

Ascetic Hedonism: Self and Sexual Conquest in the Seduction Community

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Abstract

Much of contemporary self-help discourse and practice revolves around a peculiar intertwining of hedonistic goals and diffused forms of innerworldly asceticism. To illustrate, the present paper will uncover the ascetic tendencies of a particularly "hedonistic" self-help movement: the so-called Seduction Community. In the Seduction Community, dating coaches teach men how to attract and seduce sexually attractive women. This paper argues that in spite of the manifestly hedonistic goal of sexual conquest, disciplinarian and ascetic values permeate the discourses and practices of the Seduction Community. Before us is the work ethic famously described by Max Weber; albeit in a form that is diffused, fragmented, and "applied" to twenty-first century dating.

Introduction

In the early twenty-first century, the international self-help movement seems more wide-reaching than ever before. The self-help movie *The Secret* reached millions of people, first through the cinema and then through a globally-distributed DVD. It stands in a long line of international self-help blockbusters, spanning from Samuel Smiles's foundational 1859-book *Self-Help* and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) to Spencer Johnson's *Who Moved My Cheese?* (1998) and *The Secret*

(2006). Over the course of its history, the self-help movement also expanded its thematic outreach. While late nineteenth-century self-help predominantly offered career advice, idolizing the figure of the so-called self-made man, contemporary self-help covers everything from advice on career advancement, relationships, happiness and spiritual growth to more specific topics such as dieting and dating. The result is a diverse jumble of self-help products and gurus—some of which claim to have uncovered the fundamental law of the universe, while others merely offer practical tips for solving specific problems. The accompanying self-help groups and movements range from secular fan clubs to (semi-)religious cults; and from peer-to-peer mutual-aid groups to loosely knit movements revolving around a charismatic self-help guru, a bestselling publication, or a popular advice blog.

Though contemporary self-help is thus highly heterogeneous, there are a couple of elements or general themes that loosely bind the unending mass of self-help discourses and practices together. These are as follows:

1. The attempt to cultivate a "positive attitude"; or more generally, a therapeutic or psychological approach to life
2. A focus on the problems and opportunities of the atomistic individual, frequently at the expense of a critical stance towards collective social issues (McGee 2005)
3. the value put on self-discipline and critical self-observation
4. the idea that people can and should radically transform themselves

That last point—the belief in self-transformation—in fact constitutes the fundamental premise of all self-help teachings and is that at which all self-help practices are ultimately aimed. You help yourself by transforming yourself into something better: a more socially skilled, spiritually enriched, financially successful, or sexually satisfied person. Self-help books, DVDs, and training programs promise to assist their readers, viewers and clients in effecting a transformation of the self; and they usually suggest—at least initially, on the marketing level—that this transformation will be spectacular, extensive and relatively abrupt.

In recent years, there has been an increased scholarly interest in self-help narratives and teachings, as well as in their broader social and cultural impact. Recent works on the topic include Sandra Dolby's folkloristic study *Self-Help Books*, Micki McGee's critical analysis *Self-Help, Inc.* and Eva Illouz's broader sociological research *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. What these researches show is that self-help narratives and teachings not only help, or fail to help, individual self-helpers with tackling specific (perceived) personal challenges, but that they also encourage self-helpers to adopt a particular way of describing and perceiving their social life and overall identity. As Eva Illouz points out, the importance of self-help literature is its role "in providing a vocabulary for the self and in guiding the perceptions of one's social relations..." (Illouz 2008, 53)

The basic idea here is that self-help can and frequently does change people and social groups by altering the way they view themselves, society, and their

place within it. Self-help can thus exert a socio-cultural influence irrespective of whether or not it actually changes people in the way it initially promised them; that is, irrespective of whether it actually helps self-helpers to become happy or successful. So, even if a certain self-help teaching or product is in fact not delivering on its promises—or if self-help in general simply "doesn't work" or "doesn't help," as many public critics contend—it is still valuable to study its impact on people's social and cultural identities.

