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CTRL: A Critical Examination of the Wellness Industry

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## **CTRL: A Critical Examination of the Wellness Industry**

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This is individualism's greatest trick: in an individualist culture, every need that could have been fulfilled by our relationships is forced, instead, to rely on capital exchange.

- Rayne Fisher-Quann, *Rayne Fisher-Quann's Seven Deadlier Sins*

Perhaps we can learn to ride the tides of life by engaging directly with it instead of perfecting ourselves for its performance.

- Sadhbh O'Sullivan, *Wellness Culture Won't Save Us. It's Only Making Us More Sick.*



**Part 1: CTRL**

*Control the controllables.* Every morning I wake up to the sound of a distant birdsong... through the speaker of my iPhone. A few months ago, I clicked through every alarm sound trying to decipher which noise would inspire me to get out of bed with at least a semi-positive outlook on life. I don't just want to control exact minute I wake up (either 7:27 a.m., 7:42 a.m., or 8:20 a.m. depending on how ambitious I felt the night before), I want to control the exact mood I begin the day with. After turning my alarm birds off, and opening the window to let the *live* bird sounds in, I look to my nightstand and find my purple plastic pill case—the next agent of control. I pop the lid on the compartment of the day and toss back a few hundred milligrams of psychiatric medications in a more concerted effort to affect the mood of the day. I then go to the sink and wash my face with soap that costs \$40 (\$10/oz.) to ensure that my pores are as clean as possible; I may not be able to erase the genes that gave me acne-prone skin, but I do have the power to employ a chemical arsenal against them. *Control the controllables.* I follow with a sunscreen called Supergoop. This is super important. For years, my mother has been warning me about what will happen if I don't wear sunscreen: not only will I get skin cancer, but I will also end up with a freckled complexion, which is also, apparently, unfavorable. I curl my eyelashes to make people think I'm a bright-eyed morning person (even though I went to bed at 2 a.m. after scrolling on TikTok for three hours), and then things generally fall apart. You see, I have mastered these first five steps of my day. I have calculated a way to *control the controllables*—or so I tell myself at 2 a.m. while choosing between 7:27, 7:42, and 8:20. My mastery of control eventually vanishes as I cross the hallway and enter the kitchen. I start out strong, making myself a cup of jasmine green tea because, well, because I like it, but also notably because I heard it's good for your enamel (unlike coffee), and I'm in a constant state of ambient stress about my teeth

and gums eroding. *Control the controllables*. If I am so unfortunate as to open the wrong kitchen cabinet I am confronted by a collection of green, brown, white, and pink powders that allegedly contain just about every nutrient I need to be a high-functioning member of society. These various expensive powders quite literally exist to *control the controllables*—but there is one problem: they’re disgusting. I like bread too much to forego my sourdough with butter for something called “BeWell Superfood Greens”. So, there comes a point every morning when I sit at the kitchen table, drink my jasmine green tea, eat my sourdough toast, think about how I’m missing all the nutrients sitting in the cabinet, and stare out the open window at the pretty little birds. This is when I have the familiar realization—that somehow feels incredibly profound every time—that I am not *really* in control. I will never *really* be in control, at least not via these calculated rituals. Settling into this daily revelation, I hear Fran Lebowitz’s voice in my head bluntly reminding me, “Your bad habits can kill you... but your good habits won’t save you” (“Department of Sports & Health” 0:06:30-0:06:41) and I begin to face my daily responsibilities.

