

## **Adding self-command to self-restraint: Reflections on developing social courage**

**By Michael Ronall**

*The cultivation of the will, as we may call it, is most important. I have already mentioned how nervousness often makes it impossible for people to know what they should do. They do not know their desires, or even what they should desire. This may be regarded as a weakness of the will that is due to an insufficient control of the ego over the astral body. Some people do not know what they want and, if they do, they never manage to carry it out. Others, still, cannot bring themselves to will firmly what they should.*

*The way to strengthen one's will is not necessarily to carry out something one wishes, provided, of course, it will do no harm to leave the wish unfulfilled. Just examine your life and you will find countless desires it would no doubt be nice to satisfy, but equally possible to leave unsatisfied. Fulfillment of them would give you pleasure, but you can quite well do without. If you set out to examine yourself systematically in this way, every restraint will signify additional strength of the will, that is, strength of the ego over the astral body. If we subject ourselves to this procedure in later life, it becomes possible to make good much that has been neglected in our earlier education.*

*"[Overcoming Nervousness](#)," a lecture given by Rudolf Steiner in Munich on January 11, 1912 (GA 143)*

Many anthroposophists dismiss the findings of experimental psychology in favor of learning directly from life. They believe that common sense applied to open-minded observation—that is, unclouded by the dubious metaphysics, capricious methodologies, and myopic philosophical anthropology that undergird contemporary social science—stands a better chance of discovering truths of human nature than *in vitro* constructs of human conduct putatively insulated from karmic consequences. Furthermore, students of Anthroposophy might feel that our independent judgments, when enhanced by the results of spiritual-scientific research provided by the master of that art, ought to be sufficient to supply us with all we need to know about human development. Another ingredient in our skepticism concerning human-laboratory investigations consists in the suspicion that the very procedure of constructing artificial events risks dehumanizing both subject and researcher through inquiries that actually require a grounding in wisdom, with its essential ingredient of love, rather than merely quantifiable information. Finally, undetected biases peculiar to the scientist, the group he represents, and the materialistic culture at large—whether tendentiously, e.g., through allegiance to sources of funding, or arbitrarily through ignorance—are expected to delimit the range of available insights to which rats and inkblots could lead us.

Systematically probing these attitudes for their validity would exceed the scope of the present essay, not to say the capacities of this author; here he must be content to acknowledge that he shares these concerns. But the conclusions of Jonah Lehrer's article "[Don't! The secret of self-control](#)" (*The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009), and the urgency of our need for their application, persuaded him to suspend his prejudices against white coats and aluminum clipboards in advance of their fructification by cosmic contexts. Additionally, natural-scientific method applied to philosophical anthropology serves as more than an historical relic, having provided *the* model for Rudolf Steiner's central ethical treatise.<sup>1</sup> The article recounts a series of ingenious studies assessing the effectiveness of children's methods for trying to resist temptation:

It evaluated their various styles of attempting to refrain from consuming available but proscribed marshmallows, in pursuit of remoter, more substantial rewards. Tracking the children's lives over the years that followed revealed that gratification-delay, rather than intelligence or any other factors, constitutes the prime ingredient to later academic and professional accomplishment, and that temperance turns out to be a cognitive rather than purely volitional ("will-power") practice. Most valuably, the acquisition of self-restraint turns out to be accessible through simple instruction in the training of attention. Clearly, the significance of such a finding is paramount for spiritual self-development also.

Hence, this analysis of self-control in the service of productivity prompted me to wish for parallel instructions for developing self-mastery to face what is *antipathetic*: How one can "get" oneself (telling idiom) to eat, as it were, *bitter though advantageous food*, as the *New Yorker* article deals only with avoiding what is attractive, that is, how to restrain the impulse to consume *sweet but in some way debilitating* food—understanding these polar dining gestures as emblematic also for life's extra-prandial trials of enticement and repulsion. I imagine that this missing side could hold particular value for social relations.

This is because my impression in anthroposophical circles is that of a population occupationally high-functioning but socially limited, in that it does well, indeed often virtuosically, in hierarchical relations (e.g., providing unrivalled quality in caring for children and the infirm on the basis of goodwill informed by consequential knowledge), yet notoriously, even if not ubiquitously, poorly among equals (e.g., in life-partnerships, faculty and parent relations, and other administrative functions). Unfortunately, underachieving in the latter potential also inhibits the optimal expressions of the former. How could this improve?

