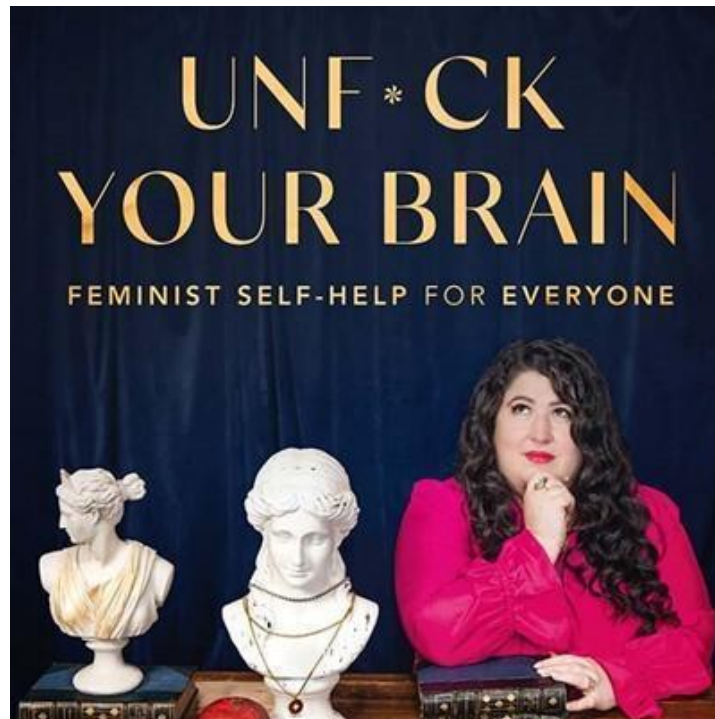


# UFYB 180: Philosophy = Self Help + Why It Matters



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Kara Loewentheil**

[UnF\\*ck Your Brain with Kara Loewentheil](#)

## UFYB 180: Philosophy = Self Help + Why It Matters

Welcome to *Unf\*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms. One that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Hello my chickens. How are you? I miss you all. I have been really loving revisiting all of the re-released content with you, the updated episodes and interviewing my fellow coaches, but I also love just coming here to chat with you and tell you about what I'm thinking.

So that's what I have been up to. I have been really buckled down working on so many amazing things that we are planning for this year. We have already launched our sponsorship for four Black, Indigenous, or people of color coaches who are getting certified at The Life Coach School.

So we are sponsoring half of the tuition for four amazing coaches who are going to bring their life experiences and perspectives to this work and up-level the coaching industry and I'm just so excited about being about to make access to certification more accessible.

Okay, so we're doing so many fun things. It definitely feels like spring is here, the trees are starting to turn. I think we may have made it through the pandemic winter. It feels like life is unthawing a little bit. So what I want to talk about today actually came out of a conversation that I had with my brother right before winter, like back the last time it was nice enough to be outside.

Earlier in the pandemic. I think it was in the fall because I remember that we were sitting in Washington Square Park and we were outside obviously, pandemic. So my brother and I both went to Yale for undergrad degrees and we both took part in this program that's called directed studies.

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So it's basically like a year-long grade books curriculum and you have small seminars with professors rather than taking big lecture hall classes, which is like your normal freshman experience. You think of all those one-on-one courses, huge lecture hall, and you have TAs mostly and when you're in directed studies it's like having advanced upper-class seminars but it's all first years.

We're all doing the same program and you're reading the grade books on multiple topics. So but point being - and we were both raised by a rare book dealer. So we've read a lot of classical literature and philosophy. And I have to say, I actually kind of stopped reading that stuff after law school, which was another three years of this because I just felt like after 20 years of education, I had longer than that, god, so long, I had my fill of pontifications from white men in 1732 about the nature of the world.

But I have a very deep background in it and my brother still reads classic philosophy and history and the like for fun for him. So we're sitting on this bench in the park and I was talking to him about my own coach had recently asked me like, how did I see myself? What word would I use to describe myself?

Would I call myself a coach? Would I call myself a teacher? Would I call myself an entrepreneur? And I'm all three of those things. I'm even a businesswoman, which I used to always - I fought that name very hard in my master coach training so it's like a long-running joke with my coaching friends. I'm all those things.

But here's what really came to mind. And it felt like of funny to say it, so I was telling my brother, I was like, it feels ridiculous but I kind of think that I'm a philosopher. I think what I'm doing is thinking about philosophical questions, just in this kind of life coaching format.

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And so I felt kind of silly saying that, but my brother who is not beset by my decades of internalized sexism and misogyny just shrugged and said, “Well, I think most of good philosophy is actually self help in some ways. That’s always been the case.”