I keep up these routines (and more) because I feel it is the responsible thing to do—I feel I have a responsibility to control every aspect of my individual experience, or at the very least make an effort to do so, in order to be able to *show up* for others, for my day, for the world. If I don’t make sure I am mentally and physically up to par, or *well*, before approaching a new day, I fear I will get left behind, unable to keep up with the pace of my mounting responsibilities as a young adult. I also know what it’s like to feel completely out of control, completely helpless: it’s my least favorite feeling, to say the least, and it’s one of the most common symptoms of depressive disorders (American Psychiatric Association 155). In fact, all this focus on my well-being, on alarm sounds and medications and jasmine green tea only came about after years of depression, waking up every day in a state of numb helplessness and existential dread. Sure, I’ve

been drinking green tea my entire life, but I never saw it as a moral responsibility, a *step in the right direction*, until I found myself grasping for control over my daily human experience. There is a shifty balance between viewing these routines of control as responsible and meaningful things to do, and seeing them as a collection of mini Band-Aids patching up deep bullet holes of exhaustion, expectation, and the desire to live my *best life*. Of course, that logic suggests that my life would indeed be better if I had the discipline to be in complete control of myself. If I stay disciplined enough within my individual world, I will be able to circumvent the gritty truths that burden me—the morning dread I try to stifle with gentle birdsong, the depression I try to suppress with the pill case of serotonin-norepinephrine re-uptake inhibitors, the physical insecurity I try to prevent with \$40 soaps and Supergoop sunscreens. Yet despite how precisely I try to manipulate my morning routine, I only buy myself about an hour of optimism before I'm back to the messy reality of daily life that was waiting for me all along.

## **Part 2: The Rise of Wellness**

The concept of wellness was introduced to the American public by Dr. Halbert L. Dunn—the founding father of the wellness industry—in his 1961 book *High Level Wellness*. Dunn, a career physician, was disillusioned by the American view of health as simply the absence of illness. In his eyes, we deserved more: we deserved to be able to attain “high-level wellness”, defined as, “an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable” (Dunn 4). The central tenets of wellness as defined by Dunn are continual progress, ever-expanding potential, and integration of the mind, body, and spirit. He believed that the pursuit of high-level wellness would be of increasing concern for the average American in a world evolving more rapidly than humans were able to keep up with (6).

Perhaps he even imagined a world in which people have calculated morning routines aimed at beefing up their personal fortitude in hopes of being able to weather the storm of another day in the 21st century. Who knows? When answering the question of why wellness would be so important to our prosperity, he gives an answer that can now, for better or worse, be perceived with a *you-don't-even-know-what's-coming* attitude:

“Fundamentally, it is because the world is changing so fast... Food and living necessities are more abundant, at least in the industrialized nations. And, medicine and public health are saving lives on an unprecedented scale... But population density and the patterns of industrial and urban development have brought increased tensions and social problems, into almost every facet of daily living. The concept of high-level wellness—in the individual, the family, the community—embodies the preventive aspects of many of the things which are now fighting in terms of disease and disability and social breakdown. Patching up is no longer sufficient.” (6-7)

In simple terms, modern life, despite its marvelous scientific and technological advancements, is becoming less and less suitable to simple human well-being. Instead of placing a focus on changing the patterns of development making our culture less suitable to human well-being, Dunn suggested that we change our individual lifestyles to conform to the new pressures. From his point of view, “Stability *is* possible, but it must be a dynamic type of stability. Man’s future rests upon the evolution of the mind in such a way that it can [deal] with problems in a relative way” (77). This is not to say that Dunn was acting in favor of the “patterns of industrial and urban development” that underlie his argument for wellness, but rather that he saw wellness

as a legitimate answer—and an answer with immediate individual impact—to the stress of modern life. His intentions were good. What Dunn suggested we do to prioritize wellness may come as a surprise to those familiar with the current-day wellness industry. He suggested that in order to achieve wellness, we must, for instance, build strong value systems, learn to communicate better, expand our minds through self-reflection, nurture our relationships with our elders, and cultivate self-respect (59, 94, 113, 132). He did not suggest that we buy... anything.