The longitudinal marshmallow studies related in the article linked above instruct us of the surprising degree to which lifelong productivity consists in self-control, which, we also learn, in turn entails delaying gratification. The studies valuably point to the cognitive and volitional skills that adduce to these accomplishments. Now, in light of the observation that anthroposophical social life is abundant in healing idealism and yet may be deficient in effective negotiation among peers, what can we learn about productive adults whose capacities are unbalanced in this way? Productive agents have, by definition, learned successfully to overcome task-distracting temptations (at least in vocational pursuits!), but what can aid these same individuals if they systematically resort to protracted dysfunctional contortions in order to avoid, by denying the patent existence of, *any* social conflict, in which, when it is inescapable, they reactively fall back on sentimental self-pity and/or hysteria and/or bullying, i.e., gratuitously freezing, fleeing, or fighting? By what techniques can the I deploy mastery over its own astral body in the face of perceived threats to survival, complementary to the methods by which Lehrer's article teaches us we can master temptation?

Translated into the terms of the marshmallow-studies, how would those who have acquired temperance when encountering inert objects acquire courage to encounter other autonomous subjects in ways consistent with both compassion and human dignity?<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, many of

these kind, helpful, productive, conflict-averse or even -allergic individuals show traits of sanguine-cholerics: effectively ambitious while socially impressionable.

The lucid writings of the innovative psychologist Albert Ellis (1913-2007)<sup>3</sup> have convinced me of the degree to which individuals in our culture suffer a pandemic mania to have others approve of who we are, signified (we falsely believe) by approving everything we do. Among the pernicious effects of this anti-individualist superstition is its disabling of truth-seeking and truth-telling in social relations. Such narcissistic vulnerability, fostered by the self-esteem movement—which began in psychotherapy, extended into education at all levels, and has infested all facets of our culture—prevents confidence in the possibility of creative strife, in place of which it breeds stagnant, sometimes smoldering pacts of intrapsychic suppression.

The *New Yorker* article linked above leads me to suspect that the occupationally high-functioning and socially limited-functioning idealists among us have trained themselves to treat [the expressions of] those who frustrate them as though those others were marshmallows, that is, *only* as phenomena that cause sensations in those who encounter them, rather than *also* as subjects in their own right—what Kant condemned as treating others only as means and not *also* as ends-in-themselves, colloquially formulated as the sins of using people and loving things instead of vice-versa.

I'm thinking of those who, as soon as they realize that they're not going to acquire, immediately and entirely on their own convenient terms, what [they believe] they're looking for from another individual—however lofty the ideals by which they may justify their quest<sup>4</sup>—reflexively treat that other as a suitable object on which to apply “a simple set of mental tricks—such as pretending that the candy is only a picture, surrounded by an imaginary frame”; “cover[ing] their eyes with their hands or turn[ing] around so that they can't see the tray.” How often, in long-term associations with those who share our ideals, do we fail to resolve disputes, deny their persistence, avoid fresh encounters? How frankly and receptively do we meet the gaze of those who have offended our imagined entitlements? How vigorously do we pursue the idea within the reality of neighbors whose frictive influence actually holds information for our own healing?

Retreat from intersubjectivity replaces the possibility of reciprocal social communion, with its attendant fertile vulnerabilities, by competing versions of benevolent tyranny.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that tendency toward a righteous reification and instrumentalization of others, facilitated by arresting our social interest at the surface of our neighbor's appearance, rather than cognitively searching for the idea within his reality, is a symptom of our culture's evolutionary retrogression. If that is a risk, our inattentiveness will allow us to revert to obsolete ethical styles, apposite to the bygone sentient-soul epoch. Such reversion would betray our present task of advancing toward the imaginative transposition of self and other that entails sacrificially, empathetically acquiring, on the one hand objectivity about oneself, and on the other, intuitive subjectivity about others' perspectives.

The capacity for an individual deliberately to turn his experience inside-out arose at the turning-point of time, when the great sacrifice by the I of humanity eliminated human egotism as a requirement for survival, and egotism became in fact our ultimate hindrance. But only gradually and by trial can we learn to emulate this deed of inversion and employ it in our social encounters, including training ourselves to meet the attacks on our pride that social conflicts present.

Members of our present civilization, including students of anthroposophy, still inadequately absorb the teachings of reincarnation that interpret felt personal impotence as consequence of past-life tyrannies. Karmic analysis suggests, as treatment for emotional suffering, the “claiming” of one’s *Doppelgänger*. One result of thus reversing our fear as well as our desire is the achievement of empathy, which replaces our native, creaturely, utilitarian, consumerist attitude toward our neighbors by an intuitive grasp of the *other’s* experience.

