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Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) and Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT)

It is difficult to define Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) because those who started it and those involved in it use such vague and ambiguous language that NLP means different things to different people (a fact, which also is quite revealing). I think, though, that the critical thinker Robert T. Carroll, has done a quite good job in his critique of NLP. In the following I will use parts of Carroll's definition and critique, supplied with my own critique of NLP.

Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP) was begun in the mid-seventies by a linguist (John Grinder) and a mathematician (Richard Bandler) who had strong interests in (a) successful people (b) psychology (c) language and (d) computer programming.

NLP has something for everybody, the sick and the healthy, individual or corporation. In addition to being an agent for change for healthy individuals taught en masse, NLP is also used for individual psychotherapy for problems as diverse as phobias and schizophrenia. NLP also aims at transforming corporations, showing them how to achieve their maximum potential and achieve great success.

While it is difficult to find a consistent description of NLP among those who claim to be experts at it, one metaphor keeps recurring. NLP claims to help people change by teaching them to program their brains. We were given brains, we are told, but no instruction manual. NLP offers you a user-manual for the brain. The brain-manual seems to be a metaphor for NLP training, which is sometimes referred to as "software for the brain."

Furthermore, NLP relies heavily upon (1) the notion of the unconscious mind as constantly influencing conscious thought and action; (2) metaphorical behaviour and speech, especially building upon the methods used in Freud's interpretation of dreams and (3) hypnotherapy as developed by Milton Erickson.

NLP is also heavily influenced by the work of Gregory Bateson and Noam Chomsky.

In short you can say that there are three main sources of inspiration:

1) **The New Thought movement** (see my article **The New Thought movement and the law of attraction**)

2) **Humanistic psychology** (see my articles **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology** and **Self-help and the Mythology of Authenticity**)

3) **Management theory** (see my article **Management theory and the self-help industry**)

A central problem of NLP is pseudoscience (see my article **The pseudoscience of New Age and reductionism**). NLP is extreme in its way of creating scientific-sounding terms in order to add weight to claims and persuade non-experts to believe statements that may be false or meaningless. NLP is also using established terms in idiosyncratic ways, thereby demonstrating unfamiliarity with mainstream work in the discipline.

An example of this is the use of the term paradigm shift. John Grinder denies, that his and Bandler's work is an eclectic hodgepodge of philosophy and psychology, or that it even builds from the work of others. He believes that what he and Bandler did was "create a paradigm shift."

The following claim by Grinder provides some sense of what he thinks NLP is:

My memories about what we thought at the time of discovery (with respect to the classic code we developed – that is, the years 1973 through 1978) are that we were quite explicit that we were out to overthrow a paradigm and that, for example, I, for one, found it very useful to plan this campaign using in part as a guide the excellent work of Thomas Kuhn (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions) in which he detailed some of the conditions in the midst of paradigm shifts. For example, I believe it was very useful that neither one of us were qualified in the field we first went after – psychology and in particular, it's therapeutic application; this being one of the conditions which Kuhn identified in his historical study of paradigm shifts. Who knows what Bandler was thinking?

As a comment to this Carroll says: "One can only hope that Bandler wasn't thinking the same things that Grinder was thinking, at least with respect to Kuhn's classic text."

Kuhn did not promote the notion that not being particularly qualified in a scientific field is a significant condition for contributing to the development of a new paradigm

in science. Furthermore, Kuhn did not provide a model or blueprint for creating paradigm shifts! His is an historical work, described what he believed to have occurred in the history of science. He made no claim that anything similar happens in philosophy and he certainly did not imply that anything NLP did, or is doing, constitutes a paradigm shift (read more about the inspiration from Kuhn in my article **Constructivism: the postmodern intellectualism behind New Age and the self-help industry**).

So, a central part of NLP is the use of obscurantist language, and use of apparently technical jargon in an effort to give claims the superficial trappings of science.

Michael Corballis (1999) stated that “NLP is a thoroughly fake title, designed to give the impression of scientific respectability”. NLP adapted many scientific sounding terms, such as eye accessing cues, non-elective surgery, metamodeling, micromodeling, metaprogramming, neurological levels, presuppositions, representational systems, and submodalities.

None of these terms have any scientific meaning at all.

In the following I will go into four central aspects of NLP:

- 1) NLP as a user-manual for the brain
- 2) NLP as observation of behaviour
- 3) NLP as a Primary Representational System
- 4) NLP as Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT)

1) NLP as a user-manual for the brain

One common thread in NLP is the emphasis on teaching a variety of communication and persuasion skills, and using self-hypnosis to motivate and change oneself. Most NLP practitioners advertising on the internet make grand claims about being able to help just about anybody become just about anything. A presupposition is that “if someone can do something, anyone can learn it.”

NLP claims that its “experts” have studied the thinking of great minds and the behaviour patterns of successful people and has extracted models of how they work. “From these models, techniques for quickly and effectively changing thoughts, behaviours and beliefs that get in your way have been developed.”

So, you can say, that NLP is about programming your brain with such models, like when you are downloading a new program to your computer.

This statement comes from people who claim they understand the brain and help you reprogram yours. As Carroll says, then NLP wants you to think that the only thing that separates the average person from Einstein or Pavarotti or the World Champion Log Lifter is NLP.

In order to explain NLP Dr. Steven Novella (MD) tells about that there is an episode of Spongebob (one of those cartoons accessible to both young children and adults) where Patrick, upset that his friend Spongebob has won so many awards and he has won none, decides to copy everything Spongebob does. Patrick is a lazy, dumb, pathetic, (but charming) do-nothing, and he is no less so by simply mimicking Spongebob's every move. NLP, at its core, takes the Patrick approach to success and counseling.

Briefly NLP is based upon the notion that success can be achieved by simply modeling the language, behavior, and thought patterns of successful people. Various versions of this have been applied to counseling by simply modeling the language and behavior of supposedly successful counselors.

NLP coaches and psychotherapists are, in sessions with clients, themselves using such influence techniques as mirroring and matching, reframing, pacing, and anchoring, which include noticing eye movements, gestures, breathing patterns, voice tone changes, pupil dilation, and skin color changes. It's a matter of noticing and interpreting subtle cues, then mirroring them back at the other person. Essentially this means that when you are with someone, you mimic that person's behavior and attitudes so that he or she feels comfortable with you. Instant bond! Instant communication! You then have the upper edge and can more easily influence that person and obtain the results you desire.

Bandler and Grinder claimed that their techniques allowed a person to look at the external behavior of another person and reliably determine that person's internal state. This in effect says that you can look at the outside of a human and tell what is going on inside. You can judge a book by its cover. And not only that, so the claim goes: by using NLP you will also increase your influence over others.

I remember the behavioristic joke about a couple after their sexual intercourse, where the man asks his partner: "It was good for you, was it also good for me?"

In the following I will give two examples of NLP sessions from Margeret Thaler Singer's book *Crazy Therapies* (page 173-174):

- 1) The Echoing Therapist
- 2) The Miming Therapist

1) The Echoing Therapist

“Louise” had been assaulted during a nighttime robbery of her apartment. She was having trouble not thinking about her incident. Her family doctor referred her to a new therapist in the office building. “I never returned after my first visit,” Louise said, “because the experience was just weird.” She went on to say:

“The guy was in his late twenties, I guess, well dressed and sort of trendy looking. He sat facing me, watching my every move. He seemed to be doing some repeat maneuvers, for example, echoing what I had just said, or asking series of questions about every statement I made. I felt like I was in high school English class and the teacher was prodding me to expand every sentence into a paragraph. In the end, we never connected as human beings because he was always saying things like, ‘You seem to be looking at that idea,’ ‘You have a picture in your mind about that,’ or ‘Picture yourself seeing that.’

“He seemed hung up on ideas of looking, having mental pictures and visualizing things. I tried to see if he knew anything about how to get rid of my mental distress and fear at night. I told him I was having trouble studying, reading. But he never really heard what I said. Even though he picked at and parroted my words and phrases, he didn’t seem to get anything and I never got an answer from him.

“He didn’t seem to want to learn from me. I guess his thing was to play some kind of game with sentences. Finally the hour was over and I never went back. Luckily I eventually found a good therapist who knew what I was talking about, who related to me, and heard what I saying in a real sense. The first guy was just plain weird.”