Most of the principles and perspectives that Dunn suggests we adopt reflect previous notions of well-being seen in the ancient medicinal systems of many Eastern collectivist cultures. Ayurveda, the oldest system of medicine in the world, dating back to 3,000 BC in India, emphasizes the idea of a body's constitution—an idiosyncratic balance of energy that one must recognize and keep balanced to ensure health (Hajar). In order to keep balance and prevent sickness, Ayurveda posits we must holistically attend to the mind, body, and spirit—a trifecta that Dunn points to repeatedly in his promotion of wellness (and yet fails to mention the origin of even once). It is unclear why Dunn did not explicitly extend his conceptualization of wellness back to the ancient systems that created the holistic health approach wellness now promotes, but it may have been an attempt, conscious or not, to appeal to America's individualist sentiment at the mid-century. Dunn's conceptualization relies on the assimilation of these ancient collectivist perspectives—that were discredited by the American healthcare system in favor of pharmaceutical models—to function alongside modern American culture. Crucial to this manipulation is Dunn's added dimension of "maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable" (4). In the American context, wellness is about not only finding balance in our lives, as the ancient principles suggest, but also pushing ourselves to achieve a better-than-good state of well-being, to be ahead of the curve; wellness is aspirational. To Dunn, and consequently to the



American public and current wellness industry, “wellness is a *direction of progress* toward an ever-higher potential of functioning” (6). The goal was to promote human well-being in the face of modern life’s mounting pressures and the proposed course of action was self-improvement. Over the last 50 years, the notion of an ever-higher potential for well-being has morphed into an ever-higher pressure to attain it.

Today, the word wellness has evolved to be synonymous with a multi-trillion-dollar global industry. It was in 1975, a decade after the release of Dunn’s *High-Level Wellness*, that John Travis, another physician, made the pivotal step to turn wellness into a profiting business. He set the tone for decades to come when he opened the first dedicated wellness center in Mill Valley, California—charging \$1500, equivalent to approximately \$8500 in 2024, for eight months of wellness training (Stará & Charvát 5). The training aimed to teach people how to “relax, experience themselves, remove barriers, improve communication skills, enhance creativity, envision desired outcomes, take full responsibility for themselves” (Ardell 9). Intentions aside, Travis created a service that promised to help people achieve wellness, and sold it for...*a lot* of money, setting the premise that wellness is both highly valuable (deserving of our money) and achievable in part through capital exchange. Over the next several decades, more and more wellness goods and services flooded the market, shifting what was once a suggested way of living into a suggested way of consuming. Interestingly, 21<sup>st</sup> century trends in the growth of the wellness industry coincide with generational events, namely 9/11, the 2016 presidential election, and the Covid-19 pandemic (Boyle; Meltzer). It is also worth noting that the initial rise of wellness coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, one of the most impactful and dramatic periods of change in American history. Evidently, Dunn was right to posit that rapidly changing social, cultural, and political landscapes necessitate a pointed focus on human well-being.

Perhaps because of this fact, throughout the last 60 years, wellness has etched out its spot in the fabric of American culture and economy. Whether it be at school, at work, or in casual conversation, we have all been encouraged to prioritize our wellness at some point in time. The American wellness industry, the driver of wellness culture, is currently valued at \$1.9 trillion dollars per the Global Wellness Institute's latest report, and constitutes the largest portion of the global industry's value both at large and per capita (GWI 3). Evidently, the demand for well-being in America is vast, and wellness has been accepted as the designated supplier. The industry is now comprised of a wide range of goods and services; much wider than the books and trainings of the 1960s and 70s. At some point along the way, it became less about the spread of knowledge and more about the spread of commerce. It is generally accepted that there are 11 sectors of the industry (from biggest to smallest market size): personal care and beauty; healthy eating and nutrition; physical activity; wellness tourism; public health, prevention and personalized medicine; traditional and complementary medicine; wellness real estate; mental wellness; spas; and workplace wellness; and thermal/mineral springs (GWI 10).

The industry as we know it does exist because of Dunn's work, but it is not as though he had a master plan to spawn a trillion-dollar enterprise. His theory that common threats to well-being are best addressed on an individual level planted the seeds for an industry that markets compartmentalized control as the path to attaining well-being, but he never implied that wellness was something that could be bought and sold. If anything, he was generally weary of rapid industrial development. Nonetheless, the wellness industry rapidly developed, largely because wellness businesses recognized the discrete effects of modern life's strain on well-being and offered a response in goods and services that provide control, often fleeting, over matters of individual stress. This compartmentalization of wellness into discrete issues that can be solved

challenges Dunn's view that wellness is a holistic endeavor, one which can hardly be reduced to its component parts.

