

Narcissism

Pages 6-16

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Introduction

I posed an initial question to myself regarding the writing on the subject of “narcissism”: What is it that urged me to delve in its study and discussion? What are the personal and collective (including social and historical) factors in my mind and psyche that have highlighted this topic as a priority field? The answer to this question was not immediately available. There were many aspects and positions that would shape and define the “because” that would answer the “why”.

Firstly, an initial observation is that the concept of narcissism itself originates from the name Narcissus, who was the character of an Ancient Greek myth. Thus, he was one of our Greek ancestors, which means that the origin of the concept touches upon our ethnological and personal pride (aka narcissism). In short, the tale of Narcissus is as follows:

According to Ovidius, and his book “Metamorphoses”, Narcissus was a youth of outstanding beauty. The nymph Echo (who in another version of the story was his own sister) fell in love with him. Echo had been punished by Hera for talking too much, and

thus could not initiate a conversation, but could only repeat what was said by somebody else. Echo felt an intense love for the adolescent Narcissus, and astounded by his beauty followed him everywhere. Yet, when he became aware of her following him, he rejected Echo and she died sad and alone. Later, Nemesis (the goddess of punishment and revenge) aims her arrow against Narcissus. Thus, when he finds himself before a calm pond and bends down to have a drink of water, he sees his reflection and falls in love with his own image. Yet, every time he reaches into the water to embrace himself, his reflection dissipates. Narcissus cannot leave, but he can neither satisfy his desires. And so, just like Echo, he dies because of an unfulfilled love. The difference being that his is not a love that constitutes a couple, but rather a one-sided love for his own self. The flower bearing the same name grew at the place of his death as a symbol of attrition and of the chthonic deities.

Psychiatric approaches

Psychoanalysis, following the reasoning of this myth, has defined the structure of the narcissistic personality. The psychoanalysts, i.e. Modell, believe that a narcissist has rejected the primary object, the mother, because she has been experienced as intensely interventional. The destruction of the maternal object is the basis for the creation of a “law of the self”. In the place of the other, the self establishes its own image as a new primary object. And there is no problem, as long as the narcissist only gazes at his own image. However, every attempt he makes to come into contact with this image leads to its destruction. Or to put it otherwise, if somebody attempts to integrate a self inside him, the self rejects this and this “somebody” (in the case of the narcissist his own self) is destroyed. This is a self-destruction. Echo tries to contain Narcissus and is rejected. Narcissus tries to contain his own self and is destroyed. They both die in an attempt to contain the “other” person.

Perhaps the most important feature of the narcissist is his demand to be *admired*. Apart from silently idealising himself, he can also project this passion-filled fantasy to other people or to idealising activities in his life (which is where we encounter star-systems, politics, as well as many experiences of our social everyday life like erotic-spousal relationships). This fact offers a particular trading value, a quid pro quo of

sorts. “You idealise me” and “I idealise you”. Thus, there is an agreement to introduce this to others too (compatriots, partners) in a, silently idealised society of a narcissistic construct. I promote you, I exalt you, and you will do the same for me. But we offer the same service to others (so that they will vote for us in when election time comes).

Another characteristic of the narcissist is that for him the “visual” prevails over the “verbal” or the “symbolic”. For him, the phrase “an image is worth a thousand words” (that was used in 1911 by Fred Barnard as a slogan to promote advertisements in trams) is true. This is because, for the narcissist, the aim is to establish a world of *ideals* not of *ideas*. The ideal self or the ideal object are connected to the *power of depiction*. Thus, some narcissists hate language, as it separates them from the omnipotence of the image and from the use of the non-verbal as a means to control others.

