

# Self-Help Philosophy

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*The Thinker's Way: Eight Steps to a Richer Life*

John Chaffee, Ph.D.

Boston: Little Brown, and Company, 1998

409 pages, \$25 (USA)

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*reviewed by Eric Manchester*

In reading *The Thinker's Way*, I found myself both impressed and frustrated. On the one hand, I was pleased to find an author who is also a philosopher advocating and demonstrating a viewpoint I've always wanted to believe, which is that philosophy, when done properly, provides us with the ideal skills for engaging in self-understanding, self-evaluation, and self-improvement. To one who has devoted his or her life to intellectual inquiry, there is little more discouraging than seeing how often people with impressive intellectual acumen fail completely to apply their skills of scrutiny to the activity of self-reflection. In contrast to this, Chaffee at times writes in the spirit of the Socratic quest for self-knowledge, and seems to promote the essentially Aristotelian ideal of discovering for oneself the elements of the good life while providing one with some of the mental tools for developing the habits needed to realize such a life.

On the other hand, a careful reading leaves one frustrated in two ways: 1) stylistically, in that the format of the book is unnecessarily tedious and arguably redundant in places, and 2) ideologically, in that Chaffee seems to borrow «nuggets» from various psychological and philosophical sources whose compatibility is in question.

To be fair, in respect to the second concern, the author goes further than many self-help authors in identifying the intellectual sources of his inspiration (in particular, Jean-Paul Sartre), and thus the conceptual tensions which arise in his models for self-improvement are not as hodge-podge as what one often finds in similar work. Even so, while Chaffee's work avoids this degree of incoherence, a discerning reader may be troubled from time to time with the way in which he at least on the surface seems to sympathize with the goal of certain Scriptural and traditional moral frameworks while elsewhere overtly modelling his work from fundamentally contrary contemporary approaches. In any case, in evaluating this work, I will first assess the format of the book, followed by an analysis of the conceptual foundations (and difficulties) of Chaffee's ideas.

*The Thinker's Way* is directed primarily toward the non-academic reader, though the work refers amply to intellectual sources (primarily of an existentialist bent). The manner and effectiveness with

which these sources are utilized will be addressed later. On the surface, some of the concepts are clothed in the jargon one typically finds in self-help books: readers are encouraged to learn to «live creatively,» «choose freely,» «learn how to solve problems effectively,» and so on. Methodologically, Chaffee adopts the common formula of establishing a particular approach («critical thinking») and then applying it universally to address any number of tasks and problems. Chaffee introduces the reader to basic techniques for identifying one's core beliefs and the assumptions and unreflective biases affecting these beliefs. In addition, he provides basic introductory logic instruction for forming valid and sound arguments and recognizing the relation of premises to particular conclusions in respect to one's views on any number of topics. Finally, he includes a number of «thinking activities» where one is asked to reflect on any number of issues or personal characteristics, while also offering a number of self-applied questions where one is asked to grade oneself on a scale of 1-5 on similar subjects. *The Thinker's Way*, simply put, is part self-help book, part primer in critical thinking and certain aspects of basic logic, and part workbook complete with various exercises and self-assessment tests. Along the way, the reader undergoes evaluation of his or her religious, political, and moral convictions, while also being led to examine his or her work habits, life attitudes, communication styles, relationship tendencies, and critical thinking abilities with the help of Chaffee's prose and various self-assessment exercises.

The problem with providing such an exhaustive application to problem solving, self-evaluation, and self-improvement, however, is that it leaves most any reader, well, exhausted. Indeed, the book's format reminds one of a stereotypically lengthy foreign film: while one can see the relevance to each part to the work as a whole, and thus appreciate the unwillingness to eliminate any part of the work, anyone who makes it to the end of the piece nevertheless cannot escape the feeling that somehow the production was tortuously tedious so as to alienate much of its potential audience. Though one is left with the impression that the author primarily envisions his work to be a self-help manual, its layout is not conducive to the sort of airplane-trip and hotel-room reading to which such an audience is typically limited.

In the above respect, the work is almost more like a textbook, with accompanying workbook, for community college-level course in values clarification, or in organizing a career/life plan. Consequently, Chaffee would have stylistically been better off either dividing his labors into a number of smaller works (perhaps in a series), or finding some way to shorten and summarize the text. In fact, the various applications of the critical thinking method (the explanation of which could well constitute a worthwhile complete work unto itself) actually would seem to be best handled through a series of seminars, or audio tapes, to allow the reader time to digest the basic method and then reflect on its application to virtually any or all areas of life. Of course it is possible to read books in a similar piecemeal fashion, and it seems inevitable that virtually any reader will succumb to the temptation (as even I did at first) to haphazardly skip through Chaffee's smorgasbord of instructions for self-reflection and fail to consume the majority of what the author has to offer.

