariant, but rather the effect of discourses inscribed in the history of society.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, in the sociological field the transformation of the “individual” verges on an incontestable fact. What is invariably referred to by the ambiguous term “individualism” is sometimes related to morphological changes, as in the Durkheimian tradition, sometimes to the expansion of commodity relations, as in the Marxist tradition, and sometimes to the extension of rationalization to all areas of existence, as in a more Weberian strand.

In their fashion, psychoanalysis and sociology thus register a mutation in the discourse on the human being, which can be related (as in Lacan) to science, on the one hand, and capitalism on the other. It was indeed a scientific discourse which, from the seventeenth century, began to state what a person is and what she or he must do; and it was in order to make the human a productive, consuming animal, a being of toil and need, that a new scientific discourse proposed to redefine the measure of personhood. But this very general framework is insufficient to identify how a new normative logic came to be established in Western societies. In particular, it does not enable us to pinpoint the reorientations the history of the Western subject underwent over three centuries, or still less the ongoing changes that can be related to neoliberal rationality.

This is because, if there is a new subject, it must be grasped in the discursive and institutional practices that engendered the



Two early examples of self-help books are featured in this image: Charles Fremont Winbigler, "How to Heal and Help One's Self or a New Outlook on Life," (Los Angeles, 1916); John Kearsley Mitchell, *Self Help for Nervous Women: Familiar talks on Economy in Nervous Expenditure* (Philadelphia, 1909).

figure of the man-enterprise or “entrepreneurial subject” in the late twentieth century, by encouraging the institution of a mesh of sanctions, incentives, and commitments whose effect was to generate new kinds of psychic functioning. To achieve the objective of comprehensively reorganizing society, enterprises, and institutions by multiplying and intensifying market mechanisms, relations, and conduct – this involved a becoming-other of subjects. The Benthamite subject was the *calculating* figure of the market and the *productive* person of industrial organizations. The neoliberal subject is a *competitive* person, wholly immersed in global competition.

### The Plural Subject and the Separation of Spheres

For a long time, the so-called “modern” Western subject pertained to normative regimes and political registers that were heterogeneous and in conflict: the customary and religious sphere of old societies; the sphere of political sovereignty; and the sphere of commodity exchange. This Western subject thus lived in three different spaces: that of the services and beliefs of a still rural, Christian society; that of nation-states and the political community; and that of the monetary market in work and production. From the outset, this apportionment was mobile; and fixing and altering its boundaries was at stake in power relations and political strategies. The great struggles over the very nature of the political regime gave singularly focused expression to it. More important, but more difficult to grasp, are the gradual alteration in human relations, the transformation of everyday practices induced by the new economy, the subjective effects of new social relations in the market space and of new political relations in the space of sovereignty.

Liberal democracies are worlds of multiple tensions and contrasting growths. We can describe them as regimes, which, within certain limits, enabled and respected a mixed functioning of the subject, in the sense that they guaranteed both the separation and the articulation of the different spheres of existence. This heterogeneity found expression in the relative independence of moral, religious, political, economic, aesthetic, and intellectual institutions, rules, and norms. This does not mean that this feature of equilibrium and “tolerance” exhausted the nature of the dynamic that inspired them. Two major parallel growths occurred: political democracy and capitalism. The modern human was divided in two: the citizen endowed with inalienable rights and the economic actor guided by self-interest; human as “end” and human as “instrument.” The history

of “modernity” has sanctioned an imbalance in favor of the second pole. Were we to foreground the development, albeit uneven, of democracy, as do some authors, we would miss the major axis, which in their different ways, Marx, Weber, and Polanyi highlighted: the spread of a general logic of human relations subject to the rule of maximum profit.

The expansive commodification that Marx identified as the great price of “emancipation” assumed the general form of *contractualization* in human relations. Voluntary contracts between free persons – contracts certainly always underwritten by the sovereign body – thus replaced institutional forms of alliance and filiation and, more generally, old forms of symbolic reciprocity. More than ever, the contract became the yardstick of all human relations. As a result, the individual increasingly experienced in his relation to others his full, complete freedom of voluntary engagement, perceiving “society” as a set of relations of association between persons endowed with sacred rights. Here we have the core of what is commonly called modern “individualism.”