2) The Miming Therapist

“Nick” had recently begun working on a master’s degree. He’d been a police officer, but a leg injury from a shooting had forced him to retire from that line of work. He went to a therapist because he felt “down” and was having trouble adjusting to his new sedentary lifestyle. A friend at school said he really liked his therapist, who used a technique called NLP, so Nick thought he would give it a try.

“I only went to him once,” Nick said. “I mean, give me a break! After all, at the police academy I’d been trained in interviewing and observation, you know. It didn’t

take me long to figure out that he was reflecting back at me everything I did. He'd adjust his body like me, cross his legs, try to speak in the same way, the same volume, with the same inflections. It was as if I were at the amusement park in front of one of those glass boxes where a pantomime artist imitates every little move you make until you just crack up in laughter. Only the therapist wasn't that good. But he was that obvious. At one point I asked him, 'Why are you doing all that?' He told me it was a great way to build rapport. I said, 'Not with me.' I never went back, and found a new therapist who's a real person."

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Teachers on NLP courses (also the so-called "qualified" and "listed" NLP educations) keeps on telling the students, that everything the teachers say and do, are supported by "new research", without making account of who has carried out this research (the thought distortion *Research has shown that...*).

NLP *has* in fact been investigated scientifically. And it turns out that the assumptions of NLP, namely that our cognition, behavior and emotions can be "programmed" by mimicking the more superficial aspects of those with desirable attributes (for example posture and mannerism) are wrong. The last thirty years of research have simply shown that NLP is bunk. NLP has failed every test of both its underlying theories and empirical tests of its efficacy. So, in short, NLP does not make sense and it doesn't work. In fact: NLP has been recognized as among a **Top Ten of Most Discredited Interventions**, according to a published research survey by Norcross et al (2008).

It turns out that improving one's cognitive ability and emotional stability is hard work – there is no quick short cut. The brain is not infinitely reprogrammable – it can learn and change, but there is an underlying structure and function that is pretty resistant to change, and this resistance increases as we age. Change is possible, but it is hard work. You can't just download a new personality.

The concept of resistance to change is also very known within spirituality and religion, where they talk about original sin and negative karma (see my articles **The emotional painbody and why psychotherapy can't heal it**, and **The value of having a religion in a spiritual practice**).

If you want to read more about the scientific research, read the articles [Neurolinguistic Programming and other Nonsense](#) by Steven Novella, and [NLP – no longer plausible](#), by Donald Clark. Also do yourself a favour and read the comments to these two articles, where you see how advocates of NLP are attacking the scientific research with a battery of pseudoscientific techniques and thought distortions such as Ad hominem, Testimonials, Anecdotal evidence, Research has

shown that..., Pseudo-profundity, Rhetoric, etc., etc. - see my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**. For a definition of pseudoscience, see my article **The pseudoscience of New Age and reductionism**. Also see my articles **Constructivism: the postmodern intellectualism behind New Age and the self-help industry** and **The Sokal Hoax**, about how postmodern intellectuals are attacking science (while themselves claiming their theories to be science).

(Let me add in parenthesis a couple of other interesting blogs on NLP by Donald Clark, where he for example describes Richard Bandler as a cocaine addict, who was arrested for murdering a prostitute by shooting her in the head, the girlfriend of his drug dealer: [Click here](#))

Anyway, besides the scientific problems, NLP is also filled with spiritual and philosophical problems. One of these problems is the problem of hypnosis.

Hypnosis is a typical sophistic technique. Being hypnotized is usually characterized by (a) concentration (b) relaxation, (c) suggestion, and (d) expectation.

The versatility of hypnosis is unparalleled. Hypnosis occurs under dramatically different social settings: the showroom, the clinic (hypnotherapy), and the police station.

The best definition for hypnosis is probably The Power of Suggestion. All hypnosis effects are simply the power of suggestion. The more suggestible someone is, the better their results. And the more suggestions someone complies with, the more likely they are to comply with further suggestions.

What is then the problem with hypnosis? The problem is not, that it can help some people loose weight, quit smoking, or overcome their fear of flying. The problem is that it opens you for the power of suggestion. If you open yourself for the power of suggestion you close yourself to your own essence. This shows in four philosophical ways:

- 1) A rational where you take your assumptions, conceptions and values for absolute truths (hereunder subjectivism and relativism), and hereby end up in a contradiction between your thoughts and your lived life.
- 2) A life-philosophical, where you are circling around your own past and future, and hereby create a closed attitude, inattention, absent-mindedness and ennui.
- 3) An existence-philosophical, where you in your opinion formation and identity formation strive towards being something else than what you are, where you imitate

others, are a slave of others ideas and ideals, and where your actions are characterized by irresoluteness and doubt.

4) A spiritual where you are identified with your lifesituation, are dependent on religious or political ideologies, and where you hereby exist on a future salvation.

Read more about hypnosis in my article **Hypnosis, hypnotherapy and the art of self-deception**. About the four philosophical ways, read my article **The four philosophical hindrances and openings**.

2) NLP as observation of behaviour

NLP is said to be the study of the structure of subjective experience, but a great deal of attention seems, as already shown, to be paid to observing behaviour and teaching people how to read “body language.” That implies that NLP has some conclusions to what a certain body language or behavior means. This is invalid simply because there are far too many other alternative reasons for why persons, in certain situations, with certain inner and outer impulses at that certain moment, are behaving as they are. Ignoring this is to end in the thought distortion *Ignoring alternative explanations* (see my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**).

As Carroll says: “If someone tells me that the way I squeeze my nose during a conversation means I am signaling him that I think his idea stinks, how do we verify whether his interpretation is correct or not? I deny it. He knows the structure, he says. He knows the meaning. I am not aware of my signal or of my feelings, he says, because the message is coming from my subconscious mind. How do we test these claims? We can’t. What’s his evidence?”

Carroll is here touching the problem of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has referred to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” encouraged by writers such as Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. What people think, and the reasons they produce, may not be the real reasons at work. It then becomes easy to become suspicious of the motives of everyone, whether as the representative of an economic class or the purveyor of a morality, or just as an individual with psychological problems to solve.

To try to have a normal conversation with NLP coaches and psychotherapists can be an odd experience. Often they just look at you with these empty eyes that says: “Well, it might well be that you think what you think, and that you produce the reasons you do, but I know better, I don’t think that is the real reasons at work. I think you have some psychological problems to solve!”

But how can they know this? How can they play the role as someone who know who you are better than yourself, at the same time as they totally deny and renounce what you think, and the reasons you produce; that is: your experiences, your education, your arguments, your articles, your books?

Well, the only way they then can get their knowledge from, is from their own theories. It is a refined way of justifying prejudice. Prejudice is a belief held without good reason or consideration of the evidence for or against its being true. Philosophy is opposed to prejudice. We are all riddled with prejudices on a wide range of issues, but it is possible to eliminate some of them by making an effort to examine evidence and arguments on both sides of any question. Human reason is fallible, and most of us are strongly motivated to cling on to some beliefs even in the teeth of evidence against them (for instance wishful thinking); however, even making small inroads into prejudice can transform the world for the better.

But the NLP analysis (leading us to think of groups or individuals “what is in it for them?”), is not only corrosive of trust in society. It is bound eventually to undermine it’self. Why are such views themselves being propagated? What are those spreading them going to gain? - read more about *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion* in my article **The hermeneutics of suspicion (the thought police of the self-help industry) and why I am an apostle of loafing.**

3) NLP as a Primary Representational System

NLP claims that each of us has a Primary Representational system (PRS), a tendency to think in specific modes: visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory or gustatory. A person’s PRS can be determined by words the person tends to use or by the direction of one’s eye movements. Supposedly, a therapist will have a better rapport with a client if they have a matching PRS. Again: that implies that NLP has some conclusions to what certain words and eye movements mean. This is invalid simply because there are far too many other alternative reasons for why persons, in certain situations, with certain inner and outer impulses at that certain moment, are using their words, and moving their eyes, as they are. Ignoring this is to end in the thought distortion *Ignoring alternative explanations* (again: see my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**).

PRS has therefore not been supported by the scientific literature.