To that end, the present research shows how self-help, in spite of its often inflated promises of a "quick-fix," can cause people to adopt a new self-understanding and lifestyle that centers on an ideal of self-improvement through self-discipline. Interestingly, in the case of the most dedicated self-helpers, the initial promise of (quick) results and the real identity changes self-helpers undergo often come to intertwine in a highly complex fashion. Along the road to change, small groups of dedicated self-helpers may partially or completely reinterpret what it means to be "helped," as they partly or completely distance themselves from their initial search for quick fixes to particular personal challenges and begin to see their disciplined quest for self-improvement as constituting a goal in itself. The result is a curious interplay between hedonism and an ascetic focus on self-discipline: the hedonistic attainment of financial, social, erotic or romantic success no longer constitutes the only envisioned end goal, but rather become part of a larger attempt to reach a state of empowerment and excellence through an ascetic focus on self-discipline.

This subtle interaction between the secular ascetic practices and the hedonistic promises of modern self-help is central to one of self-help's major branches: the Seduction Community. Although not representative of modern self-help as a whole, the Seduction Community, an international self-help movement in which men are taught how to attract and seduce women, shares much of its conceptual terrain with other self-help movements.

In the Seduction Community, dating coaches or seduction gurus teach their all-male students conversation skills and body language techniques, as well as psychological strategies that are meant to produce an inner state of self-confidence. The gurus furthermore advocate values, lifestyles and worldviews that they consider useful when it comes to transforming oneself into an enormously attractive and seductive individual: a womanizer, a "pickup artist," a master of the "Venusian arts."

At first the Seduction Community appears to be a purely hedonistic movement in which all moral considerations are set aside. The direct goal seems quite clear: sexual intercourse with a large number of attractive women. Equally clear is the commercial character of the seduction community: the schools are companies, the gurus businessmen, the students consumers. However, there is also a strong ascetic component to the Seduction Community which has remained hidden from view to outsiders, if not also to many insiders. In this asceticism, the means take priority over the end; the self-discipline needed to strategically attract and seduce women takes priority over the sex, or at least forms an important end in addition to

the sex.

In the Seduction Community, we find a diffused, fragmented expression of the work ethic described by Weber. This work ethic—instrumental to what Weber calls "the spirit of capitalism"—is rooted in a secularized and inner-worldly expression of asceticism. This ascetic work ethic drives the hedonism of the Seduction Community and vice versa. Thus, rather than asceticism and hedonism being two opposed forces keeping each other in check in the movement, they seem to strengthen each other. The search for sexual enjoyment intertwines with the quest for self-perfection and empowerment through self-discipline and voluntary suffering.

The Seduction Community

There is a long history of advice literature on seducing women, of which Ovid's poem "The Art of Love" (*Ars Amatoria*) is perhaps the most artistic product. This longer history should not be equated with the Seduction Community. The Seduction Community is a specific set of related schools in Western popular culture. These schools originally formed an underground movement in Los Angeles in the late nineties, but they then rose to mainstream prominence in the first decade of the twenty-first century after the publication of Neil Strauss' bestselling book *The Game* in 2005 and the reality television series *The Pickup Artist* on the American VH1 channel in 2007 and 2008. What sets the dating schools of the Seduction Community apart is their highly systematic approach to dating and their largely shared technical vocabulary—a kind of idiosyncratic community "language."

The main contributors to this vocabulary and the community's body of dating knowledge are as follows:

1. the neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and hypnosis-based school rooted in Ross Jefferies' Speed Seduction method
2. The Mystery Method school built on Mystery's somewhat mechanistic step-by-step method
3. The "natural game" or identity-oriented school, represented by Tyler Durden and other coaches connected to the dating advice company Real Social Dynamics

Besides these larger schools and the dating advice companies associated with them, there are all kinds of less distinct seduction schools and methods, many smaller dating advice companies, and a number of celebrated freelance dating coaches such as Sasha Daygame, Asian Playboy or Badboy.

A distinctive feature of the community is the use of special pseudonyms (e.g. Ross Jefferies, Mystery, Tyler Durden, Sasha Daygame, Asian Playboy, Badboy). Most gurus and students use a pseudonym: a special seduction nickname by which they are known within the Seduction Community. This signals both their determination to become a new person and their wish to be part of an exciting "underground" movement; but often it is also simply a way to post on seduction without one's real name being linked to a controversial self-help movement on Internet search engines. However, as the movement entered the mainstream media and subsequently became a steady source of income to a number of top dating coaches linked to a handful of larger dating advice companies, some

dating coaches began to use their real names again. For example, the prominent coaches Jlaix and Tyler Durden once again became Jeff Allen and Owen Cook.

