Book Review

Self-Absorption in the Digital Era: A Review of "Self-Improvement: Technologies of the Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" by Mark Coeckelbergh

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Mark Coeckelbergh is a Belgian philosopher who specializes in the philosophy of technology. His work primarily explores the intersection of technology and society, specifically the philosophical implications of emerging technologies such as AI and robotics. He has written on whether machines can be moral agents and how ethical frameworks should be applied to autonomous machines. He has a broad philosophical perspective drawing on classical sources, Eastern philosophy, Marxism, Foucault, phenomenology, and the postmodernists. In this short text, he brings his remarkable insights and erudition to bear on our attempts at self-improvement in the age of AI.

Coeckelbergh has a broad definition of self-improvement, including any way people have tried to change themselves, from becoming saints to seeking online validation. He sees the impulse to self-improvement as cross-cultural and transhistorical, shaped but not created by culture, economics, and technology. In clear prose, he gives us a mile-high review of ideas about self-improvement from the Greeks and Romans, through Christian and Buddhist perfectionism and Confucian virtues, to the radical individualism of image curation on social media. His thesis is that capitalism, individualism, and AI have turbocharged our self-centeredness. The problem isn't the desire for self-improvement but the narcissistic excesses it can lead to.

Coeckelbergh observes that capitalism shifts responsibility for well-being to the individual, convinces us of our inadequacies, and sells us products to fix our flaws. Surveillance capitalism then makes additional profits by selling increasingly sophisticated models of who we are to other capitalists. Liberal individualism turns us from defining ourselves in terms of relationships and social roles towards the public presentation of our idealized self-brand. In Coeckelbergh's account, technology is not just a tool of human agency but also shapes the self in complex ways. Artificial intelligence tracks us and can tell us things about ourselves that we would not otherwise know.

Tying all these things to self-improvement seems a little reductive since many of the things techno-capitalism wants us to buy, food and entertainment for instance, are as likely to be marketed to our weaknesses as to our aspirations. A beauty cream is both a concession to vanity and an attempt at self-improvement; and may not belong in the same category as meditation and exercise.

Coeckelbergh's discussion of self-improvement through transhumanism embraces the utility and inevitability of human enhancement technologies. He describes some proposals for enhancing human morality with drugs or AI moral advisors. Psychonauts

will have new tools to explore consciousness, like virtual reality and brain-machine interfaces. Nonetheless, he concludes that shortcuts to enlightenment will not provide the same benefits that we would gain from the older, more arduous spiritual methods.

The book is especially intriguing when it proposes the need for political engagement, experiments with intentional communities, and new technologies to support self-improvement through social relationships. Coeckelbergh argues that collective action for social change makes us better people and that a free and equal society will make it easier for everyone to improve themselves. He says, "we need a philosophy of the self that is linked to social change" and a new globalist identity beyond nationalism. He proposes intentional communities as another way to achieve self-improvement collectively. Perhaps the current loneliness crisis will inspire a new wave of communes, cooperatives, and radical collectives. But his proposal that we should tweak apps to be more enlightening and prosocial seems much more likely. It reminded me of the app in the television show Mrs. Davis which was invented to encourage self-improvement by rewarding users for personal and prosocial "quests." It became so popular it took over the world.

If there is a weakness in this text it is that it offers little practical advice. Coeckelbergh encourages readers to critical reflection and ethical engagement, to actively shape themselves and the future while avoiding narcissism. We need to make a better society in which self-improvement becomes easier. But we also need to avoid utopian and totalitarian projects that replace self-engineering with social engineering. We should engage with wisdom traditions but avoid spiritual materialism. We don't have to give up technology, but we should avoid being overwhelmed by it, while acknowledging that we partly create ourselves through technological practices. The conclusions work better as moral meditations than as a self-help guide, a thoughtful historical and philosophical framework for thinking about self-improvement, rather than a manual on the "Ten steps to happiness."

In conclusion, "Self-Improvement: Technologies of the Soul in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" is a short, readable, and thought-provoking book and an excellent introduction to Coeckelbergh's interdisciplinary approach, meticulous research, and thoughtfully crafted arguments.