

**Transcript: ANT Farm**  
Tomas, Nikki, and Anil

Tomas

I'm Tommy.

Nikki

I'm Nikki.

Anil

And I'm Anil and you're listening to ANT Farm where we bring in critical and literary theory to discuss popular self-help books and the practices they set forth.

[00:00:13-00:00:18--Intro Music]

Nikki

Today, we'll be discussing one of the most popular and influential self-help books in recent decades, *The New Psycho cybernetics*. Originally written in 1960 by prominent cosmetic surgeon Maxwell Maltz, this updated edition instructs readers on how to mold, achieve, and uphold self-images of themselves. In this episode, we'll discuss Maltz's text in the context of distinguished critical theorists and then spend some time relating our experiences and thoughts on some of Maltz's proposed self-help practices.

Tomas

All of us have a self-image that is affected by many internal and external stimuli. If we consider our inner self as a separate being that needs to be taken care of, we begin the journey towards a happier and healthier mental mindset. This podcast episode is for everyone, as we discuss a book that teaches everyone how to communicate with and learn the language of the internal self, something many of us struggle with. Maltz argues that understanding the psychology of the self can mean the difference between success and failure, love and hate, bitterness and happiness. The discovery of the real self can rescue anyone from the darkest depths. On another plane, discovering your real self means the difference between freedom and the compulsions of conformity. Unlocking the real self, he argues, is that ultimate form of liberation, but to do that you need to take control of your creative mechanism, which is central to Maltz's argument. He says our brain is wired to complete or seek out outcomes or emotions we feed it. If we feed information and data into a creative mechanism that says we are unworthy, inferior, undeserving and incapable, this data is processed and acted upon as any other data in giving us the answer in the form of objective experience. Like any other servomechanism, our creative mechanism makes use of stored information or memory in solving current problems and responding to current situations. Your program for getting more living out of life consists of first of all, learning something about this creative mechanism and harnessing its self-directive power as a success mechanism, rather than as a failure mechanism. Maltz discusses how to do that which involves learning, practicing, and experiencing, new habits of thinking, imagining, remembering, and acting in order to: (1) develop an adequate and realistic self-image, and (2) use your creative mechanism to bring success and happiness in achieving particular goals. While Maltz's background as a plastic surgeon provides this text with interesting, thought provoking and novel anecdotes, his arguments are ostensibly simplistic and his pieces of advice often tend towards conventional mantras and truisms, rather than insightful bits of wisdom. Maltz's discussion of positive thinking tends to be over simplistic at times, it encourages subjects to change their own self-

conception. This involves creating a new concept of your own self and thinking or doing things that are consistent with his newly created image. According to Maltz, you need to, quote, act like the sort of person you conceive yourself to be, unquote. He follows with a thoughtful analysis and relevant examples.

[00:03:35-00:03:40—Transitional Music]

Anil

So I kind of want to take control the conversation here and talk about something I thought was really interesting in the book, which was his blending of surgery and self-help terminology, so I wanted to just start by asking, Nikki did you think the blending of surgery and self-image was effective did it ultimately confuse you or did it make the ideas more effective?

Nikki

Yeah, that's a great question and I do not think that they were confusing, and I do think that they generally strengthen the book because they give more examples of his otherwise more abstract ideas. But this being said, I do not think that he used his plastic surgery experience to enhance the book as much as he could have. Maltz really had the opportunity to do something unique with his experience as a plastic surgeon because he brings a new perspective that so many of us cannot relate to, but I found myself disappointed by what felt like a series of cliches in his book. One in particular that stands out to me is when he refers to a patient and states that they needed, quote, emotional surgery, not physical surgery. Although his point does come across that the patient's biggest issue was his internal self-image, the sentence reads in a way that is cliché and flat, when I expected him to say something nuanced and original with his years of expertise.

Anil

Right, right. That's a valid point. Tomas, were there any examples that stood out to you or impacted you in any way, specifically, or were they ultimately, like Nikki says, boring and ordinary?

Tomas

Yeah, thanks for the question. I was honestly really astounded by Maltz's discussion of our brain's servomechanism. This is the idea that our brain has a little compartment in which all of a person's experiences are stored. He compares it to a quote, tape recorder, unquote Maltz relates an experiment in which a researcher touched certain parts of the cortex with a surgical instrument. The responses from patients were incredible. One patient, Maltz claims, immediately began to proclaim that she was reliving past childhood experiences. This ties in with the idea of how a tape recorder can be rewinded--patients were reliving decades old memories as if they had somehow been transported back in time.