What is interesting is, that NLP in a session of NLP-psychotherapy, or NLP-coaching, praises the neutral approach, while forgetting that the therapist is sitting and using a theory (PRS), which not at all is neutral. NLP is here the victim of the

thought distortion called *Priming effect*. Another thought distortion involved is *Communal reinforcement*.

Let us look at this “value neutrality.” NLP is often connected with so-called “spiritual self-improvement”. Many NLP therapists are connecting NLP with everything from Akasha healing and hypnotherapy to the personality typology The Enneagram. But in order to get some “scientific credibility” other NLP consultants are discriminating sharply between NLP and spirituality. It is from such consultants that you hear that NLP is a complete neutral theory, yes even that it is not at theory, but a neutral practice. This is also what you hear from other coaching directions (coaching as such is building on the same sources of inspiration as NLP).

And these sources of inspiration are based on subjectivism and relativism; therefore not at all neutral. A central mantra in NLP is for example, that the map is not the landscape, which might seem like some kind of absolutism, where it must be possible to discriminate between the map and the landscape, subject and object. But at the same time NLP claims, that you can't go beyond your own linguistic mappings, behavior or thought patterns. This of course leads to the Socratic question: From where does NLP then know, that the map is not the landscape? And we have just seen, that the NLP consultant claims to know your body language, because he knows the structure, the meaning behind, which is coming from your subconscious mind. But how can *he* know the whole of this, actually quite complicated landscape, when at the same time telling, that nobody can know the landscape?

Anyway, the only thing you can do, according to NLP, is to change your linguistic mappings according to what you *yourself* find positive. Because it is only your own subjective evaluation, which can provide something with value. There neither exist valid values, which come from the community, or objective values, which come from nature, the universe, or life itself. Nothing has value in itself, unless it comes from the individual's subjective experiences, will, needs and wishes.

So, there is nothing “neutral” in this view of truth and moral. And NLP's view on moral is not only a subjectifying, which attributes the source of morals to the subjective itself, but also an emotionalizing, since it is the individual's *feelings*, which decide the moral quality of something. What it is about is to do what “*feels*” right. It is the individual's emotional experience of something, which defines values, not conversely. And this is fully in thread with Consumer Capitalism, where the customer (and his or her's experiences, wishes, will and needs) always is right. The consumer society, the therapeutic self-actualization, and the subjectifying of the moral, go hand in hand. The moral – the individual's relation to himself – is therapized, and the moral is subjectified.

Iben Krogdøl is a researcher on Science of Religion on Aarhus University in Denmark. As a part of her PHD project she followed a NLP education on the Danish NLP institute. She writes in her book about NLP (*The New Myths – from religion to psychology, 2011*) that the assumption, which is mostly discussed on the education, is the central sentence about the positive intention behind all behavior (here we see the inspiration from positive psychology, which again has its roots in the American religious movement New Thought). Many students find it difficult to understand, what this positive is. To *whom* is it positive? The teachers have to answer many times, before the students accept the answer. The positive is what is positive to the individual person. Krogdøl also writes, that it is her impression, that the teachers often got irritated over having to spend time on giving answers to something that evident.

But it is *not* evident. The question *To whom is it positive?* is again a Socratic question. When the assumption about the positive intention behind all behavior is the basic assumption, then you must accept, that everything from Nazism, Fascism, Dictatorship, popular murder, terror and violence is as equally positive as democracy, negotiation and dialogue.

NLP often uses phrases such as “There is no such thing as failure. There is only feedback.” As Carroll says, then this would imply that NLP could be invented by the US Military to explain their “incomplete successes.” When the space shuttle blew up within minutes of launch, killing everyone on board, was that “only feedback?” If I stab my neighbour and call it “performing non-elective surgery” am I practicing NLP?

Another version of this is, that NLP often refuses critique, because the critic “falsely is assigning bad motives to the good intentions of people”, and therefore somehow is a bad person. That is another version of the thought distortion called *Ad hominem move*, which has absurd consequences, because a lot of dictators, terrorists, and other ideologists probably all have “good intentions” - read about the thought distortion *Good Intentions Bias* in my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**.

This *reductio ad absurdum* problem is the problem of all the management theories and the self-help industry as such. As I have mentioned before, the Danish psychologist Nina Østby Sæther says that the psychologized self-help ideal about the self-actualizing human being seems in remarkable way to remind about the actual behavior of the psychopath (see my article **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**).

Krogdøl writes furthermore that the NLP method was introduced in Denmark by the NLP therapist Ole Vadum Dahl, who has written the basic textbooks on NLP, which

are used in Denmark. Later he has dissociated total from NLP, because it was his experience, that it was used for manipulation, that it produced false, inflated self-images, and that it made the clients dependent of it, because their “peak experiences” only lasted for a short while. Ole Vadum Dahl is in that way, paradoxical enough, today both Mr NLP in Denmark, and persona non grata in many NLP environments (about the problem of peak experiences see my article **A critique of the Indian Oneness movement and its use of Western success coaching**).

Krogsdal’s book also has some wonderful inside knowledge about how NLP is used in connection with sickness and healing. It is namely so that NLP consultants in public forums are more cautious about the statements they are using.

The NLP teachers on the education weren’t hiding, that they think NLP can heal *all* kinds of sickness, both mentally and physical, and both mild and severe illnesses. And that is actually fully in thread with the claims that you via NLP can become whatever person you like; *there are no limits*. As they say, it depends on how skilled you are in using NLP. And, precisely as in the positive psychology of New Thought, they think that *all* sickness are due to negative thoughts.

Also here there are some objections from the students. One student says: “But there must be a bottom limit! For example in connection with children with cancer - children don’t die just because they *think* they are going to die? Often they don’t know it!”

The teacher answers: “Children can easily sense the adults’ anxiety and worry: children take everything in, they are very well aware that it is serious.” When the student keeps on holding on to, that there must be a bottom limit, another woman says: “So, that is *your* point of view! Who says there is a bottom limit? Who says that everybody can’t be healthy?” The teacher agrees and says: “What you say is that the Earth is flat!” She says that one day such a point of view would die out (page 101).

Another example is when one of the students, Carl, is complaining about having fever. The teacher begins to use NLP on him. And not surprisingly he comes to the conclusion that Carl’s fever is due to his negative thoughts. If he hadn’t had negative thoughts, he would not be able to catch any illness at all. But the teacher goes even further, and talks about that it can get directly dangerous when people not only have negative thoughts, but also a negative identity.

Here Krogsdal herself is asking the teacher, if he isn’t inducing people great guilt, when he says, that they can think themselves healthy. In other words: Krogsdal talks against the thought, that people’s illnesses are their own fault. The teacher answers that there in him neither exists shame or guilt: “You can’t use those concepts for

anything” he says. “They are namely negative thoughts. You are *always* yourself the cause of your illness, *everything* comes from yourself!” – note here the similarity with the self-help coach that seduces a female client as a part of personal development – see my article **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**.

The same day, when the students were going to train in groups, one of the students refuses to sit next to Carl, because he was afraid catching the fever. The teacher says: “Just tell yourself that you are not going to be ill!” (Really not an advice I would encourage people to follow).

A few days later Carl is well again. His fever had shown to be a severe stomach poisoning due to a dinner on a restaurant. He asks the teacher what this has to do with his thoughts? Strangely enough the incident doesn't have any influence on neither the teacher nor the students. So, we see that NLP involves precisely the same mind cure problems as the positive psychology of New Thought - read more about these problems in my article **The New Thought movement and the law of attraction**.

Krogsdal's book is also loaded with all the self-contradictions the teachers are involved in. On one page they say that *everything* comes from within, on the next they talk about how other people influence us in a bad way. On one page they can talk about how the unconsciousness only allow things to come in, which it *wants* to come in, on the next about how the society are inducing bad things in it without our wanting it to be so. On one page they say that all kinds of sickness/suffering can be abolished by the power of the thought, on the next that sickness is controlled by something that is greater than thoughts, for example past lifes and karma, etc., etc., etc.

Such self-contradictions can of course not be tolerated on any serious education.

Back to PRS. The problem with PRS is the same as the problem of personality typing.

There exists several different kinds of personality typing, and there are still coming more. Each new number of a New Age magazine with respect for itself, must include at least one new “revolutionary” theory of personality types, in the same way as it must present at least one new “revolutionary” spiritual theory “proved” by quantum physics (see my articles **Six common traits of New Age that distort spirituality**, and **Quantum mysticism and its web of lies**).