And that just kind of knocked me out because all of a sudden, I thought back to all the philosophy I had ever studied and I realized that he was totally right. And so today I want to explain to you why I think philosophy and self help are kind of the same thing a lot of time and why that matters.

It’s not just semantics. It’s not just well, okay, call it one thing, call it the other. Because what we call things and how we think about them impacts how we experience them and what we do with them. That’s the whole point of this podcast. How we think about things impacts us.

So I want to kind of go over the different classical branches of philosophy. Don’t worry, this is not going to be a snooze fest, I promise. But just talk about kind of what those different philosophical branches and studies look into and question and how that relates to our work.

So there are traditionally several different branches of Western philosophy as a discipline. Some people say four, some say five, some say 10, whatever. For our purposes, it really doesn’t matter. I’m going to talk about it as basically four overall categories and two of them have subcategories so we’re at a total of about eight. We’re splitting the difference.

So I’m going to give you the names and talk about what each one was, but here’s what I really want you to listen for. I want you to listen to the questions that each category of study or philosophizing is interested in. What questions does it ask? What are the questions that the people who do this philosophy work think about?

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So the first is metaphysics. So metaphysics is the study or the theories of the nature of the physical universe and reality. So metaphysics asks questions like what is real? How can we know what is real? Where did the universe come from? Those are metaphysics.

The second is epistemology. So epistemology is the study of the nature and origin of truth and knowledge. And so epistemology as a discipline investigates questions like what can we know to be true? How do we know the things we know? How do we learn the things we know? Why do we believe what we believe?

So those two are pretty well known, I think. Then there's axiology, which is not a term you hear that much, but you've heard of the subgroups. Axiology is the nature of principles and values, and that includes both what's called ethics and what is called aesthetics.

So ethics is the nature of morals. Morality. The study of morality. And ethics as a discipline asks questions like what is just? What is good? What is ethical? How do people come to ethical values or conclusions? How should we choose and evaluate our ethical principles?

Aesthetics is the nature of beauty. So aesthetics as a discipline asks questions like what is beautiful? What is beauty? What is pleasure? What is art? What makes one thing art and another thing not art? How do we experience beauty or pleasure or art? What are the principles that make something beautiful or pleasurable or artistic?

So metaphysics, epistemology, then we have ethics and aesthetics. Then there's logic. Logic is the study of the nature of human reasoning, and there's two types. There's deductive logic, which is when you establish a set of rules or principles and then you apply them to specific instances. So you might decide a question you would ask would be like, what are the

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rules or principles for how I want to make a decision, evaluate an outcome, or live my life?

Now, how can I apply those to specific instances? So for instance, you might say one of my principles is to be fair. Okay, now how do I apply this principle to this specific situation where my kids are arguing about a toy? That's deductive logic.

Inductive logic is when you examine specific instances and then you theorize what general rules or principles may have caused them or can be drawn from them. So for instance, when I am coaching and I say we have to coach from the bottom up, we need to look at what's your thinking in these specific instances and then we can draw a conclusion about a general thought pattern you have.

Or inductive reasoning might be looking at the decisions I've made that I'm proud of as a parent, let's say, what are the values or principles that I can draw from them? What are the values or principles that I hadn't articulated that are animating the way I've been making those decisions?

So it's taking a principle and applying it to specific cases is deductive logic and looking at a bunch of specific cases and abstracting a principle or a value or a rule that explains them is inductive logic. There's not going to be a quiz, but I just want you to think about these two different ways of reasoning and of thinking.

So that's all Western philosophy. Obviously Western philosophy is not the only philosophy. So there is also Eastern philosophy, and these are huge generalizations, but Western philosophy is a little more of a cohesive intellectual tradition. A lot of people really dispute the concept that there even is such a category as Eastern philosophy, that that's sort of an idea that only an outsider would invent, that only a Western person looking at the East would say, "Oh, Eastern philosophy is one thing."

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Because in fact, there are multiple different philosophical traditions coming out of cultures in “the East” and those traditions have sometimes interacted with each other, sometimes not, but don’t necessarily have anything to do with each other and don’t categorize themselves as being part of any kind of larger group called Eastern philosophy.

So even the concept that that is an overall category is disputed. But again, this is a podcast. Not a graduate semester-long course, so we’re going to do a little broad generalizing here, which just like I did for Western philosophy.

So one of the main differences is that in many Eastern philosophical traditions, the notion of the self is really an illusion. In Western philosophy, the notion of the self, it’s often interrogated and we ask like, what is the self? What constitutes the self? How do we know what the self is?

