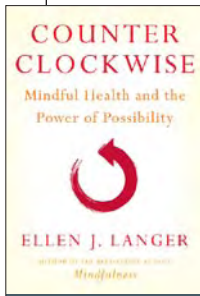


books

▶ BEYOND THE PLACEBO EFFECT



Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility

by Ellen J. Langer.
Random House, 2009
(\$25)

When she was in her 20s, Harvard University psychologist Ellen J. Langer fainted occasion-

ally, and doctors said she might have epilepsy. She decided to take the matter into her own hands, mentally “catching” herself sooner and sooner when she felt faint, until the fainting disappeared. That empowering experience set the tone for her remarkable 30-year career, much of which she has spent figuring out how to help people take almost miraculous control over their lives.

Her 1989 book *Mindfulness*, summarizing a decade of ingenious experiments, became an instant classic. Now, in her new book, *Counterclockwise*, with more of those experiments under her belt, she presents a more thoughtful and thorough look at the power of mindful thinking: “the simple process of actively drawing distinctions.”

Langer says by changing the way we observe and label our experience—specifically, by becoming more aware of the *variability* we often mindlessly ignore—we can improve our health and quite possibly prolong our lives. In a recent study that makes the point, Langer and a Harvard colleague, psychologist Alia Crum, told cleaning personnel in Boston hotels that the considerable exercise they got every day in their job satisfied government guidelines for living an active lifestyle. Their activity levels did not change, but their perspective did, and they soon lost more weight and body fat than control subjects did.

Langer attributes outcomes such as this one to the placebo effect: when people are persuaded to think mindfully about what they are doing, they adopt more positive and empowering beliefs about themselves, and they feel and perform better.

The book’s title refers to a study conducted in 1979 in which two small groups of elderly men were housed for a week in quarters simulating the world of 1959. Members of the experimental group were told to imagine themselves

living in that time and also told, “you will feel as well as you did in 1959.” Another group was told merely to *talk* about that year and that “you *may* feel as well as you did.”

Signs of aging decreased in both groups, with greater gains for the experimental subjects—an effect, perhaps, of the difference in the instructions they received. Subjects in both groups also gained weight (a desirable outcome), with the experimental subjects gaining more. This change makes the study results difficult to interpret, however, because weight gain alone makes elderly people appear more youthful.

That said, *Counterclockwise* succeeds in presenting powerful ideas about largely untapped human abilities, grounded in a body of fiendishly intriguing research.

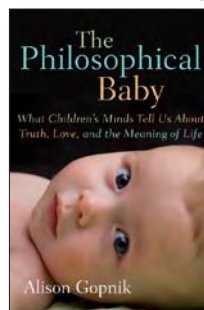
—Robert Epstein

▶ INFANT INTELLIGENCE

The Philosophical Baby: What Children’s Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life

by Alison Gopnik, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009
(\$25)

Most parents want to believe their children are brilliant. But how much do babies really



understand about the world around them? In her provocative new book *The Philosophical Baby*, Alison Gopnik, a developmental psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, asserts that babies and young children are in some ways “actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and even more conscious than adults are.”

These claims are bold, but Gopnik backs them up with dozens of empirical studies, many conducted in her own laboratory. At the heart of her argument is the idea that children have evolved to be the “R&D department of the human species.” While adults are kept busy seeking food and avoiding danger, children are free to let their minds wander in the “useful uselessness of immaturity.” They can ask questions their parents would not conceive of, occasionally stumbling on solutions no adult could have taught them.

In this way, Gopnik claims, babies behave like little scientists. Toddlers build theories about the people and things around them not just by observation and imitation, but also by running “experiments” on their surroundings—experiments their parents might not always appreciate, as they may be messy or disruptive. Comparing young children to researchers is a suggestive

CREDIT



» Neuro-Economic Boom

Does sex really persuade us to buy a product? Why do economies slip into depressions? And how much do we let our emotions influence our decision making? A spate of new books tries to answer these and other questions about how we make our choices, why they are sometimes so far off the mark and what their consequences are.

Animal Spirits—How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Global Capitalism (Princeton University Press, 2009) examines the relation between economic fluctuations and psychological forces. Economists George Akerlof and Robert

Shiller explore how “animal spirits”—the term coined by economist John Maynard Keynes to describe levels of consumer confidence—lie at the heart of such questions as why there is unemployment and why minorities are often particularly poor.