Both in New Age, and in coaching, which claims to be purely neutral and scientific, the so-called Enneagram is very popular. It is a New Age mandala, a mystical

gateway to personality typing, and through this to spiritual consciousness and fuller being. The enneagram represents nine personality types. It is original developed by Oscar Ichazo (b. 1931), who claims to have received it in a vision.

Later the enneagram has turned up in several new versions, funny enough often developed by people, who also claim to have received it in divine visions.

So how the types are defined depends on whom you ask. The classification systems seem to have been modified according to the inventors' own idiosyncratic beliefs. Often they do it in relation to astrology.

A personality typing theory categorizes people in different psychological types. Such theories of psychological types are comparatively easy to invent, and earn money on, and they are certainly harmful because they also involve all the problems of the Hermeneutics of Suspicion.

There is no evidence for such type-theories at all. How do we test these kinds of claims? We can't. (Read more about personality typing in my article **Personality typing is a refined system of prejudice**).

4) NLP as Large Group Awareness training (LGAT)

NLP is one of many New Age Large Group Awareness Training programs (LGAT). NLP is a competitor with Landmark Forum. Anthony Robbins, and legions of other enterprises which, like the Sophists of ancient Greek, travel from town to town to teach their "wisdom" for a fee.

Anthony Robbins (Tony Robbins) is probably the most successful "graduate" of NLP. He started his own empire after transforming from a self-described "fat slob" to a firewalker to (in his own words) "the nation's foremost authority on the psychology of peak performance and personal, professional and organizational turnaround."

On July 23, 2012, in San Jose, California., 21 people were treated for burns after walking barefoot over hot coals as part of an event called Unleash the Power Within, starring Tony Robbins. The American journalist Oliver Burkeman is the author of the book *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*.

In an article called *The Power of Negative Thinking* Burkeman is asking in a comment to the firewalker incident: What, exactly, did they expect would happen? In fact, there's a simple secret to "firewalking": coal is a poor conductor of heat to surrounding surfaces, including human flesh, so with quick, light steps, you'll usually be fine.

But Mr. Robbins and his acolytes have little time for physics. Burkeman says: “to them, it’s all a matter of mind-set: cultivate the belief that success is guaranteed, and anything is possible”. One singed but undeterred participant told The San Jose Mercury News: “I wasn’t at my peak state.”

Burkeman asks: “What if all this positivity is part of the problem? What if we’re trying too hard to think positive and might do better to reconsider our relationship to “negative” emotions and situations?”

Consider the technique of positive visualization, he says, a staple not only of Robbins-style seminars but also of corporate team-building retreats and business best sellers. According to research by the psychologist Gabriele Oettingen and her colleagues, visualizing a successful outcome, under certain conditions, can make people less likely to achieve it. She rendered her experimental participants dehydrated, then asked some of them to picture a refreshing glass of water. The water-visualizers experienced a marked decline in energy levels, compared with those participants who engaged in negative or neutral fantasies. Imagining their goal seemed to deprive the water-visualizers of their get-up-and-go, as if they’d already achieved their objective.

Burkeman continues: Or take affirmations, those cheery slogans intended to lift the user’s mood by repeating them: “I am a lovable person!” “My life is filled with joy!” Psychologists at the University of Waterloo concluded that such statements make people with low self-esteem feel worse — not least because telling yourself you’re lovable is liable to provoke the grouchy internal counterargument that, really, you’re not.

There are mainly two reasons for why this is happening:

- 1) Positive psychology is inducing several thought distortions in their clients such as False dichotomy, Compensation, Conversion to the opposite, Confirmation bias, Illusion of control, etc.
- 2) In the New Thought movement (the inspiration for positive psychology), and therefore also for NLP, they have redefined the concept of karma to what they call The Law of Attraction.

Let me explain why this is going wrong by describing the main thought distortions induced:

1) False dichotomy:

False dichotomy is a misleading conception of possible alternatives. A dichotomy is a division in two alternatives. Often seen in the expressions Either/or – If/then, as for example: "Either you are with us, or you are against us" – "if I'm not always a success, then I'm a fiasco". Similarly, someone who says that you must either believe that God exists or else that God doesn't exist is setting up a false dichotomy since there is the well-known third option of the agnostic.

A false dichotomy appears when somebody sets up a dichotomy in such a way, that it looks like, that there only are two possible conclusions, when the facts actual are, that there are many other alternatives which not are being mentioned. Many inappropriate rules of living and life-strategies are based on false dichotomy. False dichotomy is thinking in extremes, and leads to a false and imbalanced way of life.

In connection with inappropriate basic assumptions such as "If I am not always a success, then I am a fiasco", the false dichotomy is closely related to the development of guilt, shame and depression.

Note, that you can't think in extremes such as I am a success, I am perfect, I am beautiful, without the opposite extreme. That is: if you for example follow the teaching of positive psychology, which excludes all negativity, then you induce in yourself a false dichotomy, because an exclusion of the opposite extreme not is possible.

2) Compensation:

You are for example trying to maintain a positive self-evaluation by avoiding areas of life where there are chances of fiasco and instead are seeking areas, where the chance of success is largest. This is in itself a compensation.

There is also another kind of compensation, because the unbalance in the above action will by the energylaws of life itself be compensated. Division consists in, that the Ego, through evaluations of the images of time, split the world up in opposites (good and evil, power and powerlessness, perfect and fiasco, love and hate). Thereby is created a line of one-sided and extreme basic assumptions (for example "I always have to be perfect!") and rules of living (for example "unless I always am perfect, then I am a fiasco"). The energylaws of life will seek to balance these imbalances, for example through contrabalances (perfect becomes fiasco) – that is: through a compensation.

3) Conversion to the opposite:

You can for example convert your insecurity and anxiety for not being good enough to exaggerated self-confidence. Such a conversion is of course a kind of *Compensation*, escape, self-deceit, and will lead to a false and imbalanced way of life.

Sadly enough, it seems like the movement of positive psychology (see my article **The New Thought movement and the law of attraction**) directly is using Conversion to the opposite, like Confirmation bias, as a central part of its training. Positive psychology is marked by its attempts, through thinking, to eliminate all negativity by converting it into something positive, or simply by ignoring it, or saying it doesn't exist. But a thought is always defined by its negation; that is: what the thought *not* is. This means that a thought always contains a pair of opposites. So, you can not by the force of thinking (and therefore not by force of will or choice) convert negativity to positivity. If you nonetheless try to do this you will end up in focusing on the one extreme of a pair of opposites, which is an unbalance. The energy-laws within the wholeness will therefore, as explained, seek to bring the thoughts back to the balance of middle. They do this through a contra-balancing movement; that is: a swing over in the opposite extreme. That is what is meant with compensatory karma (see my article **What is karma?**).

Existentially seen Conversion to the opposite causes a conflict between what you are and what you want to become, or between being and becoming.

Conversion to the opposite, and the above-mentioned problems, also seems to characterize Byron Katie's method *The Work*, in her so-called Turnaround technique, where you always have to look at your thoughts as false (see my article **A critique of Byron Katie and her therapeutic method The Work**).

In a true spiritual practice the transformation happens, partly through art of life, where you are dancing between the opposites (as in the teaching of Yin and Yang), and through deep meditative-existential inquiry.

4) *Confirmation bias:*

Confirmation bias refers to a type of selective thinking whereby one tends to notice and to look for what confirms one's beliefs, and to ignore, not look for, or undervalue the relevance of what contradicts one's beliefs.

The tendency to give more attention and weight to the positive and the confirmatory has been shown to influence memory. When digging into our memories for data relevant to a position, we are likely to recall data that confirms the position.

Researchers are sometimes guilty of confirmation bias by setting up experiments or framing their data in ways that will tend to confirm their hypotheses. They compound the problem by proceeding in ways that avoid dealing with data that would contradict their hypotheses.

In the movement of New Thought and the law of attraction Confirmation bias is, like conversion to the opposite, directly used as a central part of their training.