Tomas

Right, well, I think I really enjoyed this part of the book and there were a few really great examples that I kind of just wanted to share to the listeners. For example, on his talk about sensitivity, which I was all ears to because I'm super sensitive myself, he talks about the epidermis, which is the outer layer of the skin and how that protects our body from chemicals, viruses, UV Rays, all sorts of stuff and he talks about that in terms of internal self, saying that our own soul needs an epidermis if we're going to stop being sensitive to everything and anything.

A second example that I really enjoyed was his discussion about scarring. He talks about how in his surgery, you need to do a lot of removal of excess skin to prevent any sort of scarring and get rid of

all the trauma, and he purports why can't that happen internally as well with emotional scarring. If you can cut out all the tension and remove the scar altogether, you'll be much happier, so I thought it definitely was a very interesting point that caught my eye.

[00:06:57-00:07:02—Transitional music]

Nikki

I just kind of wanted to redirect the conversation to the abstractness of his ideas, even when he is talking about plastic surgery at times. There are many instances throughout the book in which Maltz will introduce a topic and discuss the topic in higher level and more vague terms, or even go off on tangents at times. Do you think that this is helpful because it leaves room for the reader to interpret the book how they want? Or do you think it detracts from the book and serves as a source of confusion for the readers?

Tomas

I mean, yeah, I can jump in here. I think definitely one of the many reasons why self-help has grown in popularity in recent decades is because of its accessibility. Self-help is meant to appeal to a mass audience, by this I mean that so many people can pick up a self-help book at random and somehow, some way or another relate it to their lives in some special and even unique way. So, by making his book somewhat abstract, Maltz facilitates this and encourages readers to create their own version of the book. Maltz also has simplistic one-line messages, which summarize his vague ideas scattered throughout the book to ensure that readers are able to understand and comprehend the heart of his message.

Nikki

That's really interesting Anil, what do you think?

Anil

You know I'm going to have to agree with Tomas here. I think that naturally the topic that Maltz is writing about, the internal self, is super vague as it is. There's really no concrete way to ever measure the ideas that he's talking about, like the success mechanism or the soul. So I feel like self help books talking about these things can only go so deep without confusing the reader.

Another thing that I really liked about the vagueness of the book was that it allowed people to project themselves onto the page and conform the teachings and bring them into their own lives. But you know, if you look at another book that's known to be a really popular self-help book that also tries to do this, *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia's* attempt to have the reader connect with the character, even though it was in 2<sup>nd</sup> person, failed really badly because it was too specific and the thoughts, the dialogue, were so specific, it kind of shut the reader out of the book. So I think by staying vague, Maltz really let the reader come in with him, so I would have to agree with Tomas.

Nikki

Yeah, I think that those are both good points that I hadn't necessarily thought of while I was reading it. To me the vagueness of the book was a little bit confusing, but it was supplemented with his self-help practices at the end of each chapter, which kind of brought the chapters together for me and allowed me to understand more what he was saying and really tied in all of his ideas, so I guess my follow-up question to you two would be--the self-help practices at the end of the chapters are they helpful. Did you like them? Do you think that they work well, with the book and the flow or do you think that he could do without having included them?

Anil

So I thought that to an extent it worked, but largely it failed. I think the reason that I didn't like them is because so many of them required an aspect of meditation or mindfulness or relaxation or yoga, things that he'd never really primed us or taught us how to do. You know, he throws you essentially into the deep end, without any sort of preparation on how to best perform these sorts of activities. So when you're left to your own devices, I feel like it's very hard to do them.

[00:10:36-00:10:41—Transitional Music]

Anil

Sort of on that topic, I think maybe it would be beneficial to the listener if we talked about how our experiences with some of the practices were, and if they really worked. So we each chose a different practice that we're going to talk to you about today and I'm excited to hear what Nikki and Tomas' is. But I'll start, so my practice was about visualization. To introduce the topic, Maltz talks about a study done by R.A. Vandell where he tests a bunch of people throwing darts at a target. One group continuously practices physically throwing the darts each day, while another group mentally imagines themselves throwing the darts for 20 minutes a day, and what he found was astounding. Actually, both groups had a very very similar percent success rate after the period of study showing that visualizing throwing the darts at the board was just as effective as practicing physically.