The reduction of wellness into marketable component parts also creates a myriad of possibilities for the product developers of the world. Consider this: Is your work schedule so demanding that you don't have time to eat? You wouldn't be alone: A recent survey showed that of 5,000 American workers, only 29% could regularly block out time for lunch, and 62% of that group usually ended up working during that time anyway (ezCater 5). Luckily, the wellness industry is here to offer us solutions to the harmful effects of overworking. For instance, you could invest in your well-being by buying "BeWell Superfood Greens" that get you your nutrients without slowing you down, harming your almighty productivity. All you have to do is mix a spoonful of the dark green powder with 8 ounces of water, stir it up, and sip it in between emails. This ready-made, easily-marketable solution addresses the symptom (lack of nutrition) of a larger problem (a capitalist system that values productivity (and demands it) over workers' well-being), giving people a sense of control over the way their work impacts their lives.

The logic of this archetypal example reflects the contemporary interpretation of wellness as a way to regain control over our individual experience of life; a way to *control the controllables*. By promoting wellness as an agent of control over one's life in this way, wellness businesses are able to capitalize on the strain that modern life places on humans without assuming the responsibility of addressing the larger common causes of that strain. Interfacing with an industry like this in our daily lives covertly makes us believe that there is a better version of ourselves in the realm of possibility, waiting to be realized, that is so *well*—optimized—that it can weather the storm of daily life without falter. That version is our so-called *best self*, a figure filled with vitality, allegedly reachable through consistent focus on the self.

The pressure posed to us by the wellness industry to be in a state of optimized functioning at all times in all arenas of our life—to be our *best selves*—intentionally falls in line with larger societal pressures. There are core aspects of our personhood that our society universally places stress on: appearance, money, material possessions, and status. You may be thinking, *those things have almost nothing to do with wellness*—this is a wise instinct. But profit-focused wellness businesses observe how the stress to achieve those things manifests in us as discrete symptoms (anxiety, fatigue, lack of nutrition, limited body movement, etc.), and convince us that these symptoms *are* the issues we face, not the result of larger stressors. Instead of facing those larger, often inescapable, stressors—say, a demanding work schedule that leaves you hungry—the wellness industry suggests the solution is optimizing ourselves to reach those demands, finding a way to be *well* under those strained conditions. This positions well-being as the direct result of an individual’s actions, suggesting that instead of trying to create a work culture that accounts for the fact that humans have to eat to live, an uphill battle apparently, we must find a way to increase our individual resilience in order to remain well. When we internalize this logic, we believe that the issue started from within ourselves. Once we believe that *we* are the issue, that we are *an* issue, we feel control—we regain a sense of control over the compounding stressors of our immediate environment, relinquishing us from the need to change the larger pressures that burden us, while simultaneously boosting our perceived self-efficacy (Di Corrado et al. 2). *Control the controllables.*

The wellness industry offers us solutions for a variety of common stressors. Wellness diet plans—sold for hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars—offer control over one’s body; wellness-centric nutritional plans promise to make their devotees feel strong, healthy, and vivacious, not (just) thin. Wellness medical spas—with services ranging from lymphatic

drainage massages to Botox injections to facial microdermabrasion treatments—offer control over one’s beauty; they promise to make their patrons feel balanced, refreshed, and comfortable in their skin, not (just) beautiful. Workplace wellness initiatives—complete with online mental health counseling, incentivized health goals, and resources, resources, resources—offer control over one’s productivity; they promise to improve the employee’s health and morale, not (just) their capacity to produce in the workplace (Nopper & Zelickson 6). These particular wellness practices respond to stress created by unrealistic societal demands of thinness, “natural” beauty, and hyper-productivity respectively. While they provide an immediate and convenient sense of control to individuals in the name of wellness, and may effectively boost perceived well-being for a while, they are surface-level comforts. After all, without the presence and strength of these societal pressures, the wellness industry would not be able to profit from patching up the pain they create. True relief from the stress created by those expectations of thinness, “natural” beauty, and hyper-productivity will come through the breakdown of the expectations themselves, not through the optimization of ourselves to meet their demands.

