

Escaping The Self: Alcoholism, Spirituality, Masochism, Other Flights From Burden Of Selfhood

By Roy F. Baumeister

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Overwhelmed by the demands of creating and maintaining a positive self-image in their personal and professional lives, some people are taking to escapist practices - drug and alcohol use is increasing, suicide rates are rising, exotic and foreign cults are flourishing. Why is it that there is such a strong urge to escape in a people as blessed as the middle classes? This book presents a view of the darkest side of human nature - showing how powerful experiences from religious ecstasy to bulimia can relieve the burden of maintaining a personal identity. Filled with lively examples and incisive analysis, this book enhances our understanding of behaviour both familiar and baffling.

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews
A perceptive study of modern culture's overriding fascination with the self and identity. Baumeister (Psychology/Case Western Reserve Univ.) states that the history of the self in Western culture began by equating it simply with the physical body; the self has now grown to be regarded as vast, unique, important--containing personality traits, the wellsprings of creativity, the keys to personal fulfillment, and the solution to life's dilemmas (all of which is absurd to cultures that don't share our zealous faith in the inner self). The more inflated this self, Baumeister argues, the more burdensome it becomes: In the wake of calamity, or to escape its demands, people flee from it. For example, says Baumeister, bulimics, painfully preoccupied with themselves and the way they look to others, go on binges to escape their tyrannical self- images. During a binge, meaningful thought is abandoned for a narrow focus on immediate sensations; the troubled self disappears from awareness by becoming preoccupied with one cookie after another. In masochism--most common among successful, individualistic people at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy- -the competent, virtuous, energetic, and decisive selves these people maintain are gratefully relinquished by submission to the master. And, through pain, the self is reduced to the body, and the world is shrunk to one's immediate surroundings. Baumeister notes that the cult of self-esteem--which has so raised people's expectations and obligations (looking better, making love better, success at work, play, dieting and saying clever things)--will be dangerous in the long run as they try, through aberrant behaviors, to escape this self-imposed despotism. And perhaps self-esteem in itself is not always desirable. ``Weren't self- importance and overconfidence two of the factors that embroiled the US in Vietnam?" Baumeister asks. Well written in nontechnical language; unique and persuasive. -- *Copyright ©1991, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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