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Undoing Common Ground: Argumentation in Self-Help Books

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ABSTRACT: Doxa have been central in theories of rhetorical persuasiveness since ancient times. Modern self-help books systematically undermine doxa in order to persuade readers to alter their behavior and their view of themselves. This paper investigates the method by which two best-selling self-help authors undo doxa. It finds that they use one type of doxa, generalized patterns of reasoning (topoi koinoi) to subvert another type of doxa, specific cultural or personal beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Common ground, cultural belief, doxa, explanatory logic, opinion, self-help rhetoric, topoi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 30 years, 'Self-Help' has become one of the most popular non-fiction book genres in the United States. For this investigation I narrowed the type of self-help books to those concerned with general well-being, fulfillment, or happiness, rather than those aiming at specific goals, such as weight loss or financial security. Specifically, this paper presents an analysis of two best-sellers, M. Scott Peck's *A Road Less Traveled* (1978) (RLT), which is often credited as one of the first of the genre, and Philip McGraw's *Self-Matters* (2001) (SM), one of the more recent books by a celebrity self-help guru. Although over twenty years separated these two texts, they share the goal of helping readers improve general well-being and happiness, and each have sold millions of copies and spawned significant media attention. We can view them as markers in the development of this genre whose popularity has grown exponentially.

These self-help texts aim at changing readers' beliefs about themselves and subsequently their behavior. Of course we could investigate how their methods might be drawn from clinical psychology. But from a rhetorical perspective, we see the authors faced with a daunting persuasive task. How does one change peoples' beliefs about themselves, which are often based on and reinforced by their personal experiences? What rhetorical strategies do self-help authors employ to persuade people to think differently about themselves?

Many of Peck and McGraw's rhetorical techniques such as tone, framing, and ethos are quite different. However, at the core, their arguments use the same strategy: the undoing of doxa. Both authors believe their readers' to be unhappy and unfulfilled because they are living by misguided principles, such as commonly held beliefs about relationships, success, class, etc. The authors take these opinions and try to uproot them from readers' belief systems. This paper focuses on *how* doxa is undermined.

2. DOXA

In rhetorical studies, doxa, understood as common opinion, traditionally has had a positive connotation as the necessary building blocks of an argument. However, it has also placed rhetoric in inferior position to dialectic since the reliance on doxa leads to contingent rather than scientific knowledge. Hence, Plato's derision of rhetoric and rhetoric's subsequent defensive pose throughout much of history. Hariman (1986) tried to remedy this situation by changing rhetoric's status through understanding doxa as a relation of regard, ranking, and concealment. He points out that some discourses are more highly valued socially, granted a certain status, whereas other kinds of discourse hold an inferior status and are marginalized. Thus, ranking is inherent in opinions shared by a community:

Ranking occurs through a process of selecting and deflecting, revealing and concealing, our attention to the nature of a thing. Our opinion of another requires concealing as well as revealing some of what we know, and we are known through our own acts of concealment as well as disclosure...Doxa is created by acts of concealment, and so a complete conceptualization of doxa must include the idea that regard is in part achieved by the concealments of rank. (p. 49)

For Hariman, if doxa is understood as created through ranking and concealment, then it is no longer the opposite of, and inferior to, episteme, but rather it reflects a certain stage in the development of meaning.

McKerrow (1989) uses Hariman's understanding of doxa to ground his critical rhetoric. He explicitly moves away from the idea of rhetoric as epistemic, making the end of rhetoric the demystification of discourses of power, investigating how such discourse becomes normalized and then reconceiving those power relations. He argues that by focusing on doxic knowledge, rather than truth or falsity, critical rhetoric "allows the focus to shift to how the symbols come to possess power—what they do in society as contrasted to what they are" (p. 104).

In the socio-critical perspective of francophone literary studies, doxa (or 'social discourse,' 'myth,' 'ideology,' 'received ideas,' etc.) has similarly been seen as that which needs to be revealed and disrupted. But critical rhetoric and the socio-critical perspective are faced with the same dilemma, what some have referred to as the "scandal of doxa" (Jasinski 2001, p. 186): in order to reveal and disrupt doxa one must employ doxa. Shared cultural beliefs and values, as well as accepted patterns of reasoning are necessary for effective communication and literary verisimilitude. Amossy (2002a, 2002b) takes up this theme in her work on doxa. Building on Perelman's new rhetoric in French discourse analysis, she returns to valuing doxa as a very condition for communication and textual effectiveness. Also, she goes back to Aristotle to remind us of different types of doxa: general *topoi* (*topoi koinoi*), referring to universal patterns of reasoning and specific *topoi*, the opinions held by a specific culture or society. She further points out how Perelman distinguishes these two types of doxa according to audience; when speaking to a particular audience the rhetor draws on specific *topoi* while general *topoi* are used for the universal audience. Through an analysis of both literary and nonliterary texts she illustrates how different types of doxa operate to create meaning for

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audiences. For Amossy, “The new rhetorician’s main task is not to denounce and condemn, but to describe and analyze” (2002b, p. 485).