Despite the dominance of a handful of larger companies, the Seduction Community is not only organized around the top-down dissemination of products and teachings, but also by the horizontal sharing of dating knowledge between non-professionals. Horizontal exchanges between students are typically non-commercial in character and take place in special online discussion fora and in local student meetings in numerous cities worldwide. In these meetings, known as "lair meetings", groups of seduction students not only discuss topics pertaining to womanizing, but also team up for approaching women—perfect strangers—in "the field". You can find seduction students roaming around in nightclubs and bars, on streets and in parks, from Los Angeles to Tokyo.

The ideas and approaches propagated by members of the Seduction Community vary widely. Some gurus and schools encourage the use of "canned material"—that is, rehearsed, status-conveying stories that are thrown into conversations to make a strong impression—whereas others advocate "natural game," which involves a more spontaneous way of interacting. Some put the emphasis on learning specific strategies, whereas others stress the value of enhancing one's psychological strength or "inner game," arguing that attractive behavior flows naturally from a state of self-confidence and emotional stability.

However, these disagreements do not run deep enough to result in sectarian divisions; there is clearly one Seduction

Community. The movement develops its unitary identity, in part, through a vocabulary that is to a great degree shared and which produces common values and outlooks on life. Though each of the seduction schools attempts to distinguish itself by developing novel concepts and metaphors, these merely overlaid onto the movement's larger shared vocabulary. Moreover, the students active in the Seduction Community are usually not completely loyal to any particular school but, rather, mix different metaphors and concepts in their communication with other students.

Lair meeting discussions and Internet fora are dominated by a number of widespread terms and metaphors. These include terms such as: "set" (a group of friends in a social gathering), "approach anxiety" (fear of initiating conversations with attractive women), "routine" (canned story for impressing women), "kino escalation" (the establishing of physical intimacy), "alpha male" (the attractive, high-status male), "social proof" (a way of signaling high status), "frame" (based on Goffman's theory of dramaturgical social frames), "wingman" (one's in-field assistant), "plowing" (the act of slowly breaking through a woman's standoffishness), "field report" (an online report on events in the field), "shit test" or "congruence test" (a provocation by means of which a woman tests a man's strength and authenticity), "sarging" (going to social gatherings with the purpose of seducing women), and "game."

Of these terms and metaphors, the most important one is "game." By means of the game metaphor, traditional moral considerations are swiftly brushed aside.

In the spirit of the familiar English sayings "Love is a game" and "It's all part of the game," the community establishes that seduction is ethically permissible. Moreover, conceiving of seduction as a game may also help the student to desensitize himself to rejections by many women, which, most gurus insist, is an inevitable component of becoming a skilled womanizer. The game metaphor pops up everywhere: there is "night game" and "day game," "club game" and "street game," "inner game" (the psychological dimension of being an attractive male) and "outer game" (the behavioral dimension of being an attractive male). Most importantly, becoming a successful womanizer requires that you "work on your game."

My experience with the concept of "working on your game" began with my visits to local lair meetings, and my participation in a weekend "bootcamp" in Frankfurt led by an international team of dating coaches. Most of the lair meetings I attended took place in Mannheim and Heidelberg, though I have also attended meetings in the Netherlands and the United States. The local lairs in Mannheim and Heidelberg are so-called "street lairs"; rather than assembling at night for "club game," they assemble on Saturday afternoons, and participating students are given the opportunity to approach young women on busy streets. New participants learn about these meetings either through word of mouth or through announcements on a German seduction website. Usually about four to ten people—some familiar faces, some surprise guests—show up for each meeting.

The first time I showed up for the Heidelberg lair meeting, I was called to introduce myself to the other participants by the local lair organizer, a young German man who, despite his slightly timid appearance, posts on German seduction websites under the name of Aphantier (alpha animal). Aphantier then directed us to split up into smaller teams of two or three participants and to spread out across Heidelberg's main shopping street to begin our seduction practice. At lair meetings, there are often a few participants who, despite being pressured into taking action, remain passive. But most participants are able to at least initiate a couple of flirtatious conversations and get one or two phone numbers. Occasionally, a student manages to immediately take one of the approached women on an "instant date" to a nearby café or ice cream stand. At the end of each lair meeting, the entire group typically reassembles for a "debriefing" in which the participants report and reflect on the day's results and lessons. During my first debriefing in Heidelberg I also received advice from more senior participants, who had already been "in the game" for a number of years.