The ego-religion and the ego-exercises are the ego's incessant confirmation or denial of the ego: "it is no use with me!"; or: "Wonderful me!". Both, either the denial or the confirmation of the ego, maintain the ego-process, the ego-identity, and the ego-centralization. The ego's religion and exercises are the ego's needs and longings and will: I want to, I think, I believe, I feel, I wish, I hope, I think, I believe, I feel, I wish, or, in its most common core: I, I, I...Me, Me, Me...

It should now be easy to see, that the positive psychology of the New Thought movement, and the law of attraction, are based on the ego-religion and the ego-exercises, where it is about moving the focus away from the denial of the ego (the negative, evil), and encourage the confirmation of the ego, which is considered as positive, and in compliance with the divine universal laws.

In the Danish New Age magazine *Nyt Aspekt* (New Aspect, January-March 2012), there is an article called "Super Thoughts" by the Health Coach Anni Simonsen. After having stated that "New research has shown..." that "everything is subjective", and "Fantasy=reality" she claims that you can think yourself healthy, by standing in front of a mirror and repeating: "You are so beautiful!" "I love you!" She states that it is about giving yourself positive confirmations, to acknowledge, praise and love yourself as unconditional as possible. Thereafter she states that critical thinking belongs to the denial side of the ego, wherefore you of course should avoid such kind of negative thinking. She concludes that giving yourself positive confirmations are synonymous with healthy thoughts, and that such thoughts are good thoughts, light thoughts, super thoughts.

If you find it difficult, she says, you must borrow (here we see that Anni Simonsen also is a NLP coach, and that New Thought is the source of inspiration for both the law of attraction and NLP). She continues the exercise: Let yourself be inspired by a person, whom you would like to be like, and use this model to create your own self-image. When this self-image is ready, it is time to put sound on. Listen to your own voice. Find the sound that tells you, that you speak to the world with confidence and trust. It is a voice people will listen to! Listen to how the whole world will answer with acknowledgement, respect and love.

I am afraid I don't agree that the whole world will love Anni Simonsen because she stands in front of a mirror repeating to herself: "You are so beautiful!" "I love you!" I think it sounds like the evil queen from the fairy tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. She ends the article with a preconceived response to critique. If you think that the image not is true, but only is fantasy, then remember that everything is subjective.

Such thoughts are actually an expression of black magic, a way of turning spirituality upside down.

First of all: Subjectivism means that truth *only* is something you create yourself – there is no absolute, or objective truth; which actually means: no divine source. This of course raises the Socratic question: from where does Anni Simonsen (and other New Thought thinkers) know that everything is subjective? She can't know this if reality only is a fantasy you create yourself. Subjectivism is self-refuting. The self-refuting aspect is that subjectivism makes an exception of its own position. The very assertion of subjectivism is itself non-subjectivistic (see the thought distortion *Self-refuting arguments* in my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**). Besides this self-contradiction, then the assertion of subjectivism is in opposition to spirituality, which in its worship of a divine reality, of course believes that truth is absolute and objective. The opposition is due to, that religion, and therefore spirituality, has been reduced to psychology; a reductionism, a distortion of the human being (see my articles **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**, and **The pseudoscience of reductionism and the problem of mind**).

Secondly: The ordinary ego-consciousness functions by being identified with the physical world, with instincts, sexuality, emotions and collective ideals. The true spiritual practice works through these aspects by means of, for example the core which exists in the basic monastic vows: poverty, chastity and obedience. These promises work with a restructuring of the ego's ownership to things, food and power, and they re-structure sexuality and emotions. First thereafter the mystical process can begin. Again: it should now be easy to see how positive psychology and New Thought are doing the exact opposite.

The ego is a demonical structure, and it attracts demonical powers and energies, which also have been created by the ego phenomenon. The same energy-process and function, which realized spiritual teachers use, can therefore be used for other purposes than spiritual. When the energy-processes of the astral plane's collective history are used spiritual, then the ego, in its egoistic isolating and self-affirmative function, steps aside, and the energy is turned into the now, and therefore in towards the source and the spiritual dimension. The people, who around a spiritual teacher,

constitute an energy-mandala, are in this way made transparent for a higher common human spirituality.

In a lesser realized person's use of energy the contact with, and the ability to manipulate with such collective forms of astral energy, can be used for other purposes than spiritual. It can be creative, ego-affirmative, political, demonical, and so on.

The powers that, by realized spiritual teachers are given to others' disposal in healing, energy transmission and spiritual information exchange, the same powers can be turned in through the ego-structures, and therewith into past and future, and fragmentation (conflict). In this way there can be opened creative channels, created super egos (super thoughts), created political leaders and popular seducers (in my article **The philosophy of Karen Blixen** I have investigated these phenomena in detail).

These phenomena are well known from history and from literature. In the story of the temptation in the desert, we can see these possible ways of using the energy pictured in anticipated form. Here you see the possibility of using the freedom and the power, to elevation of the ego and the consequent power and material glory. But Jesus abstains from this deification of the ego. It is also known from the Faust myth, described by for example Goethe and Thoman Mann.

When you in a selfish way use the powers from the collective history of the astral plane, and which demonical astral beings will help you with (because the ego phenomenon is their magnet of attraction), you can create personal power and material glory. That is the essence of Black Magic, and it is the background for the creation of the concept of the law of attraction (though the worshippers probably don't realize this - I think they have perfectly good intentions - see the thought distortion *Good Intentions Bias* in my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**). But you will eventually meet the compensatory karma, or Nemesis.

You can in short not use these energies as you want to; that is: through thinking, and therefore not through will, choices or feelings.

The eternal circling around your own dreams, desires, success etc., will in other words be contra-balanced through the opposite categories. New Thought here exposes its worshippers for the possibility of Nemesis.

An example: as soon as your thoughts spread themselves too much out in an extreme, the energy-system compensates by seeking to bring itself back to the balance of the middle. The system does this by seeking over towards the opposite extreme (for instance from perfectionism to a feeling of fiasco). That is: through a

contrabalancing, a compensation. The energy works as a pendulum. The more energy, which is invested in an extreme of a pair of opposites, the larger the swing in the opposite direction will become (read more in my article **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**).

5) Illusion of control:

Control makes us feel powerful, which is a good feeling. And feeling that there is an order in the universe (the law of attraction) which you can control via the power of thought is comforting to many people.

Is there any harm in this? What's the harm in obliterating truth and reality in favor of what you want to be true? A great deal of harm can come from deluding yourself that you can control your health, spiritual development and your wealth, or somebody else's health, spiritual development and wealth, by the power of thoughts.

In my article **The emotional painbody and why psychotherapy can't heal it**, I explain how the painbody, through the inner evaluating ego, is connected with the more dangerous depths of the astral plane's collective history; you might call it original sin or negative karma. This you can't control.

In my article **The value of having a religion in a spiritual practice** I describe that only an intervention from the source (God, Christ, the enlightened consciousness) can basically help Man with a transcendence of the negative karma of the original sin. But in order to be able to receive this help you must do your part of the work: the spiritual practice. Many years. And this means that you need to re-structure the ego's ownership to things, food, personal power, sexuality and emotions. Spiritual practice is in all simplicity about separating and dismantling the consciousness' automatical identification with all this, in order to turn the consciousness in towards its source. First thereafter the mystical process can begin.

The magnet of attraction, which the ego is controlled by – (the ego's identity with the material world: instincts, sexuality, emotions, desire, collective ideals, ownership, personal power) – will in a true spiritual practice lose its attraction. Investments in the material world's ups and downs, its demands, temptations and dramas, become undramatized, uninteresting, even meaningless, in relation to the consciousness' opening direction in towards its spiritual essence: the now, the wholeness, life itself, and finally: the eternal otherness, from where the good, the true and the beautiful are streaming as grace and forgiveness.

In this movement in towards the source you begin to ask philosophical questions in a meditative-existential way: Who am I? Where do the thoughts come from? What is consciousness and where does it come from? Is there a meaning of life? How does man preserve peace of mind and balance in all the relationships of life? How do we learn to appreciate the true goods and flout all transient and vain goals? Is the destiny of Man part of a larger plan? In this way the grab, which the material world has in your mind, is automatically reduced (I have explained this in my book **Meditation as an Art of Life – a basic reader**).

Very few people will be willing to do this work. On the contrary the New Thought movement (positive psychology and therefore also NLP) has today done an illusory work of trying to re-define this ancient wisdom, so that the magnet of attraction directly is becoming the object of worship.