It is also a known fact that ideals and idealisation have to do with the stages of one’s life. Adolescence, for instance, is a crucial time for self-idealisation or for its opposite, a destructive terror that the self is a stranger and is, thus, clearly the opposite of the ideal self. The narcissist also idealises objects aiming to live in a world without humanism, where the idealised self replaces the other person, or the other person is merely used for the idealisation of the self. The psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva has stressed the fact that the narcissistic structure refuses to see anything beyond the grabbing of the intended targets. When the Nazis annihilated the Jews, they were trying to rid the world of undesirable aspects of their own self that they projected onto the Jews. The form of *negative narcissism* defines the tendencies towards racism, sexism and genocide. The blacks, the Jews, the homosexuals contain undesirable aspects of the narcissistic self, they define the other, the “non-self”. Thus, their existence confirms the purity of the “inner-self”.

Individual and social characteristics

Despite all this, the narcissist’s internal world remains empty. The narcissist experiences inside himself what is termed “narcissistic emptiness”. This refers to a lack of internal structure as a result of not engaging with the object world, that is countered by an ideal self. This internal emptiness means that the self has been

deficiently nurtured, and has thus been led to gluttony, greed, and voracity, or as described by Kernberg, experiencing the self as a being that is hungry and empty.

These conditions refer to the concept of “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*) that was introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre and processed by Simone de Beauvoir. This is the erroneous perception that equates to self-deception and the simultaneous deception of others.

Another important issue that emerges from the results of epidemiological studies (like those of Miller, 1976, Chodorow, 1978, Giligan, 1982, Herman, 1983, Jordan and Surray, 1986) is that of the many similarities and differences of the forms and intensities of narcissism between social characteristics like gender (female and male), social class, and ethnicity. An example of this is the evolution of the American family where industrialisation has drawn the father away from the household and reduced his role in the child’s conscious life. Meanwhile, it has enriched life with values such as fame and *celebrity*, and impediments such as the *fear of competition*, and the *horror of death*. In Henry Jules’s words: “There is a constant interplay between each family and the culture at large, one reinforcing the other”. He goes on to say that the American “socialisation” of many family functions has severe pathological consequences, that in their milder form equip the young person to live in a society where the “*pleasures of consumption*” are central, a fact that on a wider social level reflects the “*decadence of the super ego*” (forms of this are the decline of the super ego, as well as the development of a cruel and punishing super ego founded in archaic images of parents, enmeshed with grandiose images of the self).

Psychoanalysts, philosophers, and historians have put forward many descriptions of the narcissistic personality in society that pertain to both individuality, and the relation of the individual with the environment. Alexis de Tocqueville has described how many modern societal conditions have weakened the connective bond between older and current generations. “The thread of time is ever ruptured and the track of generations is blotted out. Those who have gone before are easily forgotten and those who follow are still completely unknown. Only those nearest to us are of any concern to us”. Thus, despite his delusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-confidence through their *admiration*. For the narcissist, the world is a *mirror*, and as such, he needs it. On a level close to the aforementioned, many references have

been made in political/cultural movements and trends (I will not mention which) that have exerted a fatal attraction to those that sought to drown their sense of personal failure through collective action. Similarly, some political actions draw to them those who desire to manifest before the masses the fantasy of a destructive rage, along with the yearning for fame and a celebrity status. This is the fantasy of identifying with the rage and destructiveness of the Erinyes (the Furies), the Amazon, the Valkyries. Simultaneously however, the authentic private life is in danger of also falling apart, following the raid that its public counterpart has launched onto it. The more bloodthirsty and barbaric the social life becomes, the more personal relationships (friendships, romantic relationships, marriages) also turn into battlefields. Erich Fromm considers narcissism as equivalent to “asocial individualism” that abolishes cooperation, brotherly love and the search for integration into something wider. Cristopher Lasch, on his part, stresses that “there are connections between the narcissistic personality and certain characteristic patterns of temporary culture, such as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating of relationships between men and women”. Then of course a reference is also made to the connection of pathological narcissism with *modern social phenomena* recognisable in the current political scene: the management of impressions given to others, paired with the lack of concern for others and of emotional empathy towards them, a ravenous hunger for intense experiences that will fill the internal void, terror concerning old age and the end of life. According to Otto Kernberg the most intense and profound problem for the narcissist is the experience of the second part of his life, namely old age. It is a condition that terrifies him, as he loses the ability to provoke admiration that is a result of the beauty and the appeal of youth. Thus, in modern societies that have been characterised as being dominated by the “crisis of old age”, the narcissist’s main features are the obsession with mobility, the adoration of “development”, and the insatiable veneration of success. What is also interesting, are the changes that psychotherapists have noted regarding their patients’ symptoms. The typical cases of neuroses the Freud described have given their place to narcissistic personality disorders. According to Sheldon Bach (1976), “You used to see people coming in with