Short of breaking the book into several smaller presentations, many discussions could be conflated and treated within a single section, thereby making the treatment of these topics much more memorable. However, just as one should not level the rather general criticism that a movie was «too long» without going through and showing what could have been removed without hindering the quality of

the movie, one in fairness should pinpoint how Chaffee could have altered his work without undermining its quality. This seems to be best done by looking at each chapter, or exercise, individually to see where room for alterations lies.

Chaffee breaks the book down into 8 «steps,» plus an introduction entitled «Transform Yourself Through Thinking» and a concluding section en-titled «Create a Life Philosophy.» In effect, then, the book has 10 chapters. The «step» titles, examined independently, all seem relevant enough: «Think Critically,» «Live Creatively,» «Choose Freely,» «Solve Problems Effectively,» «Communicate Effectively,» «Analyze Complex Issues,» «Develop Enlightened Values,» and «Think Through Relationships.» Unquestionably, there is tremendous value in assessing one's religious convictions, moral principles, political opinions, work habits, communication style, relationship tendencies, and life and career planning, but many of these concerns could be treated as aspects of the same issue without comprising a chapter unto themselves.

For instance, in Step 3 («Choose Freely») we are asked to consider how we impulsively react to various situations, and could, through reflection, gain more control over these reactions. The situations in question are being rejected for the request for a date, missing a deadline, and losing patience with children. However, in Step 4 («Solving Problems Effectively»), the reader is asked to undergo similar reflection regarding one's tendency to respond with sarcasm (undoubtedly much the same reaction that leads us to yell at children), one's tendency to procrastinate (much like missing a deadline), and compare alternatives with our original goals when these goals are not achieved (which involves much of the same advice which Chaffee offers for one who is rejected for a date: go out and meet other people, remind yourself this one person does not reflect your personal worth, and so on). The dating advice, missed deadline problem, and tendency to yell all could have easily been treated as part of the same discussion in the later step. Indeed, the issues of dating, yelling, and sarcasm could have been even further concentrated into the chapters dealing with improving communication (Step 5), and thinking through relationships (Step 8). Similarly, many of the thinking activities and self-assessment questions deal with subjects that are quite similar, and could have easily been offered as various examples of a single reflections.

While the breadth of its application is a hindrance to the readability, and thus general effectiveness of, the book (despite the general soundness of its method), the deeper concern with Chaffee's work relates to the ideological foundations of his approach to self-improvement. At times, Chaffee appears to be after the same goal as classical ethicists like Plato and Aristotle. This bent is evidenced, for instance, on page 313 where he declares

*Your values constitute the core of who you are. If you are to live a life of purpose and meaning, rich in quality and satisfying in fulfillment, it is essential that you develop a vital and enlightened code of ethics to guide you. Your moral «health» is at least as important as your intellectual and physical health, and certainly more essential than many of the activities in which you now regularly engage. Becoming a truly moral individual should be your paramount goal in life, a compelling insight expressed by the following biblical question still relevant today: «For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?»*

Certainly, the high praise for morality and saving one's soul caters to traditional ethical concerns. At the same time, however, Chaffee subverts this goal by openly embracing Sartrean existentialism (110) and its rejection of preconceived notions of morality and goodness. In Step 3 («Choosing Freely») where Chaffee asserts that beliefs in human nature are «attempts to explain human behavior in terms of factors that precede the action: a universal human nature» which «assume the `essence' of a person,» which in turn have «the effect of removing personal responsibility from the individual for his actions» and which «limit future possibilities» (115). In fact, Chaffee goes on to cite Sartre's own insistence upon the precedence of «existence» and freedom to «essence» in 117. Similar Sartreanisms emerge in his references in step 3 and to the «authentic,» and later to the «true» and «false» 'self' (356). Chaffee takes this view to a more extreme (and undoubtedly controversial) conclusion in a section on depression, where he does not address potential physical causes of the problem, but notes only presumed attitudinal factors. In fact, Chaffee suggests that most mental difficulties are attributable largely to our free adoption (and habitually entrenched) of a life attitude of pessimism or optimism (140-143). While I personally agree with much of Chaffee's assessment, he does the reader an injustice by neglecting to more openly acknowledge other equally plausible explanations for certain mental health problems.

Chaffee's acceptance of existentialist models over classical ones is further evidenced in chapter 3, where he pays homage to Carl Rogers' conception of a «Good Life.» Quoting Rogers, he proclaims that the «Good Life» is «not a fixed state like virtue [ i.e. the classic view], contentment, nirvana, or happiness» and «not a condition like being adjusted, fulfilled, actualized» but rather is «the psychological freedom to move in any direction» and «creating yourself through genuinely free choices» (147). One could hardly find a more stark contrast to traditional Aristotelian conceptions, where «happiness,» «virtue,» actualization (according to natural teleology) and the like are the only ways of conceptualizing human responsibility. This position, however, is somewhat complicated by Aristotelian-sounding remarks he makes elsewhere about the importance of rationality to developing a moral perspective, as will be discussed later.