Another aspect of the true spiritual practice is that you break the automatic process of compensatory karma, which is closely related to the material world, laws of nature, cycles of life, yes actually pure causal regularity of mechanical kind. It would be an illusion to connect such things with a superior intentional divine order (see the thought distortion *Intentionality bias*).

Furthermore you have your free will either to continue to be identified with the area of compensatory karma, or break with it, and move in towards the source, which is the area of progressive karma (where the mystical process begins) – about karma see my articles **What is karma?**, and **A critique of Stanislav Grof and Holotropic Breathwork**.

In Taoism and Zen they talk about the concept of Wu Wei, which means non-activity, passive listening presence, non-control, non-interfering, which lead to Tzu-jen, spontaneity and naturalness. In Zen they for example talk about that when practising Wu Wei you are letting the grass grow by itself. Also the Stoic concept of Apátheia (the Stoic calmness) is about this - which you by the way find in all wisdom traditions. So, it is puzzling that they in the New Thought movement often quote these wisdomtraditions as if the New Thought ideology is in perfect harmony with these. The fact is that New thought is an extreme example of the illusion of control, when believing that you via the "power of thought" can attract (control) everything you can dream of.

So, as Burkeman points out in his article, even goal setting, the ubiquitous motivational technique of managers everywhere, isn't an undisputed boon. Fixating too vigorously on goals can distort an organization's overall mission in a desperate effort to meet some overly narrow target, and research by several business-school

professors suggests that employees consumed with goals are likelier to cut ethical corners.

Though much of this research is new, the essential insight isn't. Ancient philosophers and spiritual teachers understood the need to balance the positive with the negative, optimism with pessimism, a striving for success and security with an openness to failure and uncertainty. The Stoics recommended "the premeditation of evils," or deliberately visualizing the worst-case scenario. This tends to reduce anxiety about the future: when you soberly picture how badly things could go in reality, you usually conclude that you could cope. Besides, they noted, imagining that you might lose the relationships and possessions you currently enjoy increases your gratitude for having them now. Positive thinking, by contrast, always leans into the future, ignoring present pleasures.

Buddhist meditation, too, is arguably all about learning to resist the urge to think positively — to let emotions and sensations arise and pass, regardless of their content. It might even have helped those agonized firewalkers.

Burkeman says that very brief training in meditation, according to a 2009 article in *The Journal of Pain*, brought significant reductions in pain — not by ignoring unpleasant sensations, or refusing to feel them, but by turning nonjudgmentally toward them (also see my article **Suffering as an entrance to the source**).

From this perspective, the relentless cheer of positive thinking begins to seem less like an expression of joy and more like a stressful effort to stamp out any trace of negativity. Mr. Robbins's trademark smile starts to resemble a rictus, as Burkeman says. A positive thinker can never relax, lest an awareness of sadness or failure creep in. And telling yourself that everything must work out is poor preparation for those times when they don't. You can try, if you insist, to follow the famous self-help advice to eliminate the word "failure" from your vocabulary — but then you'll just have an inadequate vocabulary when failure strikes. The advice to try to eliminate negative words from your vocabulary shows how much the self-help industry is inspired by postmodern intellectualism (again: see my article **Constructivism: the postmodern intellectualism behind New Age and the self-help industry** as well as the thought distortion *NewSpeak* in my book **A dictionary of thought distortions**). We have already looked at this tendency. As mentioned: in my article **Humanistic psychology, self-help, and the danger of reducing religion to psychology**, I describe how a Danish self-help guru is seducing one of his pupils, and wants to have

the word guilt removed from his vocabulary. Here I also show how the personality ideal of the self-help industry reminds about a psychopathic personality.

The social critic Barbara Ehrenreich has persuasively argued that the all-positive approach, with its rejection of the possibility of failure, helped bring on our present financial crises. The psychological evidence, backed by ancient wisdom (as we have seen in connection with compensatory karma), certainly suggests that it is not the recipe for success that it purports to be.

Americans are a "positive" people - cheerful, optimistic, and upbeat: This is their reputation as well as their self-image. But more than a temperament, being positive is the key to getting success and prosperity. Or so we are told.

In the utterly original debunking book *Bright-Sided – How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, Barbara Ehrenreich confronts the false promises of positive thinking and shows its reach into every corner of American life, from Evangelical megachurches to the medical establishment, and, worst of all, to the business community, where the refusal to consider negative outcomes - like mortgage defaults - contributed directly to the current economic disaster. With the myth-busting powers for which she is acclaimed, Ehrenreich exposes the downside of positive thinking: personal self-blame and national denial. This is Ehrenreich at her provocative best - poking holes in conventional wisdom and faux science and ending with a call for existential clarity and courage.

Tony Robbins reportedly encourages firewalkers to think of the hot coals as “cool moss.” Burkeman says with a good common sense: Here’s a better idea: think of them as hot coals. And as a San Jose fire captain, himself a wise philosopher, told *The Mercury News*: “We discourage people from walking over hot coals.”

Anyway: Tony Robbins says: “I built my fortune by modeling the success of others...Now **you** can copy **my** mindset and make **your** millions!”

We have already looked at how philosophy of existence is turned upside down in NLP. Philosophy of existence traditional says that you in your opinion formation and identity formation must be yourself, live in compliance with your own essence, and thereby achieve authenticity, autonomy, decisiveness and power of action.

If you follow NLP the direct opposite happens: In your opinion formation and identity formation you will strive after becoming something else than what you are, you will imitate (model) others, be a slave of others’ ideas and ideals, and your actions will be characterized by irresoluteness and doubt. The paradox is, that while

NLP is claiming to create the authentic, autonomous, resource-filled and competent human being, at the same time is doing the exact opposite: it is making people dependent of therapists, coaches, others' ideas and ideals; making them imitate and modeling so-called successful people, etc., etc. (read more about this paradox in my articles **Self-help and the Mythology of Authenticity**, **The hermeneutics of suspicion (the thought police of the self-help industry)** and **why I am an apostle of loafing**, and **The four philosophical hindrances and openings**)

Such existence-philosophical shipwrecks are much more widely spread than most people think. You see them in the talent shows and reality series of the Mass Media, where they have closed down the professional editorial offices, where there were people with knowledge about their areas. In the Mass Media the level of entertainment is higher valued than objectivity, so that all points of views are seen as equally good, and the contempt for professionalism goes from top to bottom.

The winners in this meritocracy are therefore not receiving their talents from being, from the Source itself; the Good, the True and the Beautiful, but from the masks and roles they are playing, from their ability to tell stories. It is a meritocracy of people wearing The Emperor's New Clothes. Such ideas of personal power and success are often based on a NLP induced, self-imagined X factor (I am a fantastic superhuman).

LGAT is a personal development training program in which dozens to hundreds of people are given several hours, to several days, of intense instruction aimed at helping participants begin to discover what is hindering them from achieving their full potential, and living more satisfied lives.

LGAT, or self-help programs, have also been developed for corporations and public agencies, where the focus is on improving management skills, conflict resolution, general institutional strengthening, and dealing with the eternal problem of employees who drink too much or use too many drugs (see my article **Management theory and the self-help industry**).

LGAT gurus claim to know to help people become more creative, intelligent, healthy, and rich. They focus primarily on the role interpersonal communication plays in self-esteem, and in defining our relationships with others. LGAT gurus claim to know why their participants are not happy, or why they are not living fulfilled lives. They assume everyone are being hindered by the same things, and that one approach will suit all.

Some LGAT gurus use public television and books as their vehicles. Others give seminars in hotel ballrooms. Some use infomercials and peddle books and tapes to the masses to help them on the path to self-realization and success.

It is a typical American phenomenon, which we see copied all over the world. It is penetrating everything, even on the highest political levels. We all know the concept of spin doctors. The famous coaches within the area travel around in the world as superstars, and their “shows” - with extremely high fees on tickets - are being attended by the highest placed politicians and business leaders, who worship them as divine beings.

Though some coaches within the area advocate visualization, self-hypnosis, and other techniques for achieving self-actualization, most LGAT programs focus on communication skills and the effect of language on thought and behavior. As with other personal development phenomena, the whole thing is mixed with religion, spirituality and philosophy: a New Age phenomenon.