hand-washing compulsions, phobias and familiar neuroses. Now you see mostly narcissists”.

Principle and values, History, Society, Politics

The study of changes (i.e. by Christopher Lasch) of the *principles* and *values* that have occurred in modern society is also quite interesting. In the past, *glory* was associated with performing remarkable acts, feats that were included in epic poems like the “Iliad” or the “Odyssey”, in history, and in the biographies of heroes. Today, what is most common is celebrity through the impressive exterior image that is projected in the media, magazines, T.V. channels, or facebook... The extent to which modern *politics* has turned into a *spectacle* is impressive. To make matters worse it is not a spectacle of the likes of a play by Sophocles or Brecht, but rather a grotesque comedy or tragicomedy that is contained within two extremes: *admiration* and *envy*. It is everything we witness in the daily news on the radio, on television, in the press or on the internet. Narcissistic personalities gain increasingly more prominent positions in the public life, experiencing to the extreme the success and the admiration that they desire from the bottom of their psyche. There are also, the news regarding the “simple people” that very often concern murders, rapes and the like, which always did to a certain degree exist in the domain of human relationships.

Of course, there are many events outside of human volition or behaviour that enter human life and define it, such as natural disasters (earthquakes, fires etc.). What can one say about the recent accursed wildfire on mount Pentelicus in Attica that set ablaze forests, houses, gardens, a school, and a kindergarten. Similarly, there are socio-political events, like wars (Ukraine- Russia, Israel – Palestine) or problems within a country, i.e. unemployment, inflation, political instability, or a financial crisis like the one that our country suffered in the past decade. These are events that emit a sense of insecurity and intensify the fear of the unforeseeable disaster in the near future.

What is also compelling is the references that have been made to the “adoration of heroes” and the “narcissistic idealisation”. The striker on a football club becomes the centre of attention for the fans. The criminal that murders a celebrity gains his victim’s

radiance. That is the case with the murderer of my teenage idol, John Lennon of the Beatles. Mark David Chapman shot and killed Lennon outside his Dakota building apartment in New York on the night of December 8, 1980. The killer even waited for the police at the scene of the crime. Chapman had approached Lennon, earlier on the same day, and had taken an autograph. Later he explained to court appointed psychiatrists how “evil spirits” had made him commit the murder, but he also said something of greater significance. He claimed that one of the reasons that pushed him towards committing the crime was his desire to become famous, having felt that up to that point he had been nobody. “... that bright light of fame, of infamy, notoriety was irresistible”.

According to Kernberg, narcissists see the admired individual simply as “an extension of themselves”. They identify with those who are “great” in fear of being considered “mediocre”. They expect to shine in the light of famous “stars”. At the same time, however, a hidden feeling of envy and hatred also exists, because their idols remind them of their own “mediocrity”. And perhaps these “greats” that the narcissist wants to identify with are none other than his father or mother (to come back to Freud, Klein, etc.). An interesting historical fact concerning this is the story of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who was the teacher of Nero (Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus). When Nero became emperor, Seneca, being his teacher, was able to have an active and positive effect on his rule for the first five years. Later on, however, Nero imposed a tyrannical regime of state terrorism (which would lead to the burning of Rome), and cut off all communication with Seneca, who retired to the political background. What was the outcome? Seneca was accused of participating in a (failed) conspiracy against the emperor, and by order of Nero was forced to kill himself by severing his veins.