In contrast to the informally organized lair meeting, a bootcamp is a commercial event led by professional or semi-professional dating coaches, with prices ranging from several hundred to several thousand dollars for a weekend or full week of field training. The bootcamp I went through in Frankfurt, Germany was organized by the Los Angeles-based dating advice company Real Social Dynamics (RSD), one of the largest companies on the international bootcamp market. Three well-known

international dating coaches and their assistants trained nine students including myself over the course of three consecutive evenings and nights. The three coaches each paid special attention to three students. My assigned coach was the twenty-four-year-old Julien, a Swiss American who had made a name for himself in the Seduction Community as the wingman of RSD head coach Owen Cook.

The bootcamp began with Julien's repeated admonition: "You always do what your coach tells you to do." In practice, this meant that a student must follow the instructions of his coach and approach a woman or group of women when ordered to do so. This emphasis on obedience stems from the explicit purpose of a bootcamp: to drill the student out of his "comfort zone" and acquaint him with behavior that runs counter to his "social conditioning." On three consecutive nights in Frankfurt nightclubs, Julien demonstrated his womanizing skills to his students, while observing and commenting on our efforts. Though the general atmosphere among the coaches, assistants, and students was animated and playful, the bootcamp—as the military metaphor already implies—also had a strong disciplinarian component. This content reflects the diffused ascetic values hidden behind the hedonism of the Seduction Community.

The Hidden Asceticism of the Seduction Community

There is a discrepancy between much of the marketing of the Seduction Community and its actual teachings and practices. In the marketing of the different seduction schools, the teachings are presented as

a quick-fix, as an easy and fast way of obtaining the skills necessary to attract and seduce beautiful women. However, as soon as the student digs into his newly acquired book or DVD, he will discover that a good deal of self-discipline and hard work are required; there are sacrifices to be made. Underneath a surface layer of marketing, the teachings of the Seduction Community revolve around endurance, sober abstinence from naïve romanticism, critical self-observation, never-ending development of the self, and a tremendous rationalization of social life and intimacy. If the student eventually manages to master the Venusian arts, he will be able to have sex with many attractive women. However, the relation between means and goal becomes a complicated one. The more involved he becomes with the Seduction Community, the more a student's system of self-discipline will take priority in his practice. The reason for this shift is that adhering to a system of self-discipline is intimately connected to the formation of a certain lifestyle, self-understanding and worldview that is often purported to effect an empowering transformation of the self.

The asceticism of the Seduction Community consists of its members orienting their lives towards a system of self-discipline—a system that creates a peculiar kind of meaningful, identity-shaping suffering. This system of self-discipline is neither religious nor aimed at otherworldly rewards, as are the ascetic traditions of many religions. The self-inflicted suffering of the dedicated practitioner of the Venusian arts can nevertheless be seen as an ascetic practice because, to him, it is part of a systematic

effort to achieve a transformation of the self. This transformation, like all ascetic transformations, involves a total remaking of a person's lifestyle, self-understanding, and worldview in order to achieve a more empowered and enlightened way of being.

The suffering of the Venusian artist derives from his need to rationalize and objectify his social interactions and intimate relationships, and to constantly place himself in stressful and challenging situations "outside of his comfort zone." All this causes the boundary between recreational socializing and work to blur, especially in the case of socializing in nightclubs and bars. Those who practice the Venusian arts perceive nightlife as a means towards rational gain maximization, so that it loses much of its recreational function and can instead even become a scene of hard labor.

It first might seem strange to speak of suffering in this context, for nightclubs and bars are usually seen as revolving around fun and pleasurable social interaction. However, in these settings, the man who fully embraces the Venusian arts feels obliged to convey status, to employ his techniques, to constantly examine himself critically, and to harden himself to countless harsh rejections by women—all while not falling back on the "liquid courage" offered by drinking alcoholic beverages. The Venusian artist therefore requires a high work ethic. As dating coach DJ Fuji explains at an international dating conference: "The more difficult the task, the higher your work ethic has to be." (2007) According to Mystery, a founding figure of the Seduction Community, the direct purpose of going to bars and nightclubs

is to systematically improve one's "social calibration" and internalize one's "skill set":

A Venusian artist goes into the field [bars and nightclubs] night after night primarily to improve his calibration and to internalize his skill set. You're not trying to 'get this one girl' or even 'get laid tonight.' Rather, you practice with the long-term goal of having a powerful social skill set in the future... (Mystery 2007, 42)