But there is kind of a self most of the time. Again, all generalizations. In Eastern philosophy, it’s much more common that the notion of the self in general is interrogated. The idea is often that the self is an illusion. It’s created by our ignorance of the true nature of the world.

The illusion of the self is created by our human attachment to the stories that our human mind tells us. In general, people would say that Eastern philosophy is often more collectivist and more focused on union and oneness with the universe.

So the goal is overcoming the false separations and attachments that the human mind creates. And Eastern philosophy is often also kind of more associated with particular Eastern religions or spiritual traditions. There are of course Western religious philosophies, like Christian philosophy and theology. It’s sort of more separated from non-religious philosophical concepts.



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So Eastern philosophy may have different approaches or styles of exploring the answers, but one thing you can see is that the various traditions I think asks some of the same fundamental questions, which are what is the nature of reality?

What is the nature of the universe? What is the nature of man or humanity? How do we know what we know? How should we act and behave? How should we think about our lives? What are the values a society should be organized by?

So what do you notice about these kinds of questions in either tradition? All of the various questions I gave you that different philosophical traditions might ask. What do you notice? What I notice is that they're all the kind of questions that thought work teaches you how to think about and answer for yourself.

Some people say there are three big questions of philosophy. And those are what is knowledge? How do we know what we know? How can we know anything? How do we decide what is true or what to believe? So one big one is knowledge, what is it.

The second big question, how should we conduct ourselves? What kind of people do we want to be? How do we want to act? What kind of results do we want to create in the world?

And then the third big question of philosophy in this framework is how should we govern ourselves? What should our social and political organizations look like? Given the answers to those questions above. It's what is knowledge, how should we conduct ourselves, how should we govern ourselves.

So now think about the kinds of questions that thought work and self-coaching ask us to consider all the time. Questions like how do I know



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what's true? How do I know if a thought is true? Whether a thought is true or not, how do I decide if I want to think it?

How do I want to choose to think? What do I want to choose to think and why? What do I want to believe is true and why? How do I decide what I believe is true? How do I want to act? What would I need to feel and believe to act that way? How do I want to interact with other people? What are my values? How can I think on purpose so that I can act according to my values? What kind of world do I want to create with my actions to uphold my values?

Those are questions I ask all the time in coaching calls. They're questions that self-coaching teaches you to ask yourself. And those are the same questions that philosophy is all about. It's just that traditional, especially Western white male philosophy tends to consider them more in a vacuum and that's - or what seems like a vacuum.

And that's partly because until the last 50 years or so, straight white Western Christian men were able to pretend with not much objection from anyone else that they had to listen to that their ideas and perspectives were just neutral and universal.

I always think about this meme that I find hilarious, which is - I may not get it exactly right but it's basically a tweet and the woman tweeting it is like, 20th century dissertation, here is impeccably researched and detailed and footnoted thesis based on seven years of study of an extremely niche question, I hope it's close enough to good to be okay.

And then the second part is 17th century philosopher and then his is here are some universal and essential laws of nature that I came up with in the bath. They are irrefutable. It's just so real.

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So why do we have endowed chairs in philosophy and not in self help? Drum roll, you guessed it. It's the patriarchy. In our society, self help is considered kind of a feminine hobby. Whereas philosophy is the noblest of the intellectual pursuits.

So there are a few reasons for that I think. You may have some other reasons you come up with. This is what I've got. First, our society genders emotions as female. Women are supposedly more emotional; women are supposedly more in touch with their emotions.

So any self-development work, anything that has to do with feelings, other than the feeling of anger basically is inherently considered female or feminized. Second, women are the ones socialized to always think that they are not worthy or valuable just for existing.

Men are socialized to believe often that they have inherent worth and importance while women are socialized to believe that they have to earn other people's approval and hustle for their own self-worth. And centuries of Christian religion dominating our cultural development in the West means that our social constructs have absorbed the idea that women are emotional and irrational and led to original sin.

We're inherently sinful. And women are thus in constant need of improvement and correction in order to be worthy and good. And if any of that sounds farfetched to you, I just want you to go to the library and ask for any treatise on the differences between the sexes published between 500 of the common era and 1950.

This is an incredibly common theme in Western thinking about women. That women, like children, are in constant need of guidance, leadership, improvement, and correction by men in order to be good enough, worthy enough, sensible, staying on the right path.

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And that has filtered into women constantly believing that they need to be fixed, they need to be changed, they need help to become good enough people. And so the way that women pursue that is this sort of more quotidian, daily focused, and less prestigious, and more accessible version of philosophy that we call self help.

