



The Art of Failure: The Anti Self-Help Guide

Neel Burton

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We spend most of our time and energy chasing 'success', such that we have little left over for thinking and feeling, being and relating. As a result, we fail in the deepest possible way. We fail as human beings.

The Art of Failure explores what it means to be successful, and how, if at all, true success can be achieved.

Dr Neel Burton is a psychiatrist and philosopher who lives and teaches in Oxford, England. His other books include *The Meaning of Madness* and *Plato's Shadow*, both also with Acheron Press.

The Art of Failure: The Anti Self-Help Guide Details

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Gareth says

The self-help book has acquired a bad press, earning a reputation for dealing in platitudes, patronising, and generally failing to engage the more sophisticated and demanding reader. In styling itself as an 'anti self-help guide', Neel Burton's 'The Art of Failure' therefore sets out to prove that self-help literature need not succumb to lowest-common-denominator triteness and tedious mantras of self-motivation.

The book's basic premise is that the modern Western definition of success is deeply flawed, presenting us with the false goals of material comfort, fame, power and hedonism. In contrast, Burton argues, Western philosophical and spiritual traditions have largely been in agreement that true happiness lies in accepting 'failure'; that we are limited, mortal, subject to frequent and unforeseen setbacks, in the face of which we do better to develop virtues of honesty, friendship, patience, and moderation.

To be fair, this is not perhaps a lesson that the much maligned self-help guides have ignored, but the virtue of Burton's book is that he is not afraid to enter into these topics in more appropriate depth and detail. Throughout, his points are illustrated by recourse to theories, ideas and anecdotes cherry-picked from the lives and writings of the great philosophers - Plato and Aristotle (who feature heavily throughout), Epicurus and Heraclitus, but also representatives of the existentialist tradition, such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Sartre. Burton also draws on his background in psychology in ranging through contemporary issues in psychiatry as well as the continued relevance of the classic approaches of Freud and Jung. Such discussion is augmented throughout with references to literature, art, religion and history, with the result that Burton's material is always engaging and interesting, presented in an accessible and clear manner.

However, these many merits aside, this breadth of topic and material also at times serves to detract from the book's overall purpose. Given the detail in which certain subjects are presented, the central theme - exploration of the 'art of failure' - can sometimes get lost in more or less technical expositions of theories and accounts. For instance, the chapter on free will, whilst providing an admirably concise overview of the main philosophical controversies, arguably strays too far from the main narrative path and fails to maintain a clear sense of the context and purpose of the discussion. I had a similar feeling at other points in the book, and, while Burton makes frequent attempts to signpost the reader as to how the material under discussion relates to the main topic, he struggles to do this consistently and seamlessly. As a result, the book sometimes feels more like a collection of well-written and interesting essays than a unified treatment of a central theme.

This said, the book is well worth reading. Burton's attitude to his material is always thoughtful, never content merely to outline this or that idea, but always seeking to draw lessons and insights. There is much, then, that average readers will benefit from - that will 'help' them! - and there are numerous points at which I found myself absorbed, nodding in agreement, or making mental notes to find out more about this or that. Burton's scholarship is excellent, his tone always intelligent but clear - a rare combination of skills - so whilst certain aspects of the book might be improved upon, it is far from being a failure.

Peter says

Although the title seems promising and the subtitle even more, I am afraid that the book is disappointing.

Although the author is still young (31 years, he is a practicing psychiatrist, graduate neurologist and "philosopher". This book touches on a lot of subjects of philosophy, psychology and psychiatry, it does not do anymore than touch upon these subjects. Burton quotes a whole range of sources from Socrates to Wittgenstein, but after finishing this book, you remain unsatisfied.

The book and its chapters are too short to get a grasp of the complexity of the issues raised (determinism, free will, madness, death, ...).

Fortunately Burton refers to several classic works (Thomas Nagel, Plato, Aristotle, Kierkegaard, ...) that are much more thorough in discussing these subjects.

Carl Norman says

This book does not live up to the promise of its title. Had I had the opportunity to examine it in a bookstore, I would not have purchased it. There is no unifying theme. There are only general discussions related to the chapter titles such as mania, fear, courage, ghosts, madness, and meaning. If I could get a refund on this, I would.