Notice two things: First, the rewards are moved to the future while the present becomes a scene of labor. Second, the student is advised to emotionally disconnect from direct and immediate successes (getting laid tonight) and rejections, as well as from a fascination with this or that special woman. Direct successes, the pains of rejection, and love for one specific woman: these are exactly the matters men would normally care about most, but obsessing over them is seen as an obstacle when the goal is to systematically improve one's skills set so as to seduce large numbers of women over a long period of time. In his online video blog, Owen Cook explains that the practitioner needs to "live drama free," indifferent to the low, earthly distractions that occupy the petty emotional lives of "the masses" (Cook 2012a). Also, practically speaking, emotionally detaching oneself from the outcome of any specific interaction with any specific woman is a vital component of being an effective Venusian artist:

If the outcome of any specific approach becomes important to you, it'll have subtle, insidious effects on your game and compromise your win. You really do have to not care. (Mystery 2007, 42)

Despite sharing this general insistence on the importance of emotional indifference and a strong work ethic, the central schools and doctrines of the Seduction Community differ somewhat in the ways in which their most devoted adherents discipline themselves. On one side of the spectrum, the adherents of the Mystery Method mechanically execute a step-by-step method, which involves them memorizing, rehearsing and eventually telling hours and hours of prefabricated stories ("routines") to women. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are the "natural game" schools which teach students to interact in a more natural, spontaneous fashion. They contend that tricks do not work and that you actually need to transform yourself in an authentically attractive person. These different approaches to the Venusian arts entail students undergoing slightly different forms of suffering.

The greatest discomfort that adherents of the Mystery Method face is their increasing difficulty in interacting with others in an unpremeditated or natural way. Therefore, as the student becomes more skilled, his mastery of preplanned routines of interaction also disconnects him from all the non-practitioners, which often exacerbates a sense of loneliness. As part of their practice, students of this school will likely spend more and more time socializing, only to find themselves increasingly disconnected from the people in their surroundings. Groups of people become "sets"; attractive women become "targets"; their friends "obstacles." This also entails an objectification and thorough rationalization of social life. In this vein, the occasional feminist criticism that the Seduction Community

objectifies women (Johnson 2005) misses the broader pattern: members of the Seduction Community not only objectify women, but also other men—and they first and foremost objectify themselves. Described by Mystery as “biological machines” (2007, 15-16), these men thoroughly rationalize their emotional and intimate life in order to become the object of female desire.

Whereas the most devoted practitioners of the Mystery Method suffer because they systematize, mechanize and routinize their conduct, the practitioners of natural game-oriented schools suffer in a different fashion. Real Social Dynamics (RSD), the largest dating advice company representing the natural game philosophy, advises practitioners to undergo a “deep identity-level change.” It does not call upon practitioners to painstakingly systematize, mechanize and routinize their conduct; however, its gurus and devoted students are perhaps even more ascetic, because they conceive of their practice as a laborious and never-ending “quest” for personal growth. Such a quest requires practitioners to constantly break out of their “comfort zones” in order to gradually expand them, thereby pushing themselves to greater personal heights.

Breaking out of your “comfort zone” is, of course, uncomfortable, potentially humiliating, and even painful, but it is essential to your growth as a confident womanizer. “I believe in pain,” RSD coach Ozzie explained to an audience of students in 2012 in Las Vegas. Only undergoing pain, he argued, can lead to growth because “there is no growth inside of your comfort zone.” According to this logic, staying comfortable—that is,

not seeking out challenges, not exposing yourself to humiliation, rejection and pain—equals stagnation in life and should be avoided at all costs. Julien, my bootcamp coach, regularly compared comfortable stagnation to a slow death. In a similar vein, RSD head coach Owen Cook has expressed his disgust for “the masses” that give in to their biological inclination to settle for a comfortable life that allows them to avoid investing time and effort in personal growth (Cook 2012b).

Ironically, perhaps, those same RSD coaches also teach that it is much easier to seduce women when you are not in pain but are actually enjoying yourself in social settings. During the bootcamp I participated in, Julien repeatedly instructed me to have fun, beam with joy, and avoid a serious state of mind. He frequently reminded everyone that “pickup is fun,” providing visual testimony to this statement by cheerfully jumping up and down in the nightclub. In the same breath, however, he would stress the importance of being willing to undergo suffering and pain. The idea here is that it is strategically advantageous to have fun and project joy while interacting with women, but that if, for whatever reason, you are not enjoying yourself in any particular situation or moment—the most important thing is that you keep on working. Owen Cook has frequently described situations in which he felt miserable, sleep deprived, and hungry, and has wanted nothing more than to leave the nightclub, eat, and go to bed. However, true to the ideal of asceticism, he claims that he punishes “his brain” in those unhappy situations, and “hammers it out until the bitter fucking end.” He

recommends giving up only after “every last damned girl has gone home and there’s nothing left” (Cook 2012c).