As Durkheim showed, this involved a singular illusion inasmuch as the contract always contains more than the contract: without the guarantor state, no personal liberty could exist. But it can also be said with Foucault that underlying the contract is something other than subjective freedom. There is an organization of normalizing processes and disciplinary techniques that constitute what might be called an *apparatus of efficiency*. This apparatus of efficiency furnished economic activity with the requisite “human resources”; it has continually produced the bodies and souls apt to function in the great circuit of production and consumption. In a word, the new normativity of capitalist societies was imposed through a particular kind of subjective normalization.

Foucault provided an initial mapping of this process, which was problematic. Contrary to what is too often claimed, the general principle of the apparatus of efficiency is not so much a “training of bodies” as a “management of minds.” Or rather, it should be said that disciplinary action on bodies was only one moment and one aspect of the molding of a certain *modus operandi* of subjectivity.

The *productive subject* was the great work of industrial society. It was not only a question of increasing material production. Power also had to be redefined as essentially productive, as a spur to production, whose limits would be determined solely by the impact of its action on production. The correlate of this essentially productive power was the productive subject – not only the worker, but the subject who

produces well-being, pleasure, and happiness in all areas of his or her existence. Political economy very soon had as its guarantor a scientific psychology describing a psychic economy consistent with it. As early as the eighteenth century, the wedding of economic mechanics and the psycho-physiology of sensations was initiated. Doubtless this was the decisive intersection that would delineate the new economy of humans governed by pleasure and pain. The new politics was inaugurated with the panoptical monument erected to the glory of the monitoring of each by all and all by each.

### The Modeling of Society by the Enterprise

We are no longer dealing with old disciplines intended to train bodies and shape minds through compulsion to render them more submissive – an institutional methodology that has long been in crisis. It is a question of governing beings whose subjectivity must be involved in the activity they are required to perform. Henceforth, various techniques help to manufacture the new unitary subject, which we shall variously call the “entrepreneurial subject” or “neoliberal subject,” or, more simply, the *neo-subject*.<sup>2</sup>

For the neo-subject, the target of the new power is the desire to realize oneself, the project one wishes to pursue, the motivation that inspires the “collaborator” of the enterprise, and, ultimately, *desire* by whatever name one chooses to call it. The desiring being is not only the point of application of this power; it is the relay of apparatuses for steering conduct. For the aim of the new practices for manufacturing and managing the new subject is that individuals should work for enterprises as if they were working for themselves, thereby abolishing any sense of alienation and even any *distance* between individuals and the enterprises employing them. Each individual must work at their own efficiency, at intensifying their own effort, as if this self-conduct derived from them, as if it was commanded from within by the imperious order of their own desire, which there is no question of resisting.

Just as eighteenth-century philosophy accompanied the establishment of new technologies of power with soothing music, the humanist and hedonistic statements of modern human management accompany the use of techniques geared to producing new, more effective forms of subjection. However novel, the latter are stamped with the blindest, most classical form of social violence peculiar to capitalism: the tendency to transform the worker into a mere commodity.

This does not mean that there is nothing new about neo-management and that capitalism

is basically always the same. On the contrary, its major novelty consists in the molding whereby individuals are rendered more capable of tolerating the new conditions created for them – and this even though they help to make these conditions increasingly harsh and abiding through their own conduct. The novelty consists in triggering a “chain reaction” by producing “enterprising subjects” who in turn will reproduce, expand, and reinforce competitive relations between themselves. In accordance with the logic of the self-fulfilling prophecy, this requires them to adapt subjectively to ever harsher conditions which they have themselves created.