3. SELF-HELP ARGUMENTATION

The very nature of the self-help book makes its goals somewhat broad, vague, and metaphysical: happiness, fulfillment, a stronger sense of self, or purpose in life. Typically, readers are a willing audience, those who buy the book, believing, or at least hoping, for some improvement in their lives. RLT and SM have a similar overall problem-solution argument structure. In their first chapters they introduce the problem, as they see it, and briefly describe the solution. The remaining chapters unpack the solution into separate parts or steps.

Despite the similar high-level structure, the rhetoric of RLT and SM are, on the surface, more different than similar. RLT frames its discussion in mental health terms; According to Peck, most people have some degree of mental illness and need therapy. Corresponding to this frame, Peck takes on the pedantic tone of expert bestowing knowledge and giving guidance to a client. In contrast, McGraw frames his discussion in terms of finding one’s authentic self. For him, readers are living inconsistently with their true selves, causing them to be unhappy. His tone is one of a coach, using informal language and deliberate distancing from clinical experts. Also, instead of bestowing knowledge, McGraw primarily guides readers through a series of activities, designed to help them reconnect with their true selves.

A more detailed look at the texts’ semantics can also reveal argument techniques. Fairclough’s (2003) work in critical discourse analysis points out that semantic relations between clauses can be correlated to genres and rhetorical goals. Possible semantic relations indicated by conjunctions are: causal, conditional, temporal, additive, elaborative, and contrast. Identifying certain patterns in semantic relations can help distinguish ‘explanatory logic’ from the ‘logic of appearances’ (p. 95). Explanatory logic is a developed “analysis of social change [and] might be an elaborate tracing of causal relations between other kinds of change” (p. 95), while the logic of appearances is marked by generalized description, with more addition and elaboration and a high degree of abstraction. Fairclough points out that the choice to use one logic versus the other can be quite deliberate and effective. For example, government policy texts often favor the logic of appearances, so that the description of the situation being discussed is presented as stable, given, not contingent, and thus the policy seems unalterable.

In contrast, the self-help texts reveal the use of explanatory logic. Figures 1 and 2 show an analysis of the semantic relations present in excerpts from each text’s introduction. Conjunctions are underlined and their corresponding semantic relation appears in the right column.

Figure 1: RLT, Semantic Relations pp. 16-17

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| <u>What</u> makes life difficult <u>is that</u> the process of confronting <u>and</u> solving problems is a painful one. | Causal (Reason) |
| Problems, <u>depending</u> upon their nature, evoke in us frustration <u>or</u> grief <u>or</u> sadness <u>or</u> loneliness <u>or</u> | Additive |
| | Conditional |
| | Additive |

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| | |
|---|--|
| guilt <u>or</u> regret <u>or</u> anger <u>or</u> fear <u>or</u> anxiety <u>or</u> anguish <u>or</u> despair. These are uncomfortable feelings, <u>often</u> very uncomfortable, <u>often</u> as painful as any kind of physical pain, <u>sometimes</u> equaling the very worst kind of physical pain. <u>Indeed</u> , it is <u>because</u> of the pain that events or conflicts engender in us that we call them problems. <u>And since</u> life poses and endless series of problems, life is always difficult <u>and</u> full of pain as well as joy. | Additive Additive Temporal Temporal |
| <u>Yet</u> it is in this whole process of meeting <u>and</u> solving problems that life has its meaning. Problems are the cutting edge <u>that</u> distinguishes between success <u>and</u> failure. Problems call forth our courage <u>and</u> our wisdom; indeed, they create our courage <u>and</u> our wisdom. It is only <u>because</u> of problems that we grow mentally <u>and</u> spiritually. <u>When</u> we desire to encourage the growth of the human spirit, we challenge <u>and</u> encourage human capacity to solve problems, <u>just</u> as in school we deliberately set problems for our children to solve. It is <u>through</u> the pain of confronting <u>and</u> resolving problems <u>that</u> we learn. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Those things that hurt, instruct." It is <u>for this reason</u> that wise people learn not to dread <u>but</u> actually to welcome problems <u>and</u> actually welcome the pain of problems. | Causal (Consequential) Causal (Consequential) Additive Contrast; additive Elaboration Additive Additive Additive; Causal (reason) Additive Temporal Additive |
| Most of us are not so wise. Fearing the pain involved, almost all of us, to a greater <u>or</u> lesser degree, attempt to avoid problems. We procrastinate, hoping that they will go away. We ignore them, forget them, pretend they do not exist. We even take drugs <u>to</u> assist us in ignoring them, <u>so that by</u> deadening ourselves to the pain we can forget the problems that cause the pain. We attempt to skirt around problems <u>rather than</u> meet them head on. We attempt to get out of them <u>rather than</u> suffer through them. | Causal (consequential); Causal (consequential) Contrast; Additive Additive Causal (purpose) Causal (consequential) Contrast Contrast |
| This tendency to avoid problems <u>and</u> the emotional suffering inherent in them is <u>the primary basis of</u> all human mental illness. <u>Since</u> most of us have this tendency to a greater or lesser degree, most of us are mentally ill to a greater <u>or</u> lesser degree, lacking complete mental health. | Additive Causal (consequential) Causal (consequential) |