All the different forms of voluntary suffering described above are meaningful to those practitioners who see in them a means to a full transformation of the self. Those active in the Seduction Community frequently remind each other that there is more to the Venusian arts than having sex with women. The Venusian arts, they argue, also offer a new way of living, a road to true manliness, a key to extending one’s control over one’s destiny. And perhaps such statements are less absurd than they might seem at first, for what the seduction schools offer are various “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988). In other words, they provide the self-helpers with tools to transform themselves into a new type of subject—one that more closely approximates a particular ideal of empowerment and perfection, a state embodied by the quasi-holy master of the Venusian arts.

Those determined to master the Venusian arts create for themselves a lifestyle that centers on self-improvement through the systematic seduction of women. They furthermore see themselves as creating a new way of relating to their social surroundings by attempting to convey superior status in all social gatherings. Furthermore, they tend to adopt an outlook that centers on sociobiological and evolutionary psychology-based understandings of the human condition. In his book *The Mystery Method*, Mystery devotes one chapter—fittingly titled “The Ultimate Purpose of Life”—to outlining his “Darwinian” theory on the purpose of human existence (2007, 10-24).

Despite the insistent focus in all sections of the community on the transformative potentials of their practice, there is a debate about whether the path of transformation itself should be seen as the practitioner’s highest goal. Is the path or journey of self-discipline, empowerment and personal growth the ultimate goal? Or are enhanced self-discipline, personal growth and empowerment merely a useful side effect of learning how to seduce women? Owen Cook seems to believe the former; that the path itself is the ultimate goal. He argues that “the journey of success with women” is ultimately more important than the direct results (i.e. sexual intercourse with many women) because it is that “powerful journey” that “changes the person you become...on a core level” (Cook 2012b). He explains that when you are involved in “pickup” for a longer period of time, you tend to change what “you’re in it for,” moving away from hoping to accomplish the “petty goal” of effortless sexual successes (Cook 2012b). In contrast, a senior member of his team of coaches at RSD, Jeff Allen believes that disciplined personal growth and empowerment are only a “happy side effect” of becoming successful with women and not an independent goal on itself:

The guys who get good want to FUCK, plain and simple. For me this has always been about getting laid; the self-actualization and all that shit was a happy side effect. (Allen 2012a)

Finally, to understand the asceticism of the Seduction Community, and modern self-help in general, it is important to realize that—as with traditional religious

asceticism—it belongs to a tiny yet potentially influential elite of devotees and virtuosi. Serious attempts to closely imitate the, supposedly exemplary, identity transformation of a seduction guru such as Owen Cook are rare. Thus, it is certainly not the case that all practitioners of the Venusian arts are ascetic to the same degree. There are perhaps a few million people worldwide who have come across a DVD, book, or television program produced by the Seduction Community. Of this gigantic mass of predominantly passive consumers, only a minuscule part is or has been actively engaged with the community. Furthermore, engagement with the community takes many forms, ranging from participation in Internet discussions or attendance at public lectures, to live practice sessions in bars or nightclubs. Generally speaking, these varying levels of engagement in the community are connected to varying degrees of commitment to the ascetic-hedonistic values of the Seduction Community.

For instance, it is clear that students attending lair meetings are, on average, much less committed to the distinctive values of the Seduction Community than the students participating in an expensive bootcamp, let alone than the professional bootcamp coaches and their advanced assistants. Many students at lair meetings profess that they are simply looking for a steady girlfriend, and they usually immediately leave the seduction scene as soon as they meet a woman willing to fulfill that role. Among elite circles, this kind of attitude is looked down upon, since it conflicts with the ideal of continued growth and

a disciplined long-term commitment to the playboy lifestyle. An experience from my fieldwork illustrates this point. At the end of my bootcamp training weekend, I jokingly suggested in front of the entire group of participants that I might immediately find a girlfriend and settle down. One of Julien's assistants quickly admonished me on the necessity of avoiding relationships from interfering with one's learning process.