As Carroll says, then the importance of the messenger and the way the message is delivered can't be overestimated in LGAT. The messenger must be believable. He or she must appear sincere. He must exude confidence. She must know how to use her voice and body to get her message across. He must be a master of communication skills. She must have wit and humour. He must be a raconteur. She must not only talk the talk but appear to clearly walk the walk as well. And he must do it with a large group and utilize the energy and enthusiasm of the group members to infect each other. If she or he is successful, the participants will leave charged up and ready to take on the world. The revival will have revived them. They will be running on sixteen cylinders. They will be tuned up, turbocharged, and empowered to change their lives. They will have experienced a peak experience.

In 2007 Denmark had a visit from Tony Robbins, who must be said to be the world's leading business coach and LGAT guru. The man, who is said to be the father of the concept of coaching itself, and who has coached Bill Clinton, Nelson Mandela and many more. His books and dvds has reached out to more than 50 million people, and on a November evening the already mentioned researcher on science of religion Iben Krogdald met him in Aarhus Arena together with 1.500 well dressed people, who had paid up to \$600 in admission fee. She wrote about the experience in an article under the title *The Discreet Return of the Superhuman*

On the tickets was written: ‘Life on the top - create your own fantastic life.’

Krogdald writes in the article: “Anthony Robbins enters the scene wearing black jacket and cheek microphone. He asks how it can be, that some get the life they want - while others don't? Robbins answer is, that it neither is about good luck or background. Instead success or non-success is about thought-patterns, purely and

simply. Life is created from the inside; the individual has the power over his own destiny.

“Robbins' message is simple: Within each human being there exists a leader - an inner giant - and this leader has to be awakened. The one who feels strong and believes unconditionally in himself, can become successful and prosperous. The weak, on the contrary, achieves nothing.

“Robbins now engages the audience with some exercises: ‘You have to feel power, you have to feel yourself on the top, and you have to do it without restriction. The inner critic has to be removed, if you want to achieve anything.’

“And the audience follow Robbins' requests. They stretch their hands forward and are in flock answering his directive question. Soon the assembly has changed to a self-celebrating, uncritical mass.

“Celebrate yourselves!’ Robbins shouts. And people shout jubilant on command, while their exultation is shown on giant screens in the background.

“There only exist the limits you yourself set,’ Robbins preaches, ‘life can always get better!’ The hall is boiling. People shout with joy, they scream, dance, jump. The speakers play ‘Born to be Wild.’

“After 5 hours collective intoxication Robbins ends the show by telling an anecdote: As a twenty-four-year-old he was on a street asked for a coin by an old, male beggar. Robbins decided to teach the beggar a lesson and asked him, if it really only was a coin, he wanted?

“Robbins caricatures the beggar with a foolish facial expression and shows, how the beggar reached his hand forward and stupidly nods: ‘Yes, just a coin.’

“Robbins now shows how he took a large bundle of bank notes up from his pocket and demonstratively turned over the pages of the bank notes, till he found a coin between them. The old man glared at the many money, took his coin and slunked silently off.

“Robbins asks the assembly: ‘What was the difference between the old beggar and me?’ And he answers: ‘The difference is that **I won't be contented!**’ He shouts his final point out to the jubilant audience: ‘All of us here: **We demand more!**’

“The jubilation will no end take; there is shouting, jumping, jubilation, applauding.

“The music is turned up, and Robbins runs around among audience and gives high-fives, before he leaves the hall.

Responsibility for own destiny? Krogsdal asks.

It is the second time during a year, Tony Robbins visits Denmark and attracts thousands of coaches, publicity departments, self-employed, business leaders, politicians and private persons.

Krogsdal writes that Robbins with his presentation of man as a self-determining being, and with his demand about constant progress, represents a pure and uncompromising neo-liberal growth-ideology. The individual is here accessed the total responsibility for his own destiny, all outside structures are set aside.

To judge from the ecstasy of the audience Robbins' message is falling in fertilized ground. The highly individualistic anecdote about man as his own life's sovereign creator apparently doesn't separate much from the audience's conceptions about, that we as individual persons can and need to lead ourselves towards a never-ending progress.

Robbins' anecdote is perhaps American, Krogsdal continues, but it exists in a Danish version, which clearly shows itself in the whole of the self-improvement tendency, which increasingly takes possession of the Danish education- and working life itself. Self-improvement is today understood by most employees as something you quite naturally ought to occupy yourself with: You have to strive after achieving the good life - and the good the life is the life which *feels* good.

The meaning of life is emotionalized - and is reduced only to be about the individual person's happiness. The eye is directed inwards; my life is my own project, and I actualize myself by working with my own development.

It is Krogsdal's claim, that the working life in these years connects so close to the self-improvement paradigm, that work today, for many people, has become synonymous with self-improvement. And self-improvement is increasingly seen as the meaning of life itself. You are therefore all the time focused on your own development, and the goal for the constant self-improvement project is, that the individual actualizes himself. The good life is therefore the life, where the individual has actualized his or hers own dreams.

With the spread of this self-improvement ideology within, especially the past 10-15 years, the interest for the common, and for the community, has slipped more and more in the background. Instead of the historical conscious and social oriented citizen, steps forward now the self-conscious - but historical unconscious - human being.

Krogstad writes: That is precisely the human being, who raises her hands towards Anthony Robbins in entire ecstasy over the optimistic anecdote about the individual person's path towards personal happiness. It is precisely the human being, who this evening in the arena doesn't recognize his or hers own roots in a social context. Here the right to wealth and happiness is taken for granted - while the connection to, and the debt to the community, are set aside.

Therewith the self-conscious human being represents a naive win-win ideology, which pictures life as a cornucopia of happiness, everybody can and ought to demand.

Perhaps the 1.500 people, which are celebrating themselves in the arena, therefore also can be seen as children of a welfare- and affluent society, which in a paradoxical way is in progress of undermining itself, by - direct against its own intention - producing a mentality, which doesn't recognize the individual person's debt to the collective, but on the contrary supports the individual person's right to demand more of everything to oneself.

The altogether uncritical reception of Anthony Robbins in Denmark, Krogstad writes, can be seen as a frightening consequence of the self-improvement trend: When it only is about one's own happiness, you are evidently ready to give yourself totally away to the control of the feelings and therefore you disconnect from both reason and common decency.

Robbins' invitation to the assembly this Saturday evening in the arena is tremendous easy: Energize yourself and get a fantastic life - already now tonight!

At first it seems harmless. Why not celebrate yourself unrestrained, when you yourself (or your company) have paid for it? It is after all only about yourself. About that you in a few hours can become stronger and more happy. But the conception about, that this only is about me, and that my life only is my own project, expresses this saturday evening's alarming collective repression: that the one who praises the right of the strong and doesn't tolerate own weakness neither tolerate others' weakness.

And it is precisely this repression, Krogstad writes, which makes the evening's mass intoxication so dangerous: that the individual not at all understands, what project he or she is participating in.

It is in itself frightening, she says, that 1500 Danes can worship the pampered conception, that you can get everything you demand by using an inner feeling of power. And that the misfortune of the beggar therefore only is connected with his own choices.

But the really frightening this evening is, Krogstad continues, that you precisely in a apparently harmless demander-ideology's name quite obvious, and to great amusement, caricature and taunt the weak human being, the depressed, the poor, the one who not are a part of the party. The beggar has after all only himself to thank for his own misfortune: His crime is that he hasn't demanded enough, and therefore he is presented by Robbins as a pure idiot. He neither deserves sympathy nor help - but becomes instead taunted and degraded. And, mind you, to great amusement for the assembly.

Krogstad ends her article with following words: It is a matter of a thought-provoking brutalization, which doesn't ought to remain unchallenged. There is every reason to talk against the individualistic self-improvement ideology, which Anthony Robbins represents. Because where the individual person's happiness is presented as the only goal, the eye for the community and for the fellow human being disappears together with the historical consciousness. And thereby also the memory about, how superhumans' contempt for weakness historical seen has developed into different totalitarian regimes (about how ego-structures develop into super Egos, political leaders and popular seducers such as Hitler and Stalin, read my article **The Philosophy of Karen Blixen**).