Where, then, are the empirical psychologists who will provide instruction for courage in the way that the marshmallow researchers have organized the steps to acquiring temperance? Who will calibrate the curriculum for knightly valor in its intimate applications to social conflict, as our marshmallow researchers have substantiated the archetypal monastic asceticism that equips individuals to focus on their tasks? With Lucifer now addressed by this article—entitled “Don’t!”—who will write the complementary account—entitled “Do!”—about the *other* self-control, namely, acting in the face of Ahriman? Until the team steps forward with clinical trials of counter-phobic protocols that individuals can apply as directly as the inductions from these studies of temptation, each of us works, perforce, in the laboratory of the human soul, with the endorsement of the spiritual-scientific teacher who has certified the enterprise *in vivo*, both for our immediate circumstances and for those we can anticipate with eager trepidation:

*The would-be initiate must bring with him a certain measure of courage and fearlessness. He must positively go out of his way to find opportunities for developing these virtues. His training should provide for their systematic cultivation. In this respect, life itself is a good school—possibly the best school. The student must learn to look danger calmly in the face and try to overcome difficulties unswervingly. For instance, when in the presence of some peril, he must swiftly come to the conviction that fear is of no possible use; I must not feel afraid; I must only think of what is to be done. And he must improve to the extent of feeling, upon occasions which formerly inspired him with fear, that to be frightened, to be disheartened, are things that are out of the question as far as his own inmost self is concerned. By self-discipline in this direction, quite definite qualities are developed which are necessary for initiation into the higher mysteries. Just as man requires nervous force in his physical being in order to use his physical sense, so also he requires in his soul nature the force which is only developed in the courageous and the fearless. For in penetrating to the higher mysteries he will see things which are concealed from ordinary humanity by the illusion of the senses. If the physical senses do not allow us to perceive the higher truth, they are for this very reason our benefactors. Things are thereby hidden from us which, if realized without due preparation, would throw us into unutterable consternation, and the sight of which would be unendurable. The student must be fit to endure this sight. ~ Rudolf Steiner, Knowledge of the Higher Worlds and Its Attainment (GA 10), Chapter 2, [“The Stages of Initiation: The Control of Thoughts and Feelings.”](#)*

In light of the empirical discovery of a cognitive basis to abstemiousness, contemplating the project of managing one’s own excessive aversion to strife reminds me of a conversation that a friend related having had with her young son. When the boy brought home a poor report-card from his conventional elementary school, she sought to awaken his ambition by gently assuring

him of his high academic potential: “You know,” the mother enjoined him to realize, “that you could do very well if you wanted to.”

With the perplexity familiar to introspective observers of far riper vintage facing unappealing environments, the boy replied, equally gently, “But Mom, how do you *want* to?”

That quiet question may be discerned in each moment that presents us with social adversity. How does a freedom-philosophy approach required courses in truth-based meetings? How do we prepare for exams in risking occasional unpopularity as the temporary byproduct of encountering our neighbors honestly? What curriculum can steer us into passing the uncomfortable tests that each individual’s Higher Self has prescribed in the interest of our long-range goals?



Michael Ronall will speak on “Clairvoyance Through Annoyance: The redemptive homeopathy of everyday troubles” at the Michaelmas Symposium, [“Living Questions: Exploring the Role of Individual and Community in Spiritual Scientific Research,” September 30 – October 2, 2011, in Spring Valley, NY.](#)

<sup>1</sup>“Results of Soul-Observation Arrived at by the Scientific Method” ~ motto of *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, 1894 (GA 4).

<sup>2</sup>The Lower Guardian demands humility, i.e., managing shame, the Upper Guardian demands courage, i.e., managing fear—and in that sequence, lest courage without humility issue as bullying, or, what would be less pernicious but still inadequate, humility without courage preserve cowardice.

<sup>3</sup>The work of this revolutionary figure bears investigation, particularly by anthroposophists, who will find Ellis caustic about the some of the absurdities that constitute both classical psychoanalysis and pop psychology at either end of the twentieth century. The astute reader will find not only Threefold Man represented in the very name of Ellis’s self-help technique, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, but a comprehensive method for the control of feelings, the third of Rudolf Steiner’s Six Accompanying Exercises. This notwithstanding that Ellis’s ontology is atheist and materialistic, his sexual ethic libertine, and his language occasionally barnyard for emphasis. But if Steiner could take selective inspiration from Charles Darwin and John Henry Mackay, an open-minded pilgrim will also take his wisdom where he finds it. A safe introduction by one of Ellis’s students can be found at <http://www.threeminutetherapy.com/>.

<sup>4</sup>“Just between the two of us, I have always observed these things to be in singular accord: supercelestial thoughts and subterranean conduct.” ~ Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

<sup>5</sup>“Every individual needs revolution, inner division, overthrow of the existing order, and renewal, but not by forcing them upon his neighbors under the hypocritical cloak of Christian love or the sense of social responsibility or any of the other beautiful euphemisms for unconscious urges to personal power.” ~ C.G. Jung (1875-1961)