This same uncompromising ascetic spirit also is also expressed in a video message by Jeff Allen on RSD's online forum. He calls on fellow pickup devotees to ridicule, berate, or ignore every online post that addresses "nooby" issues such as how to win over any particular special girl, how to find true love, how to avoid having to go out constantly, how to avoid having to change one's personality, etc. These kinds of posts, he explains, betray "an inner resistance to the player lifestyle." It is important, Allen adds, not to further reinforce a nooby's inner resistance with positive or polite responses that will ultimately hurt him by allowing him to slide back into the comfortable passivity of his familiar life. Instead he must become aware that he needs to "get more girls" by remaining active and taking constant risks (Allen 2012b). In other words, there is work to be done and hedonistic rewards to be earned.

The Asceticism of the Larger Self-Help Movement

Although the Seduction Community is dominated by discourses drawn from socio-biology and evolutionary theory, much of its conceptual content exists in relationship with a longer historical

tradition of self-help asceticism as well. Through this longer self-help tradition—as well as, more generally, through the ascetic work ethic incorporated in “the spirit of capitalism”—the Seduction Community ultimately connects to the inner-worldly asceticism that sprang from a particular psychological reaction to the Protestant Reformation. Weber argues that the inner-worldly asceticism of the early Protestants gradually detached itself from religion (Weber 2003). In its secularized form, this asceticism—the work ethic—fuels capitalism, taking hold wherever capitalism has spread. Throughout the twentieth century, that ascetic work ethic diffused further, spreading out over many new cultural fields while becoming harder to recognize (Gorski 2003, 172). Among the most important of these fields are the modern self-help movements, including the Seduction Community.

An inner-worldly asceticism permeates every circle of virtuosi within the self-help movement. It is hard to find examples of self-help discourses and movements that lack the ideal of self-improvement through an ascetic focus on self-discipline. Even a simplistic and seemingly discipline-undermining movie such as *The Secret* has strong ascetic tendencies. The various self-help gurus featured in the 2006-movie argue that the universe simply fulfills all your wishes if only you have a positive mental attitude. “The Secret” turns out to be the “law of attraction” which states that everything that comes into your life, you attracted into it. If something bad happens to you, this was because you attracted disaster by thinking negative thoughts in the recent past. If something

good happens to you, this was because, in the recent past, you thought positive thoughts. So if you think positively all the time, you will become rich, healthy, esteemed and beloved within no time. No real labor in the outside world is required; you can simply think yourself rich. However there is a catch: for as it turns out, one needs to perform a good deal of ascetic labor on one’s mind. One needs to purify oneself of negative thoughts by constantly monitoring one’s mind—reminiscent of the way traditional Christian ascetics sought to rid themselves of sinful thoughts.

As many scholarly treatments have indeed overlooked the workings of asceticism in the contemporary self-help movement, the movement has often been misinterpreted as nothing but a symptom of how individuals are surreptitiously repressed and exploited by capitalist society (McGee 2005; Ehrenreich 2009). For example, Micki McGee’s polemical study, *Self-Help, Inc.*, offers a rich account of modern self-help discourses and recognizes that these discourses promote exhausting labor on the self. However, she describes this labor as a misguided self-enslavement to a repressive capitalist system. She argues, for instance, that “self-help can lead workers into a new sort of *enslavement*: into a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly belabored” (McGee 12, my italics).

However, by revealing the asceticism of the very secular Seduction Community, this paper portrays self-help, not merely or primarily as a repressive force, as does McGee, but also as a potentially creative force that offers people practical “technologies” through which they can transform, discipline, and empower

themselves. Among the elite practitioners of the Seduction Community, a diffused, inner-worldly asceticism and the hedonistic goal of sexual expressivity seamlessly intertwine. This illustrates how asceticism and hedonism are able to join forces within the self-help tradition, which in turn permits us a glimpse at the idea that modern self-help provides popular culture with a dose of ascetic hedonism.