A third reason I think is that philosophy is framed as being very abstract, very intellectual, and men are assumed to be better at reason and logic and conceptual thinking, and philosophy departments are still majority male. And women in Western society are associated with the concrete, the daily, the details and logistics of life, the body, men are associated with the mind.

So philosophy is for men, self help is for women. Now obviously there are exceptions to this. There are some famous male coaches and famous women philosophers. But we're talking about large-scale cultural trends here and the philosophy industry and the coaching industry mimic those in that the best-known philosophers, still mostly male.

The best-known coaches, still mostly male, even though most coaches are women. This is a little bit of a side note but in any industry that is predominantly women, often the top few people known in the field will actually still be men because the top people known in almost any field are men.

Again, these are generalizations but we're just talking about as a general matter, why is philosophy considered this high intellectual, high prestige, esoteric not relevant to daily reality, IV tower thing, like the most useless thing you could study, philosophy would be the stereotype.

And then self help is considered - the daily, practical version of considered sort of a feminine thing, a female hobby, kind of frivolous and shallow and silly endeavor by some people. Clearly not by me.

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So what's so ironic is that so many of the people I think in the mainstream intellectual class who criticize self help or coaching as being supposedly naive or self-centered or frivolous are the same people who would say that philosophy and social and political theory are important, worthwhile pursuits and that we need those for changing the world. And they're just missing the forest for the trees, or they're missing the trees for the forest. I don't know. I'm not an arborist.

Here's the point. This is what I want you to take away from this. Self help is not silly. Self help is not selfish. Self help is not frivolous, and it's not sort of narcissistic or navel-gazing or just focused on you as an individual. It's not self-centered.

Self help is deep and powerful transformative shit. Self help is philosophy about what kind of world we want to live in and how we know what is true and who we want to be in the world. Thought work, the way that I teach it in The Clutch is a combination of many approaches and disciplines, but the two biggest elements really, well three.

One I would say is a sort of cognitive behavioral model, but even that builds on these other traditions. And these two biggest traditions are non-attachment, an observation of the mind from Buddhist traditions, and radical questioning from Socratic and Greek philosophical traditions.

Thought work grapples with the deepest most important questions you can ask. What is truth and how do I know what's true? Rather than just believing whatever I happen to think. How do I choose what to believe is true or real? How do I think on purpose? What is the good life?

What am I doing here? What is the point of my life? What kind of life do I want to have? What kind of world do I want to live in? How can I contribute to creating that world? What impact do I want to have on my fellow man? What do I want the world to look like?

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All of those are the deepest questions that human can ask. That's what thought work is all about. Thought work is about living your life with intention. That's what philosophy is about.

It's thinking about how we know what we know, how we want to behave, who we want to be, what we want to believe, how we want to act. So the next time your brain tells you that you should already know all the answers, just imagine somebody being like, "Well, I don't need to go to college or read any other philosophers. I should just know how to do this myself."

No. Or tells you you should be able to figure it out all yourself or it's silly to need support thinking through these things, every philosopher in the world has worked on some of the same questions that you are thinking about. And they usually do it with other philosophers and with teachers.

If you think about Socrates leading his band of students around and asking them questions is a long tradition. Every philosopher in the world pretty much has been in dialogue about these questions with their own teachers and their colleagues and the work of people who died 300 years before them.

It's an intellectual tradition that is - it's funny because I feel like the stereotype of the philosopher is sitting alone in a room thinking. This weird Western male stereotype that the great thinker, just ideas bloom out of their head with no other input. But that's not actually how the world or brains work.

Real philosophy is done in conversation and in concert with other people thinking about the same questions you are, and that's how thought work is done also. How to live your life on purpose and what impact you want to make in the world are the most important questions a person can ask themselves.

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And that's the question that thought work is always nudging you to ask, and that question is best asked and explored in community and in conversation, and that's always how it has been.

So forget the enlightenment gentleman philosopher sitting on the bluff in Cornwall just thinking by himself, or in Germany, wherever. I say chicken philosophers in a coop together, talking about these things, learning from each other. That is the new frontier, that is the philosophy I want to be a part of.

So I want you to go forth, think deeply, cluck loudly my chickens. I will see you in The Clutch.

If you're loving what you're learning on the podcast, you have got to come check out *The Feminist Self-Help Society*. It's our newly revamped community and classroom where you get individual help to better apply these concepts to your life along with a library of next level blow your mind coaching tools and concepts that I just can't fit in a podcast episode. It's also where you can hang out, get coached and nerd out about all things thought work and feminist mindset with other podcast listeners just like you and me.

It's my favorite place on Earth and it will change your life, I guarantee it. Come join us at [www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society](http://www.unfuckyourbrain.com/society). I can't wait to see you there.