This is what is not sufficiently appreciated by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Taking as their subject the ideology, which, according to their definition of the spirit of capitalism, “justifies engagement in capitalism,”<sup>3</sup> they tend to accept the new capitalism’s claims about itself in the managerial literature of the 1990s as valid currency. But this is to stress only the seductive, strictly rhetorical aspect of the new modes of power. It is to forget that the effect of the latter is to constitute a particular subjectivity through specific techniques. In a word, it is to underestimate the specifically disciplinary aspect of managerial discourse by taking its arguments too literally. This underestimation is the obverse of an overestimation of the ideology of individual “flourishing,” in an ultimately very one-sided thesis that derives the “new spirit of capitalism” from the “artistic critique” issuing from May ’68. Yet, what developments in the “world of work” bring out ever more clearly is precisely the decisive importance of control techniques in the government of conduct. Neo-management is not “anti-bureaucratic.” It corresponds to a new, more sophisticated, more “individualized,” more “competitive” phase of bureaucratic rationalization; and it is only in an optical illusion that it relied on the “artistic critique” of May ’68 to ensure the mutation of one form of organizational power into another. We have not emerged from the “iron cage” of the capitalist economy to which Weber referred. Rather, in some respects it would have to be said that everyone is enjoined to construct their own.

The new government of subjects in fact presupposes that the enterprise is not in the first instance a site of human flourishing, but an instrument and space of competition. Above all, it is ideally depicted as the site of all innovation, constant change, continual adaptation to variations in market demand, the search for excellence, and “zero defects.” The subject is therewith enjoined to conform internally to this image by constant self-work or self-

improvement. His or her own expert, own employer, own inventor, and own entrepreneur: neoliberal rationality encourages the ego to act to strengthen itself so as to survive competition. All its activities must be compared with a form of production, an investment, and a cost calculation. The economy becomes a personal discipline. Margaret Thatcher provided the clearest formulation of this rationality: "Economics are the method. *The object is to change the soul.*"<sup>4</sup>

To this extent, it might be said that the first commandment of the entrepreneur's ethics is "help thyself" and that in this sense it is an ethic of "self-help." It will rightly be said that this ethic is not new; that it forms part of the spirit of capitalism from the start. We already find it formulated in Benjamin Franklin and better still, a century later, in Samuel Smiles, the author of a global bestseller published in 1859 entitled *Self-Help*. The latter banked exclusively on the energy of individuals, who were to be left as free as possible. But he persisted with an individual ethic – the only decisive one in his view. He did not envisage "self-help" becoming something other than personal moral strength, which everyone should develop for themselves. Above all, he did not envisage it becoming a political

05/08

mode of government.<sup>5</sup> He even thought the opposite, basing himself on strict definitions of the private and public spheres: "It may be of comparatively little consequence how a man is governed from without, while everything depends on how he governs himself from within."<sup>6</sup> The main innovation of neoliberal technology precisely consists in directly connecting the way a person "is governed from without" to the way that "he governs himself from within."

### Personal Enterprise as an Ethos of Self-Valorization

The self's new norm certainly consists in flourishing. To succeed, you must know yourself and love yourself. Hence the stress on the magical expression "self-esteem," key to all success. But these paradoxical statements about the injunction to be oneself and love oneself as one is are inscribed in a discourse that imposes a specific order on legitimate desire. Management is an iron discourse in a velvet vocabulary.

Rationalization of desire is at the heart of the norm of personal enterprise. As underlined by one of its technologists, Bob Aubrey, an international consultant from California, "to



The central guardhouse of the Holmesburg Prison, which was part of the Philadelphia prison system until 1995. Built in 1896, this prison is also know for the extensive decades-long dermatological, pharmaceutical, and biochemical weapons research projects involving testing on inmates throughout the 20th Century.



