

The Psycho-Epistemology of Freedom

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ABSTRACT: In *Independent Judgment and Introspection: Fundamental Requirements of the Free Society*, Jerry Kirkpatrick maintains that a free society can exist only when a sufficient number of people have healthy psycho-epistemologies. He identifies fundamental aspects in our culture that work against this end. Building on the work of Objectivist psychologist Edith Packer, he presents a process for improving one's psycho-epistemology. Kirkpatrick also traces the history of child-rearing practices and relates the process of change to the work of many other psychologists including Horney, Freud, Ellis, and Rogers.

KEYWORDS: psycho-epistemology, history of psychology, psychotherapy, emotional education, child rearing, psychological research, free will, introspection, free society

Independent Judgment and Introspection: Fundamental Requirements of the Free Society, by Jerry Kirkpatrick. Upland, California: Kirkpatrick Books, 2019. 203 pp., index.

The thesis of this ambitious work is that a free society can exist only when a sufficient number of people have healthy psycho-epistemologies. A person with a healthy psycho-epistemology has two fundamental characteristics:

1. The ability to accurately evaluate what comes to mind automatically and to alter it to fit the facts of the reality being faced in the present.
2. The courage to maintain one's firsthand grasp of reality when challenged by others.

To develop such a psycho-epistemology is a do-it-yourself job. However, it is not obvious how to do it. Ayn Rand and Nathaniel Branden (in his early work) oversimplified and overmoralized this process, reducing it to just *choosing to think*. Kirkpatrick is much more accurate in his acknowledgment of how challenging it can be.

Kirkpatrick addresses himself to two basic questions:

1. Why hasn't society encouraged more people to develop healthy psycho-epistemologies?
2. What should be changed to help more people attain this goal?

Following the work of Objectivist psychologist Edith Packer (1924–2018), Kirkpatrick presents, in some detail, how much is involved in the process of change that is not included in the phrase “choose to think.” One must be willing to make the effort, spend the time (which can be considerable), and endure the difficult emotions that will be triggered. If this were easy, there would be no need for the profession of psychotherapy.

Why is so much effort required for so many people? Kirkpatrick has traced the problem down to its roots in a number of different areas. These include authoritarian ways of child rearing that still exist in some form and faulty epistemologies that look at certainty as arrogant and inherently dictatorial. Additional factors are the glaring mistake that pervades most of psychology in ignoring the fundamental purpose of the mind to accurately grasp reality and the current epistemological nightmare of modern psychology with its profound overreliance on statistical data and rejection of the validity of individual introspection to give important data on the nature of consciousness and ways to live life successfully. In a healthy society, where egoism and independence are valued, and education (especially early) includes learning to work positively with one's emotions, there would be much less effort required.

This book is a significant step forward in identifying and describing how Rand's thought can be used by people to flourish. It accomplishes this to some extent by building bridges to the thought of others, including Karen Horney,

Carl Rogers, William Glasser, Stanton Samenow, Albert Ellis, Aaron and Judith Beck, Alfred Adler, Sigmund Freud, Haim Ginott, Abraham Maslow, and Maria Montessori. All of them are or were interested in helping people to live strong, healthy, independent lives.

Although Freud is often dismissed by Objectivists for his deterministic and pessimistic view of life, Kirkpatrick points out that he was the first to develop a comprehensive view of mental life, and to appreciate that the subconscious works automatically and powerfully to shape conscious experience. Kirkpatrick would like to see the development of a science of inner life that includes both the power of the subconscious and the freedom of the will to regulate mental processes so they are in touch with reality. He is clear that the data of mental life that come up automatically can be anti-life and need to be worked with to correct them. He is optimistic that they can be dealt with productively if one learns introspective skills. These include allowing all data to enter consciousness whether or not one likes them and permitting oneself to feel whatever one feels without censorship, since feelings are not moral issues. Following Packer, he gives a detailed, four-step guide to introspecting accurately and thereby altering one's psycho-epistemology in a positive direction.

I liked his explanation of how the idea that we can never know the whole truth, only successive approximations of it, rests on Kant's noumenal/phenomenal dichotomy. While we will never be omniscient, it is more accurate to say we can optimize our knowledge if we permit all data from our senses into our awareness and let that form our understanding at a given time. We allow for the possibility that new data will alter our knowledge, increasing it, not invalidating it. This perspective leads to well-earned confidence, instead of nagging doubt that we're always going to be missing the whole truth.

Who would benefit from reading this book? Here's a list.

- People who are stuck in an overly moralistic notion of Objectivism.
- People who would like to improve their sense of life and discover deeply held mistaken beliefs that operate out of conscious control and make their lives less successful.
- Educators who believe that emotional education early in life is at least as important as any knowledge one gets about the outside world, and who want to encourage individual responsibility for how one learns to use one's mind and productively handle one's feelings.
- People who would like to learn what is and is not of value in other thinkers' approaches to mental health.
- People who are overidentified with Rand's fictional heroes and are trying to live up to an impossible standard.
- Parents who want to raise mentally healthy children.

Perhaps Kirkpatrick has been too ambitious in trying to say as much as he has in 203 pages. Several times I found myself very interested in one of his points and then disappointed that he didn't amplify it. For example, I hadn't thought of conceptualization as a form of observation. Also, I was not familiar with Packer's concept of "core evaluation." There were other instances where he drew on the work of Packer that were new to me. I purchased Packer's book, *A Guide to Understanding Your Emotions* (2018), and it was very helpful in deepening my understanding of some of Kirkpatrick's points.

Although it is true that many emotions occur because they are triggered by thoughts, I don't agree with Kirkpatrick (and Packer) that this is the only way an emotion can occur. Emotion is present in us well before we can think, as demonstrated in an accompanying video to my 2006 article in this journal, showing infant affect (see Shmurak 2006).

These are, however, minor quibbles. I found this book well worth reading.

STEVEN H. SHMURAK, PhD, is a clinical psychologist who was in practice as a psychotherapist for more than thirty years. He holds degrees in mathematics from Swarthmore College and Harvard University, and a doctorate in psychology from Indiana University. In addition to his long-term interest in Objectivism, he is well-versed in the Affect-Script Theory of emotion developed by psychologist Silvan Tomkins. He is also an avid student of the somatic work of Thomas Hanna (Clinical Somatic Education) and believes that it reveals and optimizes a fundamental property of consciousness that is central to having high self-esteem.

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- Shmurak, Steven H. 2006. Demystifying emotion: Introducing the affect theory of Silvan Tomkins to Objectivists. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 8, no. 1 (Fall): 1–18. See also the accompanying video to this article, "The Nine Innate Affects Identified by Silvan S. Tomkins." Online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tEJR7HrURQ.