Even more, Chaffee sweeps much of classical Christian psychology under the rug when he places the emphasis for religious and spiritual transformation on «self-choice» apart from any acknowledgement of Christian emphasis on grace (119). Admittedly, his claim that free choice is essential even to religious devotion is compatible with most non-Calvinist Christian thought. Nevertheless, by focusing on the effort of the individual, he overlooks the possible insights of powerful alternative approaches to self-improvement; mainly, the conformity, albeit freely chosen, to something that transcends us, whether it be the will of God (as one finds, for example, in Augustine's moral psychology) or the teleology of Aristotelian humanism. Indeed, Chaffee's metaphysical denial of an enduring self, along with his numerous references to «enlightenment,» lead one to suspect that his 8 steps are at least vaguely reminiscent of the Eightfold Path of Buddhism, so as to subtly rule out theocentric models of self-discovery while politely refraining from an explicit rejection of such approaches.

On the surface, the above criticism may seem a bit unfounded in that, after all, Chaffee has promoted a book on self-understanding and self-improvement. He has fairly openly acknowledged his existentialist presuppositions. And he gives a reverent nod to Christian teachings through a sprinkling

of biblical references in support of his views (also a common practice in self-help books). The main problem, however, is that he also insists upon the importance of establishing a personal morality, without confronting the existentialist consequence that where there is no objective human nature, and where freedom and responsibility for self-creation is absolute, there is also no objective morality. Chaffee may be personally aware of this (and seems to hint at it when he states that compassion and working for the common good are «considered» by most societies to be «right» while certain anti-social activities are generally «considered» to be «wrong» (119). But there is no reference here to becoming an objectively better person, or to viewing self «improvement» according to any objective standard of personal moral development, which would require some kind of objective conception of human potential and actualization.

In addition, Chaffee creates difficulties for his own existentialist approach in defending the importance of having «reasons» for one's beliefs, and considering the stage of critical thinking to be an advanced stage to that of what he calls the «anything goes» stage where people accept a pseudo-profound hasty relativism. However, ultimately his denial of objective nature leaves no way out of the very relativism he appears to denounce as an immature level of self-development.

Also, in his reference to the Rogerian Good Life, shortly after the passages where he lays out his Sartrean assumptions, Chaffee unwittingly appeals to a decidedly un-Sartrean, somewhat psychoanalytic view that over time, we are able to guide our choices to «best create the self we want to be» by following our «increasingly trustworthy» «intuitions,» which «reflect our deepest values» and «authentic self» (147). This is confusing, as the notion of «reflection» (elsewhere he refers to «discovering» one's true self) connotes something that exists beyond our awareness, and is later realized, contrary to Sartre's notion that the self is nothing more than what we consciously choose it to be at every moment.

Likewise, as noted previously, his treatment of the Good Life leaves out any transcendent conception of the good, but misleadingly refers to some sort of previously unknown «desires» as «guides» to further self-creation. Given his earlier scheme, this in effect instructs one to seek guidance from something (the deep desires of a self) which is ultimately fundamentally unguided, and which, in fact, has already been portrayed as lacking a stable existence. Simply put, on his view, where did these «guiding» desires come from? Were they consciously chosen, and if so, in what sense do they need to be discovered and utilized (as we presumably would already be conscious of them). If they are not conscious, then Chaffee contradicts his earlier conception of a Sartrean «self» that is characterized by its conscious choices and hence, freedom. In this passage, Chaffee therefore seems to rely on a psychoanalytic conception of a «true» unconscious self which somehow can be unveiled as to afford us genuine self-understanding and freedom over our lives.

Finally, it is not clear how «having reasons» for the life-direction one chooses (which Chaffee stresses throughout) is compatible with the Sartrean ideal where one's reason for choosing a particular life orientation can ultimately be nothing more than «this is my life-direction because this is what I will it to be.» «Reasons» imply some sort of objective standard of preferability (e.g. in Chaffee's emphasis on the importance of «care» and «justice» in forming an ethical perspective), which fits better an Enlightenment, and even Aristotelian and classical, conception of personal development.

In closing, despite my criticisms, much of Chaffee's advice is helpful and sound. Undoubtedly, identifying destructive habits and forming new ones is essential to happiness, and further analyses, such as the manner in which past experiences affect our perception of current situations, are also essential to self-improvement. I also find his emphasis on the adoption of a basic life attitude (such as in his distinction between pessimism and optimism) to be largely accurate in assessing human problems and avenues for improvement. And despite some of the tensions between its claims to existencialisms and its reliance upon aspects of classical moral theory and psychoanalysis, Chaffee's work still acknowledges its conceptual underpinnings far more clearly and openly than, many books in the self-help genre. In fact, I incorporated several of his insights and explanations into my own teaching of ethics (such as the statement cited earlier from page 313, and his promotion of critical thinking over hasty relativism). Still, with its limitations due to a cumbersome format, and its noteworthy, though not disastrous, conceptual difficulties, Chaffee's book can be given no more than a reserved recommendation. Indeed, it may be most effective when it is handled side by side in contrast to classical approaches to moral development and self-actualization.

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