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Figure 2: SM, Semantic Relations, pp. 7-8

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>I was doing things I didn't have my heart in <u>and</u> was not doing the things I did have a passion for. <u>One the one hand</u>, I occupied a comfort zone <u>where</u> my life felt "safe," <u>because</u> it was as steady <u>and</u> predictable as the ticking of a clock. 7</p> | <p>Additive Contrast Elaboration Causal (reason)</p> |
| <p>I knew there was something wrong with my life, <u>but</u> for those ten years, I avoided dealing with it <u>because</u> it just seemed easier to go along <u>than</u> to up set everyone. <u>Instead of</u> addressing the dull ache <u>that</u> I carried everywhere, <u>instead</u> of trying to root out what was bothering me, I chose to "keep on keeping on," Incredibly dumb, <u>but</u> it's the truth. 7</p> | <p>Contrast Causal (reason) Contrast Contrast Contrast Contrast</p> |
| <p><u>And in addition to</u> the presence of negatives <u>that</u> <u>came from</u> being and doing that <u>which</u> was foreign to my authentic self, there was the glaring absence of positives. I wasn't having any fun or excitement. I wasn't doing what was meaningful for me. I wasn't doing what I was good at and therefore was not pursuing my mission in life, my purpose for being here. I never finished a day and said, "Wow! Great job today, be proud!" I needed that feeling, a feeling I missed <u>when</u> I looked in the mirror. I needed to feel like I belonged <u>and</u> was called to a purpose, <u>but</u> I didn't <u>because</u> I wasn't. I was excited about nothing, zip, zero. It was not good.</p> | <p>Causal (reason) Implied contrast Temporal Additive Contrast; Causal (reason)</p> |
| <p>Ultimately, I was able to totally reengineer those parts of my life that were not "me," <u>and</u> build on those that felt right <u>because</u> they were right.</p> | <p>Additive Causal (reason)</p> |
| <p>I know the feeling <u>because</u> I've even had the revelation after doing trivial things like <u>when</u> I finally got eyeglasses; and <u>when</u> I finally built a fence <u>so that</u> I could quit chasing my dog.</p> | <p>Causal (reason) Temporal Temporal; Causal (reason)</p> |

In contrast to policy texts that emphasize the givenness of a situation, the self-help introductions show a frequency of causal relations, suggesting a preference for explanatory logic to highlight contingency. The explanatory logic continues throughout

the texts as the authors offer solutions and attack certain cultural myths, cliches, and commonplaces.

Peck's premise in RLT is that people run from problems and are undisciplined. In fact, the cause of most mental illness is a lack of discipline. The reader is encouraged to acquire discipline and the motivation to be disciplined comes from love. Thus, understanding and living according to real love is the crux of his solution. He defines 'real' love as "The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 81). But to support his definition of love, he must first undermine the popular notions of love with which he disagrees. He proceeds to take common beliefs about love (what it is, how it happens, how it is maintained, etc.) and undermines them.

One of these misconceptions is that the sensation of "falling in love" *is* love or a sign of love. To discredit this notion, Peck explains the process that brings about this sensation. His explanation begins with the concept of "ego boundaries." According to Peck, ego boundaries form the sense of distinction between I and thou required for identity. As infants, we have no ego boundaries but as we grow older, we recognize the physical and psychological distinctions between ourselves and others. But our ego boundaries, while necessary for our individual identities, are also isolating, and many feel lonely. This easing of this loneliness is the sensation of falling in love:

The essence of the phenomenon of falling in love is a sudden collapse of a section of an individual's ego boundaries, permitting one to merge his or her identity with that of another person. The sudden release of oneself from oneself, the explosive pouring out of oneself into the beloved, and the dramatic surcease of loneliness accompanying this collapse of ego boundaries is experienced by most of us as ecstatic. (p.87)

Peck goes on to describe this feeling as an act of regression, returning to a state similar to our oneness with our mothers during infancy. And slowly, just as infants develop a sense of identity, the ego boundaries of couples who have fallen in love exert themselves and suddenly the two are out of love.