So I thought, why not try to incorporate that into my life? You know, a very popular self-help book is *Self-Help* by Samuel Smiles, and he discusses how bad habits often lead to poor circumstances. So if we could take this practice to resolve bad habits or replace them with good ones, then we are by smiles logic helping our social position and comfort levels. So what did I do? I decided to do three things. I decided to see if I could flip an omelet, which is something I'm abysmally bad at, which it always turns into scrambled eggs. But I thought if I sit for 30 minutes a day and imagine myself flipping the omelet, will I be able to do it in a week? And then the next thing that I wanted to try was mouse surgeries in my lab. I work in the laboratory where I have to do a lot of surgeries that are super difficult, so I thought if I visualize myself doing the surgery successfully, will that work out? Well, and to my surprise, I'm happy to report to you guys that they did work, but only in relation to physical tasks. For example, I wanted to see if I could do well in chemistry problems by visualizing myself doing well, but that's where sort of the practice fell flat because it wasn't a physical task anymore, so I'd be interested to see, the listeners if you guys tried this out and let us know what you guys thought about it, but yeah, that was my practice. Nikki, I know that you had a similar sort of self help practice, so I'm curious to see how your experience was.

Nikki

So my self-help practice was similar to Anil's. It was focusing on visualization of the person that you want to be, and Maltz focuses a lot on how you envision yourself and the fact that the mental image that someone creates of themselves will become a reality for them. He emphasizes the importance of visualizing who you want to be. And then talks a lot about this innate success mechanism, which will take over and automatically drive you to the person that you see in your own mental image. So anyways, the self-help practice that I decided to try was spending 30 minutes a day visualizing your future self, a practice that Maltz refers to as theater of your mind. And so I started my mornings in a quiet, natural light filled room in my dorm and closed my eyes, and in my head, I saw myself sitting at a movie theater watching a movie about my idealized self. I followed exactly what Maltz instructs for the readers, and I first made a list of abstract and detailed elements I wanted to have in my mental movie, ranging from confidence or decisiveness to more specific details about my career path

and my future such as walking into a patient's room as a doctor and being able to make a difficult decision about their care and then move on without overthinking. I then followed his instructions as spending what he says should be the first 10 days making the movie as perfect as possible and then really crafting my ideal self. However, I actually decided to stop my practice after the first week, and I thought that there were many issues with the way that he described the practice, and with the practice that he sets forth, and I think that he makes it clear in his writing that he never has actually performed this practice himself, but rather just wants the reader to try to do it based on his unclear and vague instructions.

So first of all, he says to spend 30 minutes a day for 10 days perfecting the movie of yourself and that took me about two days to do. While he says that you need five hours, which is 10 days, 30 minutes a day, I really do not think that that was the case for me and instead actually found myself riddled with anxiety because I found myself with intrusive thoughts about what I could be doing during the 30 minutes a day to actually make my goals come true in a more concrete way than just thinking about what I wanted for myself.

Anil

So that's really interesting. Would you say that you would recommend this practice to our listeners then in that case, it sounds like you really didn't have a good experience with it.

Nikki

No, I wouldn't recommend it. Actually, while Maltz's point is to feed the success mechanism in our minds, I felt that this practice didn't do that. The mechanism is supposed to be instinctive and self directive, but I do not really notice any differences in my overall actions. Maybe it was too short a trial period, but I got easily discouraged by the lack of success from this practice.

I actually had a question for the two of you as to what you think about the success mechanism. Maltz says that the success mechanism can do a better job than you could do with actual willpower and conscious effort. I know that you guys didn't partake in this self-help practice, but from your prior experiences, do you agree with that or do you think this can be a dangerous mentality that could limit hard work?

Anil

You know, one way that I see that this could be dangerous is by constantly thinking about your ideal self, I feel like for some people it can be easily a reminder of how far away from that goal you are or how you don't shape up to the person that you want to be. And I think maybe the reminder of how far away you are or how insignificant you are compared to that fantasy dream can be pretty damaging, you know, so I don't think I would engage in this practice.

Nikki

That's a great point, Thomas, what do you think?

Tomas

Well throughout the book Maltz mentions our success mechanism, which he says, is the driving force of trying to live our best lives. He says that as long as you have goals and can visualize yourself achieving them your success mechanism will take over to make sure that they become reality for you. I am personally still a little skeptical about this notion that you do not need to put in as much work or take concrete steps for success, but rather simply focus on a self-image as a guide.

Nikki

That's a really interesting point, Tomas. So while I was doing this self-help practice that I couldn't help but think about the theorist Binkley and how he would analyze my practice through the lens of entrepreneurship as he discusses in his article "Happiness, positive psychology and the program of neoliberal governmentality." And if we use the lens that he sets forth, we can understand that this practice has a greater ability to make someone an entrepreneurial subject in the context of a neoliberal government, because they're more goal oriented and becoming the person that can be more efficient and productive if they become the best version of themselves. However, again, I don't think it's due to the success mechanism that Maltz says, but rather due to the fact that it becomes more conscious in everyone's lives.