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Response

The Hedonistic Pleasure of Asceticism

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Modern self-help books often promise us a “quick-fix” that in fact entails quite a bit of work. As Eric C. Hendriks demonstrates in his essay on the “ascetic hedonism” of pick-up artists in a shady corner of self-help known as the “seduction community,” books like *The Game* and TV shows like *The Pickup Artist* promise easy hedonistic sexual rewards but require tremendous self-discipline, self-denial and suffering. What seems like a relatively straightforward, if cringe-worthy, method of seduction actually involves participants adopting a radically new understanding of themselves and their social world. The “Venusian artist” lifestyle Hendriks describes is profoundly ascetic, involving “endurance, sober abstinence from naive romanticism, critical self-observation” and a “never-ending development of the self” (12). If this “identity-shaping suffering” sounds exhausting, we should not lose sight that path supposedly leads to sexual fulfillment. Yet, the advertised quick fix of seducing a beautiful woman leads to something else entirely: a disciplinary practice for self-building that turns out to be pleasurable in its own right.

In the seduction community, the hedonistic goals of sex are continually delayed as ascetic means take precedence over sexual conquest. The practitioners find that self-discipline, self-described

as a “path” or “quest,” becomes just as, if not more, important than sex itself. Hendriks notes the similarity between the ascetic hedonism in the seduction community and the ascetic work ethic at the heart of the capitalism as described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The self-help movement is undoubtedly part of a capitalist world driven by a religious self-discipline as Hendriks claims. However, in Hendriks’ description of the seduction community, hedonism follows asceticism. By hedonistic, Hendriks means both something that is pleasurable and also of questionable ethics; a Venusian artist need not act ethically toward others in this game of seduction, even as he is expected to maintain an ethics of the self. Hendriks’ critique of the seduction community focuses on the way in which it locks its students into laborious self-discipline and ascetic suffering without the assurance of a (rather ethically dubious) pleasurable pay off.

While he does claim that asceticism and hedonism are intertwined here, Hendriks does not ask whether suffering itself may be pleasurable for its adherents. In Weber’s formulation, labor merely for the sake of the reward (here profit, not sex) becomes suspect under capitalism. Capitalism for Weber requires that labor becomes an absolute end in itself, a “calling.”¹ Within the development of the Protestant spirit of ascetic labor, the means take over the ends as we adhere to a duty whose very reward is its continued operation. The ideal entrepreneur Weber describes as wanting “nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of a having done his job well” would similarly describe the ethic at

the heart of the seduction community where participants also find the pleasure of self-empowerment and autonomy in their practice.² Asceticism both within capitalism and within the seduction community is a source of pleasure in its own right.

The fact that we frequently refer to love and markets as a “games” reveals this paradox at the heart of asceticism. Games after all, are not only pleasurable for winning, but become a type of calling in of themselves; you may not have won the girl, but you can have fun trying to win her. The game metaphor highlights the similarities between capitalism and these methods of seduction, both which rely on a strategy of rationally maximizing labor and gain within a complicated social field. Weber famously referred to this as “the disenchantment of the world” through capitalism’s “rationalism on the basic problems of life.”³ We can’t help but notice that seduction, something seemingly outside of rational discourse and control, is increasingly subject to it within self-help literature and Western culture more broadly.

Contemporary seduction attempts to rationalize desire, historically described as outside of purely intellectual and strategic understanding. In doing so, it rationalizes the entire social world by defining everyone within it as he or she relates to the maximization of the player’s utility. Not only does the relationship between lovers take on the framework of the “player” and the “target,” but an entire social world is described in terms of how it maximizes gain: groups of people are “sets,” friends are “obstacles” or “wingmen” (14). The seduction community demonstrates how

thoroughly the rationalization of social life under capitalism has been extended to social life down to our most intimate desires. Besides the games of seduction, we can see this rationalization in the pervasive use of data-driven algorithms in online dating like OKCupid and eHarmony, among others.

But the question of whether seduction *can* be completely rationalized is largely irrelevant here. If obviously cannot, just as the social world under capitalism cannot be completely rationalized. We desire new markets, new women, new situations in which to practice our calculating games of love and labor, not only in the pursuit of some distant reward but as pleasurable practices in their own right. In short, we like playing the game even more than winning it. The corrosive effect of this pleasure of rationalization further extended into social relationships demonstrates how even the most intimate relationships are circumscribed under capitalism. The social world only exists as a field in which to play our own games for the pleasure of mastery and control itself; other people exist for us only in terms of their use-value for our strategies. While Hendriks concludes that the intense focus on asceticism in modern self-help reflects the discipline of the individual under capitalism, we should be just as alarmed with how it impoverishes the relationships of our social world.

Notes

1 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1990), 62.

2 *ibid*, 71.

3 *ibid*, 76.