### **Part 3: The Best Self**

At the center of wellness is the idea of the *best self*: an imagined version of oneself that fulfills all the human potential Dunn theorized in the midcentury. To embody your *best self* is to *live your best life*. While every person’s *best self* is unique to them, the 11 sectors of the wellness industry provide endless criteria to consider: appearance, productivity, nutrition, mental health, etc. The *best self* imagined in wellness culture is better defined as an ideal self, as it is inherently unreachable. How could you arrive at your *best self* when, according to Dunn’s wellness, your potential knows no end?

This idea of the *best self* preys on an inclination toward what we call personal growth. The nature of the ideal is that it can never be reached, yet when we buy into the notion that our *best self* is out there somewhere, just beyond our reach, waiting to be grown into, we become uncomfortable recognizing the distance between ourselves and our ideal: it welcomes feelings of inadequacy. This phenomenon is known as cognitive dissonance, a psychological state of discomfort that emerges when one perceives that their behaviors do not align with their values or beliefs (Harmon-Jones & Mills 3-5). Those who actively participate in the wellness industry likely believe that prioritizing their well-being is important. But if they adopt the industry's notion of endless optimization, they may feel like they are always a step behind—never fully living up to their values. Dunn, before the advent of the wellness industry, also recognized how cognitive dissonance related to wellness. While speaking on the importance of staying grounded to maintain mental health, he said, “You cannot have integrity of the self if your self-concept is of such an order that it is not consistent with who you are” (132). We cannot achieve self-respect, a critical component of mental health, unless our perception of ourselves is accurately reflected in our real-world behaviors (and vice versa). Critically, Dunn speaks on the power of adjusting one's self-concept to reflect “who you are”, an act of self-acceptance, while the wellness industry hinges on the inverse idea: that you should adjust yourself to reflect your self-concept, an act of self-improvement. This becomes problematic when one's self-concept is shaped by their *best self*. We can find strength by reconciling the differences between ourselves—the way we exist in the world—and our self-perception, but we will not find strength trying to reconcile the differences between ourselves and an idealized, aspirational self-perception—a *best self*. While Dunn's idea of endless improvement may have paved the way for *best self*, it is

critical to note he did not suggest that rejection of, or contempt for, the current self was a valid framework upon which one could improve their life. Depending on one's temperament, the cognitive dissonance of wellness could prompt detachment or, nonetheless, motivation; both outcomes begin with a critique of the self against an ideal.

Imagining ways that we may grow into future versions of ourselves and making changes to guide our lives in our desired direction—reconciling the differences—is not inherently misguided. Pursuits of personal growth can be enriching; committing to goals related to education, personal passions, or health, for instance, can lead to great achievement on personal, communal, and societal levels. This desire is not an issue, but the ways in which this desire can be manipulated, exploited, and used against us in the marketplace certainly is. The industry does this by transforming the well-intended pursuit of wellness into a moral responsibility and marketing wellness goods and services as *essential* catalysts in fulfilling that responsibility. In doing so, they inextricably tie our value as individuals to capital exchange.

The wellness industry tells us that it is our righteous duty to be *well*, to *prioritize ourselves*, by which they mean subjecting ourselves to a cycle of self-optimization—of calculated critique, often provided for us, and individualized improvement. This appeals, not by coincidence, to the American interest in personal growth. It is, by nature, a self-centered logic: *the only way that I can prosper is to focus on myself, virtually all the time*. When well-being is moralized by the industry in the interest of profit, detriments to well-being are posed as faults of the individual—the result of nothing other than the inability of the individual to care for themselves. When speaking of self-care as conceptualized by the wellness industry, this refers to the inability to fulfill one's own needs in body, mind, and spirit in isolation, regardless of external circumstance whether that be financial, familial, interpersonal, or otherwise. The pursuit of self-optimization,

of contorting ourselves to fit societal expectations, is sold by the wellness industry as self-care. Self-optimization is not self-care. Self-optimization is a cycle of critique and calculated improvement; the antithesis of the awareness, acceptance, and nurturing that characterize self-care—that characterize true well-being.