[00:18:35-00:18:38—Transitional Music]

Tomas

So my practice is actively trying to be happy by remembering to smile, being more understanding and optimistic, forcing myself to be cheerful and relying on habits. The implementation was really vague, so I took it upon myself to create ways to complete these tasks. If I was walking to get food or in the middle of class on zoom, and noticed myself spacing out or spiraling into a sea of negativity, I tried to force myself to smile. I also set reminders every hour to smile. Whenever I had a negative thought, I cleansed myself with positive energy through self-love and affirmations, often repeating phrases like 'you are enough.' I also set my phone password to the positive affirmation 'I am enough' to remind me to stay positive. I would focus very hard every time I was feeling unhappy, and force myself out of my sadness and be understanding with myself. So, while there are many aspects of the practice that I disliked, I found myself to be happier as a whole, and Maltz argues that happiness is not something that just comes to you, you need to consciously filter out unhappy thoughts and systemically practice healthy mindfulness in order to be happy. Some other positive things were that I had less stress during the school week, I did not have as many restless nights or nightmares, and friends really remarked on my overall more positive attitude, which gave me confidence.

Some things that didn't really work were that it was actually a really superficial exercise. There's so many vague things to do, so I had no clue that I was even doing them right. Maltz really dropped the ball on explaining how to properly do such exercises. It seemed a little forced to try and make myself happy. It was very tiring to constantly keep my mind in check and I would always have to be aware of my thoughts, which was quite difficult. So here's something to think about: would someone argue that this is actually a very unhealthy practice to merely ignore, or as Maltz says, close the doors of one's mind to unhappy thoughts, would that same person argue that that and say that perhaps the healthiest thing to do is fully confront those unhappy thoughts? Perhaps the best way to palliate or get rid of them is to face those thoughts rather than to put a shroud of healthy mindfulness atop them.

Well, an article from Time magazine says that the best way to deal with pessimism is to allow yourself to really feel sad--this ultimately will lead to happiness. This is a perspective which challenges Maltz's in some ways. So now I'll ask, Nikki and Anil, do you agree more with the article from Time magazine, which says not to suppress negative thoughts or with Maltz?

Anil

Well, I can go first and I think that I agree with Time. I think being unresponsive or ignoring failures or sadness shields us and keeps us very naive and stunted in our development as a person, in my

opinion. They say that there is value in every rejection, in every low of your life, in every failure. By closing yourself off from even experiencing those emotions or putting yourself in a place where you have to confront yourself when you're feeling down, I think that it would prevent you from ever learning from these experiences or growing as a person.

#### Nikki

That's an interesting point, but I would have to disagree with you, Anil. I think there's a lot of validity to suppressing your negative feelings and trying to redirect your emotions to focus on the positive. A lot of self-help authors focus on making gratitude lists and focusing on the positive parts of your life and in the same vein, I think that that's what Maltz is saying. We need to focus on what makes us happy instead of getting bogged down by the sad parts of life which are natural and come and go.

#### Tomas

Yeah, really great answers. So here's another thought: as I was reading I was connected back to another famous self-help theorist, Marcuse. He writes in his piece "The Affirmative Character of Culture" about the phenomenon wherein culture or the mental and spiritual world separates from factual civilization. The bourgeoisie which facilitates this process, compels one to develop and evolve as Marcuse says, from within. As a result of affirmative culture, it becomes unnecessary for one to alter the outside environment, and the emphasis is placed instead in the struggle to progress and change from within. Affirmative culture preserves the ideal of universal happiness, even as it makes that only achievable for the soul. Marcuse believes in a real happiness, which is achievable only when material as well as ideal conditions are changed. So in the context of Marcuse, it seems like Maltz really gets at one half of this equation.

#### Anil

Interesting, well, with that final note, we've reached the end of our episode. I want to thank all of the listeners for being so supportive in tuning in, and let us know in the comments or through email what you guys thought of this book, what you thought it did for you, what you thought it didn't do. We'd love to hear what you'd say, but we've talked about a few exercises that we've tried, we've talked about a few aspects of the book that we liked and we didn't like, and we even had moments of agreement and moments of disagreement, so I would say it was a pretty fulfilling episode. So, until next time, please subscribe and we have Patreon down below if you want to give us some money.