Perhaps it is also therefore, that Tony Robbins can be allowed to stand on a scene in Denmark in 2007 and make fun of an old beggar, while 1.500 strong people uncritical stretch their arms towards him, screaming in total ecstasy. Here is manifested, in frightening sense, the right of the strong - also to be blind (also see my article **A critique of the Indian Oneness movement and its use of Western success coaching**. Here you can read about Tony Robbins' involvement in this cult (and control over it), and where he supposedly has reached the position as an "Oneness Blessing giver"; that is: some kind of divine being, who can bless other beings with his divine energy).

When reading Krogstad's report I remember another story about a beggar. This other story was told by the Jewish mystic and philosopher Martin Buber. It goes like this:

“When I was a child I read an old Jewish legend, which I didn’t understand. The legend wasn’t telling anything else than this: ‘Outside the gates of Rome is sitting a leprous beggar waiting. It is the Messiah.’ I met an old man and asked him: ‘What is he waiting for?’ And the old man answered something, which I at that time didn’t understand, and first much later learned to understand. He said: ‘He is waiting for you!’.”

When Martin Buber in 1910 told the story of the beggar, the point already contained that, which a decade later should be the main point of his principle work, the wonderful poetic little book: *I and Thou*. And this point is: the *Thou*. The Messiah is only Messiah because of, and for “you”. Life is a meeting with the *Thou* as the third beyond the *I* and the *It*. And not even the story itself – about the beggar – stands alone. It can only be understood through the old man’s interpretation, through the dialogical principle.

The point of Tone Robbins’ beggar story is the direct opposite, and it shows what I have been pointing out many times: New Age and the self-help industry are preaching a “spirituality” which message is the direct opposite of what all the different spiritual traditions are saying. Therefore I have called this aspect of The Matrix Conspiracy *The 666 Conspiracy* (read my article **The Matrix Conspiracy**).

There are examples of people having a psychosis after LGAT seminars. Two decades ago cathartic theories of screaming, pounding, fighting, sitting on the hot seat, and group confrontation were put into place in a number of therapy centers (see my article **Cathartic psychotherapies**). The popular therapies emerged out of Esalen and other “human potential” centers, growing out of groups like the Living Theater and the Theater of All Possibilities and evolving into myriad innovations like Bio-Energetics, Gestalt Therapy, and Psychosynthesis. Model confrontational programs, such as Synanon and its clones, were being praised left and right.

Another variant of the confrontation therapies appeared in the commercially sold large group awareness training programs such as Mind Dynamics, Direct Centering (aka Bayard Hora Associates, aka The Course, aka Naexus), Arica Institute, Insight Seminars, and Lifespring. These programs were sold to hundreds of thousands of customers over two decades, and some still exist in old, revised, and new forms. Marketed to individuals, organizations, and business and industry as experiential education, they typically use powerful psychological and social influence techniques, not always bringing about the advertised claims of success and profit to the buyer, and sometimes bringing psychological distress to the clients.

Varieties of these confrontation therapies and self-awareness programs are still with us two and three decades later; in fact, they're going strong as we see.

People are going bankrupt one after the other after having been involved in these groups. Criticism is often brutally crushed. Many LGAT gurus are so rich, that they can sue almost anyone. And that is precisely what they do. It is a scare tactic. Which company wants to be sued for running a critical story? These days none. Because the whole thing is also about eliminating critical thinking. Are you critical? Then you really are a nasty person/company. And there are examples on, that LGAT gurus have crushed newspapers' criticism, because they didn't want the hassle of dealing with the lawyers of these gurus. People, who were about to write critical about LGAT in books, have been stopped. The exact same tactic as Scientology, and it works; especially because it is a way of violating the freedom of speech, which has been governmentally accepted as legal.

So those running programs within LGAT must excel in persuasion skills. The trainers (coaches) are motivators. They must use their powerful communication skills to persuade the trainees to believe, that they only have experienced a small taste of the wonderful pleasure and fulfillment that await's those who sign up for advanced training. In short: the trainers are not just teachers, they are sellers. Their main job is to motivate participants to buy more services, i.e., sign up for new courses.

The whole thing typical goes off as follows: you are being invited to attend a free course in for instance NLP. This course is about persuading you to buy an "actual" course in NLP. If you then go on and buy this course, then this course is about persuading you to buy a more advanced (more expensive) course and so on it continues. You are still not becoming that Einstein you would like to be. The only thing you might have learned, is how you yourself can become a coach; that is: a seller of courses (if you not have gone bankrupted). And if you complain, criticize, well then you must have psychological problems to deal with, and that also requires a course you must buy.

The fact that trainers are unlikely to do any follow-up on their trainees, except to try to persuade them to take more courses, indicates that their main interest is not in helping people lead more fulfilling lives (they can't, because the theories are wrong from the start – just look at the existence-philosophical shipwreck of NLP – and again, read my article **Cathartic psychotherapies**). No, the trainers have a sales job to do. They are paid commissions for the number of people they recruit and train, not for the number of people they truly help. It is not their interest/ability to do follow-up studies of their trainees. It is in their interest to do follow-up recruiting calls. Often this is done as hard pressure direct contact with participants, including phone-calls that border to harassment, according to some participants.

Some critics even think that recruitment is the main goal of the program. So there is a hard sell to sign up for future participants. Leaders encourage people to bring friends and family to a free session to celebrate their newfound love of life and invite them to enroll in the next available weekend, and hereafter pay the fee.

Personal development programs such as LGAT and NLP (and even cults like scientology) can point to many “successes.” They can demonstrate that their programs “work”. They can bring forth to testify on their behalf hundreds, if not thousands, of satisfied customers, among of them famous celebrities. But it is important to know, that testimonials do not validate a self-help program. Scientifically seen this is pure nonsense, and deeply manipulative. All talk about that testimonials are a proof, is a sign of pseudoscience. Furthermore, the sense of improvement, for instance peak experiences, might not be matched by improved behavior. Just because they feel they have benefited doesn't mean they have. Often they just have become a nuisance for their non-initiated surroundings (we have already looked at the problem about the question *To whom is it positive?*).

So, when looking at testimonials one must always consider the power of a long line of thought distortions such as, for example, *Subjective validation*, *Selective thinking*, *Confirmation bias*, *Motivated reasoning*, *Classical conditioning and placebo effects*, and *Proof by ignorance*

The problem with LGAT, NLP, and other similar programs - and their way of distorting philosophy - can be seen by comparing them with the relation between the Sophists and Socrates. Socrates was a true philosopher, he was seeking wisdom, an absolute truth that transcends us, and his way to reach this truth was through the Socratic dialogue. But this is certainly not what is meant with great communication skills within LGAT and NLP. No, LGAT and NLP must support the Sophists.

The Sophists were subjectivists and relativists. They didn't believe in any absolute truth that transcends us, but in, that there are many truths, which each of us create through our senses and language. And because there is no objective truth-criterion to decide truth, each truth must be equally true; but not equally good, because some truths fascinate us more than others. And here we precisely have the slogan of the management theories: “It is not facts, but the best story, which wins!”

The Sophists were teachers of rhetoric, who against a fee, taught people how to persuade other people about their “truths”. Rhetoric is precisely the art of persuasion. Rather than giving reasons and presenting arguments to support conclusions, as Socrates did, then those who use rhetoric are employing a battery of techniques, such as emphatic assertion, persuader words and emotive language, to convince the

listener, or reader, that what they say or imply is true. The Sophists taught their pupils how to win arguments by any means available; they were supposedly more interested in teaching ways of getting on in the world than ways of finding the truth, as Socrates. Therefore any charlatan is welcome.

Epilogue

On a more cheerful note, Bandler has sued Grinder for millions of dollars. As Carroll says with a smile:

“Apparently, the two great communicators and paradigm innovators couldn’t follow their own advice or perhaps they are modeling their behaviour after so many other great Americans who have found that the most lucrative way to communicate is by suing someone with deep pockets. NLP is big on metaphors and I doubt whether this nasty lawsuit is the kind of metaphor they want to be remembered by. Is Bandler’s action of putting a trademark on half a dozen expressions a sign of a man who is simply protecting the integrity of NLP or is it a sign of a greedy megalomaniac?”

All articles and books referred to are available in free PDF Versions. Links can be found on my blog: www.MortenTolboll.blogspot.com

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