We know that it is becoming harder to be well, healthy, and balanced in our current day—mental health crises, political disaster, economic precarity, climate change, and more create everyday challenges that deteriorate our quality of life and wellbeing in ways that feel taxing and often overwhelming. Concurrently, we now widely recognize the importance of protecting our wellbeing. But as wellness was turned into a multi-trillion dollar industry, the idea of well-being, and the way that Americans have learned to interact with it is now inextricably tied to the patterns of rapid change fueled by capitalism that, according to Dunn, necessitated a shift toward a culture of wellness in the first place. The intention behind what became the wellness industry was and is an important intention that American society would do well to accept, but the fact that our acceptance of that notion emerged through the industry has landed us further away from the prospect of a culture that values well-being than ever before.

#### **Part 4: Reclaiming our Well-being**

Sadly, reclaiming our well-being in a holistic manner will not be as easy as buying “BeWell SuperFood Greens”. The simplicity of that approach rejects the rich complexity of our lives, both internal and external. In order to move past the harmful notion that our well-being is principally reliant on our ability to optimize ourselves in isolation, we must have the ability to recognize the difference between self-optimization and self-care. When self-optimization tells us to scrutinize, self-care tells us to cultivate awareness of our needs. When self-optimization tells us we are



lacking, self-care reminds us that all we need to be is who we are—no more, no less.

At the core of self-care—and at the core of our well-being—is self-respect. We must value ourselves as human beings outside the context of the larger systems in which we exist. Only then will we be able to act in ways that truly serve human well-being, not the systems that threaten it. This re-imagination of wellness and well-being would not be easy: the odds are stacked against average Americans without existing resources to avoid the overextension demanded by modern life. However, it is not naive to have hope for a better future. We must remain optimistic that the prioritization of human well-being within society is possible, and act in ways that align with that belief, pushing to change the structures that disregard it.

It is not just *self*-care that will guide us toward a way of life that affords our well-being. Crucially, this respect for human life and recognition of self-optimization's false promise must be realized on both individual and communal levels. If we want to live in a world where valuing human well-being is not an afterthought but a priority, we must act in support of one another and in opposition to the damaging societal structures that threaten our well-being. Critic Kathleen Newman-Bremang recognized the duality of this mission within wellness stating, “It requires rest *and* revolution. You can't have one without the other” (Newman-Bremang). We cannot show up for the larger pursuits if we do not first show up for ourselves and our immediate communities, and we cannot cultivate lasting wellness if we continue to allow our systems of power to devalue our well-being. It is only when we have genuine respect for our own lives and the lives of those around us that we will be able to build a culture in which the priority is the lives of those who comprise it, rather than the money, power, and greed that currently propel American culture.

The next time you find yourself engaging with the wellness industry, take a moment to

name the exact need you are aiming to fulfill. Ask yourself: am I addressing the cause or a symptom? If you find yourself in the thick of a million insignificant wellness trends, consider acting against the larger stressor, the larger fire that fuels all others, rather than against yourself; remember, you and your behaviors are not always the *root* of the problem. Action in this direction can take a multitude of forms. Whether it be smaller decisions like financially disengaging with shallow wellness trends or making it a habit to check in on the well-being of those around you, or bigger movements like coming together with your co-workers to ensure a workplace that values well-being above profit, all actions that place human well-being as the top priority will push us in a positive direction. The wellness industry is not going to disappear—at least not in the near future—but that does not mean we cannot ourselves dismantle the destructive notions of self-optimization it has pushed upon both its consumers and American culture at large.

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