By a detailed description of the phenomenon of falling in love, Peck is able to demonstrate that it does not correspond with the definition of love he set forth earlier: "it is not an act of the will... it is not an extension of one's limits or boundaries... it has little to do with purposively nurturing one's spiritual development" (p. 89). But more importantly, he undermines the belief that falling in love *is* love by taking the mystery out of the emotional experience. By showing the reader *how* the experience comes to be, its mystery and therefore power, disappears.

Peck identifies another misconception about love as people mistaking dependency for love. He defines dependency as "the inability to experience wholeness or to function adequately without the certainty that one is being actively care for by another" (p. 98). All of us feel dependent from time to time, wanting or needing the care of others. But for some, the feeling of dependency is unrelenting. For these people, their relationships define them and their need for the other is interpreted as love. Peck explains,

dependency may appear to be love because it is a force that causes people to fiercely attach themselves to one another. But in actuality it is not love; it is a form of antilove. It has its genesis in a parental failure to love and it perpetuates the failure. (p. 105)

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Again, in this case he identifies and deconstructs the common belief that the feeling of dependency is love, by showing *how* dependency develops and why it may be mistaken for love, and then contrasting it with his definition of love.

In SM, McGraw also aims at uprooting what he considers to be harmful beliefs. However, instead of targeting only cultural beliefs, McGraw aims at personal beliefs about oneself and the world, derived from one's experiences and external influences. For example, one may believe oneself to be fat, or that others can't be trusted. Personally held beliefs are not typically considered to be doxa whose defining feature is commonality. But, if we accept self-deliberation as a form of argument (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971; Neinkamp, 2001), in which one dialogues with oneself, then we may conceive of doxa shared between the self as rhetor and the self as audience.

McGraw's argument is based on the idea of a split self. He argues that each of us has an authentic self which is altered as we go through life; altered in good and bad ways, by our experiences, relationships, and choices. Too many negative influences lead to a 'fictional self,' very different from the authentic self and this incongruity causes unhappiness. McGraw's book lays out a process by which readers can reclaim their authentic selves, an 'audit' that helps readers identify the sources of the negative beliefs about oneself and replace them with positive ones.

McGraw explicitly states that his goal is to undo assumptions:

...you may have powerful beliefs about yourself that you can't challenge, because you're not even aware that they exist. It means there are an awful lot of things influencing you, and how you present yourself to the world that you don't even know about. (p. 69)

A typical exercise in the audit asks the reader to take an inventory of 'defining moments,' those memorable events that have affected one's view of the world or oneself; write a paragraph on each moment's effect on one's self-concept, and write another paragraph on the residual effect (how and why the defining moment clarified or distorted the authentic self). McGraw then asks readers to review the effect of the defining moment, decide whether or not they believe the original interpretations of the moments were accurate or inaccurate and decide whether they should keep or reject those interpretations and why.

Another part of the audit requires readers to look at their 'Labels' and 'Life scripts.' Labels are those descriptors given to us by others, such as a teacher stating, "You're a B student," to a young student and the student accepts and acts according to that label for years. According to McGraw, such labels, if taken to heart, can influence one's identity and behavior. Life scripts are continually running tapes in one's head that are "long-held, over-learned, lightening fast, automatic thoughts that 1. totally ignore current input; and 2. program you for a specific outcome, oftentimes without your even being aware of it" (p. 226). Such tapes could be general beliefs such as "Men can't be trusted," or "My family is dysfunctional so I'll never be happy." The key to dealing with labels and life scripts is "to figure out *how they've come together* to define who you have become and whether or not each one contributes to or detracts from your being who you authentically are" (p. 247). After identifying those scripts he asks the reader to experience the emotions associated with the scripts and to literally write out new, more positive life scripts.

As Peck does, McGraw reveals the process by which certain doxa come to be. Further, he explicitly tells the readers that by knowing the process behind doxa

development, they will have some control over those beliefs. Instead of being subject to those beliefs, they can choose whether or not to accept them.

4. CONCLUSION

Implicitly in Peck and more explicitly in McGraw, is the notion that the power of doxa can be undone by identifying it and seeing how it has come to be, by explaining the process by which it was formed. Thus they are using an explanatory logic that emphasizes contingency and undermines givenness. In Hariman's terms, seeing the origin and development of doxa reveals it as ranked, rather than natural or true. Thus, these self-help texts use explanatory logic to unmask concealed cultural and personal doxa and thereby take away their status.

But why does understanding the process by which a belief comes to be undermine its authority? Explanatory logic seems to be a doxic element itself, perhaps more a general *topoi*, reflecting a pattern of reasoning. One can describe the argument of these self-help texts as using *topoi koinoi* to subvert specific *topoi*, or the reasoning of the universal audience to persuade a specific audience. Thus, we can see here one method of dealing with the scandal of doxa.

[link to commentary](#)

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