06/08

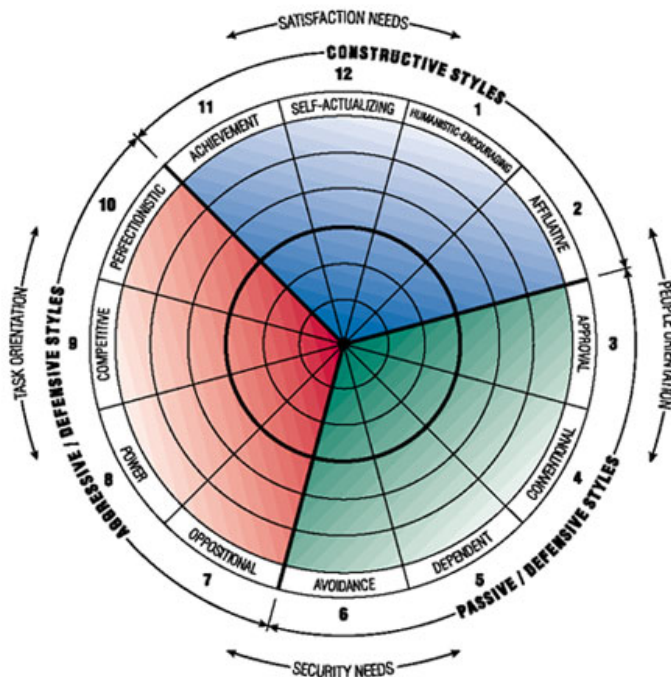
speak of personal enterprise is to express the idea that everyone can have a grip on their life: conduct it, manage it, control it in accordance with their desires and needs by developing appropriate strategies.”<sup>7</sup> As a way of being of the human ego, personal enterprise is a way of governing oneself according to principles and values. Nikolas Rose identifies some of them: “energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility.”<sup>8</sup>

It would be a mistake to disparage this dimension of the entrepreneurial ethic as merely an imposture and fraud. It is the ethic of our time. But it is not to be confused with a weak existentialism or facile hedonism. The entrepreneurial ethic certainly contains these ethical forms when it vaunts the “man who makes himself” and “integral flourishing.” But it is distinguished by other features. The ethics of the enterprise is more bellicose in kind; it extols combat, force, vigor, success. Thus, it makes work the privileged vehicle of self-realization: it is by succeeding professionally that one makes a “success” of one’s life.

As such, it is at the antipodes of the ethic of “conversion” (*metanoia*) of third- and fourth-century Christian asceticism, which was precisely an ethic of “a break with the self.”<sup>9</sup> It is even profoundly different from the work ethic of early Protestantism. For if it likewise summons the subject to constant self-inquisition and “systematic self-control,” it no longer makes success in work the “sign of election,” which is supposed to provide each subject with certainty about their salvation.<sup>10</sup>

Concerned to secure theoretical support for this new ethic, Aubrey claims to have adopted the formula of “personal enterprise” from Foucault, making it a method of professional training.<sup>11</sup> While it is rather curious to see a critical analytics of power being transformed into a set of prescriptive and performative proposals for wage-earners, the aim is nevertheless highly revealing. In the new world of the “developing society,” individuals must no longer regard themselves as workers, but as enterprises that sell a service in the market: “Every worker must seek out a customer, position himself in a market, set a price, manage his costs, undertake research and development, and train himself. In short, I believe that from the individual’s standpoint his work is his enterprise and his development is defined as a personal enterprise.”<sup>12</sup> How is this to be understood? The personal enterprise is a “psychological and social, even spiritual entity,” active in all areas and present in all relations.<sup>13</sup> Above all, it is a response to new rules of the game that radically change the work contract, to the point of abolishing it as a wage relation.

Labor having become a “product” whose market value can be measured with increasing precision, the time has come to replace the wage contract by a contractual relationship between “personal enterprises.” In this regard, use of the word “enterprise” is no mere metaphor. The equivalence between market valorization of one’s labor and self-valorization leads Aubrey to identify personal enterprise with a modern form of “care of the self,” a contemporary version of *epimeleia*.<sup>14</sup>



Human Synergistics Corporation’s graph depicts different management styles and is one of the components of a multi-level series of diagnostic instruments, focusing on self-assessment, achievement thinking, and responsible decision-making. The company was founded by Dr. J. Clayton Lafferty, an MD in clinical psychology in 1971.