There is a special interest regarding the Arts and what they have embraced and conveyed. From Aeschylus’, Sophocles’, Euripides’ and William Shakespeare’s “classical” drama, to the “theatre of the absurd”, Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov and the forms of personality, interpersonal and intergroup relations that they portray. This topic, however, is very broad and is worth studying in another paper that will make an in depth connection of art with sociology, psychology and politics.

In regards with the latter (politics), delving into history, and researching its turning points, is particularly significant for the study of narcissism, both on an individual and a collective level. What is particularly engrossing is reminiscing on the “paradoxes” of political history in different places and regimes. Some simple examples: The USA, originator of modern capitalism, responsible for many acts of racism (treatment on Native Americans), for the prohibition, for the Vietnam war and so many other historical events, is the first (and maybe the only) country in the world whose Presidents can only serve two four-year tenures. And on the other hand, huge inspirations of our youth i.e. Cuba and Fidel Castro, creative leaders, remained on their throne forever, until their death, only to be succeeded by their sons and close relatives... Not to mention the painful reality of how the ideas of Marx, Engels, and Lenin were implemented when Stalin, not only remained in power for life, but was also the one that ordered the “specialist” to travel to Latin America and murder the founder of the red army – who later on opposed him – Leon Trotsky. It is easy to reach certain conclusions concerning narcissism that infiltrates the relationships between individuals, society, and political systems, with catastrophic results. And let us not forget that the “Golden Age” of Pericles ended with his own death as well as that of the Athenian people due to the Plague, a fact that is however scientifically attributed to Zeus’ divine will rather than earthly narcissism.

Instead of an afterword

I will conclude this paper with some thoughts concerning the “healthy”, “normal”, and “useful” kind of narcissism. As is natural and expected, this refers to specific periods of the human life cycle, like *old age*. Many different, and occasionally contradictory, bio-socio-psychological perspectives approach the matter. Is it useful to retire after a certain age? Does abstaining from work incapacitate people that could in fact be creative? Or would it be deeply inhumane to have white-haired men and old ladies working to make ends meet? What happens with the continuation of the different generations in life, and the relationship between them? All these are questions that are answered by peoples’ experiences first, before they are answered by theory. Do

the people that cling desperately to their youth lose their interest for young people? Does the “longevity movement” contain a disregard for future generations? Is the personal “adoration of youth” in reality nothing other than an “adoration for one’s self”? Old age has been described as the time during which the elements of loss, weakening, and fears regarding the imminent end appear. The “oceanic feeling of the womb” is lost when the child is born (according to Freud), but the ocean into which the elderly will enter, is at the gates as a final danger. And they have already come to face it, through the loss of relatives, friends, acquaintances, and encounters of farewell – funerals. Thus, certain forms of narcissistic revival tendencies may function therapeutically. “I am an actor and I recall that when I played in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* the audience raved about me”. “I was a bank manager and I will not forget the gratitude in which some clients thanked me, for the financial aid that I personally gave them”. “I look around our home, I see beautiful furniture, some exquisite paintings, and at night from our window a wonderful full moon”. I thumb through my mother and father’s photo album and see my beautiful grandmother, my brave grandfather, and also me holding certain babies in my hands. Nostalgia becomes a therapeutic element of my life. And as for the young people, both belonging to my family and not, I accept them approaching me to discuss human life and exchange opinions. The experienced and imminent losses comprise elements of learning for my life. They even reinforce “consciousness” more than the “superego” (according to Klein). With them, time has offered elements of coexistence with others, eliminating envy and bringing to the surface the ability to judge, the sense of moral responsibility, and gratitude.

Therefore, narcissism itself abolishes, or even destroys, the aforementioned presentation of pathological narcissism and its characteristics.

When the tear of my loneliness runs dry, I can wave the handkerchief of “welcome” or “good-bye” smiling...

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