### “Management of the Soul” and Management of the Enterprise

All such practical exercises in self-transformation tend to transfer the whole burden of complexity and competition exclusively onto the individual. The “managers of the soul,” to use a phrase of Lacan’s adopted by Valérie Brunel, introduce a new form of government that consists in guiding subjects by making them fully endorse expectations of a certain conduct and subjectivity at work.<sup>15</sup>

Mastery of the self and of relations of communication appears to be the pendent of a global situation that no one can now control. If global control of economic and technological processes no longer exists, people’s behavior is no longer programmable; it is no longer wholly describable and prescriptible. Self-control is cast as a kind of compensation for an impossible

control of the world. The individual is the best, if not sole, “tracker” of complexity and the best actor of uncertainty.

Contrary to what Foucault’s interpretation might be taken to imply, Pierre Hadot stresses that the “culture of self” in the Hellenistic epoch (first and second centuries) referred to a certain order of the world, to a universal reason immanent in the cosmos, such that the dynamic of internalization was at the same time self-transcendence and universalization.<sup>16</sup> In a way, the “ascetics of performance” do not escape this logic. Obviously, this order is no longer that of Stoic “Nature,” any more than it is the order intended by the Creator with which the “inner-worldly ascesis” of the Protestant ethic was bound up. But that does not prevent this “ascetics” from finding its ultimate justification in an economic order that transcends the individual, since it is expressly conceived to harmonize the individual’s conduct with the “cosmological order” of global competition enveloping it. Certainly, one works on the self to render oneself more efficient. But one works to render oneself more efficient so as to render the enterprise, which is the benchmark entity, more efficient. Further still, the exercises that are supposed to bring about an improvement in the subject’s conduct aim to make of the individual a “microcosm” in perfect harmony with the universe of the enterprise and, over and above that, with the “macrocosm” of the global market.

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This text is an edited excerpt from *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, trans. Gregory Elliott, forthcoming from Verso in February 2014. The book was originally published in French as *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 2010).

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07/08

e-flux journal #51 — January 2014 Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval  
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1  
Were we to linger over this, we could show that at several points in his writings and seminars Lacan indicated the importance of the utilitarian turn in Western history. Cf., for example, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2007), 112.

2  
For our own purposes we adopt the neologism suggested by Jean-Pierre Lebrun in *La Perversion ordinaire. Vivre ensemble sans autrui* (Paris: Denoël, 2007).

3  
Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 8.

4  
*Sunday Times*, May 7, 1988; our emphasis.

5  
Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help, with Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (London: John Murray, 1890). In his Introduction (p. 1) the author summarizes his intention: “[our] happiness and well-being as individuals ... must necessarily depend mainly on [ourselves] – upon [our] own diligent self-culture, self-discipline, and self-control – and, above all, on that honest and upright performance of individual duty, which is the glory of man’s character.”

6  
Ibid., 5.

7  
Bob Aubrey, *Entreprise de soi* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), 11.

8  
Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154.

9  
Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros and trans. Graham Burchell (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 215.

10  
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism and Other Writings*, eds. and trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin, 2002), 79.

11  
“L’entreprise de soi, un nouvel âge,” interview with Bob Aubrey, *Autrement* 192 (2000): 193. With Bruno Tilliette he had previously written *Savoir faire savoir* (Paris: Interéditions, 1990) and *Le Travail après la crise* (Paris: Interéditions, 1994).

12  
Aubrey, *Le Travail après la crise*, 85.

13  
Ibid., 86.

14  
Aubrey, *Le Travail après la crise*, 103. We recall that *epimeleia heautou* is the formulation for “care of the self” or “concern for the self” in classical Greek culture. Cf. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

15  
Valérie Brunel, *Les Managers de l’âme. Le Développement personnel en entreprise, nouvelle pratique de pouvoir?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

16  
Pierre Hadot, “Réflexions sur la notion de ‘culture de soi,’” in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), 330.

08/08

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