



The Narcissistic Trainwreck

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In the context of narcissistic behavior, this article starts by exploring the role of mirroring in human history. It is pointed out that staring at our own image in the mirror is a means of personal assurance of the self, an activity that starts at a very early age. Furthermore, it is also suggested that mirrors allow us to see ourselves as others see us, making them highly effective tools for introspection and self-reflection.

Given the nature of mirroring, the article also touches on the theme of the double. What's noted is that the concept of the doppelgänger can be viewed as an exploration of two sides of the same personality, presented as opposites and reflecting the complex divisions or contradictions that can exist within one individual. But it is also suggested that looking at our shadow side can be a great way to shine a light on those parts of ourselves that need healing and improvement. In this context, it is pointed out that only when these qualities are repressed or denied that they become labelled as negative or shadowy.

The article also contains a lengthy discussion of narcissistic behavior. A differentiation is made between constructive and destructive narcissism. Also, the concept of echoism is introduced. Here, it is suggested that on a spectrum of grandstanding, echoism would be at one end and narcissism at the other. Furthermore, what is also made clear is that narcissistic behavior should be seen as a survival mechanism. Narcissists spend an enormous amount of energy supporting and maintaining a completely fake self to compensate for a deep, dark, cold inner void.

Also, in the context of narcissism, observations are made about leader-follower dynamics. Here, mirroring and idealizing transference reactions will be par for the course. Due to these false attributions, this transference interplay can create highly destructive behavior, as the narcissistic leader shifts the gears into overdrive while drunk on power.

Finally, it is noted that in contemporary society, narcissistic behavior has become part of the new world order. Social media has provided the means to fall even harder in love with our own image. Our projected self can now be reflected back in a digital mirror and shared with the world via the Internet. However, what's also pointed out is how in our drive to project ourselves on social platforms, we have become disconnected from the traditions that formed the bedrock of our human experience. Thus, ironically, while the world is more connected than ever before, feelings of loneliness and alienation have never been so widespread.

Keywords: Narcissus; Constructive and Destructive Narcissism; Mirroring; The Double; The Shadow; Idealizing and Mirroring Transference; Echoists; social Media; Alienation

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To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.

—Oscar Wilde

Every day in the mirror I watch death at work.

—Jean Cocteau

The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein...provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would find not himself in his mother's face, but rather the mother's own projections. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain.

—Donald Woods Winnicott

Mirroring

The mirror has been a presence throughout human history. Although historians cannot really ascertain when humans became enchanted by their own reflection, the ancient myth of Narcissus suggests that we must have gazed upon ourselves from prehistoric times onwards. In fact, our Stone Age ancestors were already crafting the first man-made mirrors by polishing obsidian, a volcanic rock. And even before that discovery, their predecessors would also have gazed at their reflections in any shining object—especially pools of water. We can also imagine that their first “aha!” experience of seeing their own reflection

must have been mysterious and breathtaking. Prior to the invention of the mirror, we can assume that they would see themselves through other people's eyes.

Soon after its discovery, however, the mirror became an instrument that not only helps us to better understand ourselves, but also to have a greater understanding of how others perceive us. The mirror has always been a space in which we could experiment with wishes, fears, dreams, and realities. Staring at our own image in the mirror is a means of personal assurance of the self, an activity that starts at a very early age. Drawing conclusions about character solely looking by at people's external features, helped by a mirror, has a long tradition that runs well into recent times. Of course, for some people, it would be a way to avoid looking deep into themselves.

Taking a developmental perspective, from the age of two onwards, human beings can recognize themselves in a mirror, an experience seen as a milestone in the development of a sense of self.¹ But looking at ourselves in a mirror has always been an ambivalent activity. Our attempt at self-discovery can also puzzle us. In the myth of Narcissus, his first encounter with his self-image happened late in his life, so that we can speculate about his specific developmental trajectory. People usually look into a mirror at a much earlier age but when Narcissus saw himself, he was unable to process what he saw. Instead, he became confused between what was him and what was the other.

¹ Lorraine E. Bahrnick, Lisa Moss & Christine Fadil (1996). Development of visual self-recognition in infancy. *Ecological Psychology*, 8(3), 189–208.

Tales involving mirrors can be unsettling and even touch on the supernatural. From a storytelling perspective, mirror magic seems to be part of our cultural heritage. Fairytales are a good example—we only have to think of the evil queen in Snow White expecting her “mirror, mirror on the wall” to declare her “the greatest beauty of them all.” Vampires and witches are also said to have no reflection because they have no soul. Many superstitions are also associated with mirrors, particularly the belief that a person’s soul could be trapped in a mirror. Mirrors would be covered during sleep or illness so that a person’s soul should not become trapped in a mirror and unable to return to the body. In some cultures, mirrors were covered after a death to prevent the soul of the newly departed from being caught in the mirror, delaying their journey to the afterlife.

As the myth of Narcissus suggests, the ancient Greeks were very wary of mirrors. They believed that looking at their own reflection in the mirror could bring bad luck. Such ambivalent feelings about mirrors were not just a Greek preoccupation, however. The Romans believed that breaking a mirror would break the soul of the person who had caused the breakage. Furthermore, it would take seven years for this soul to renew itself, a superstition that lingers on today in the frequently iterated belief that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck. In other cultures, breaking a mirror was believed to signal a death in the family.

Mirrors can be a medium for visual enhancement and illusory perceptions. When we look into a mirror, it may not really be our face that we see. We may see a distorted image that reflects how we think and feel about ourselves rather than an actual reflection. At a basic

physical and experiential level, mirrors can trigger other-worldly experiences and provide far more than simple reflections. Reflected imagery can become a great source for self-alienation at the level of emotion and cognition. There are times when looking at our own image can be very disturbing, particularly as we age. We might not like what we see and as the years pass, we may even see death in the mirror.

No wonder that looking at our image in the mirror can trigger an uncanny out-of-body experience—a kind of “me but not me” sensation. This potential for confusion might explain the malefic themes of fear and anxiety that feature in so many stories about mirrors. Experiencing our embodied self “objectified” as a projection outside our body onto a flat screen will always be an otherworldly experience. Perhaps that’s why, in everyday life, many of us avoid giving more than a quick glance at ourselves in a mirror—we are reluctant to have anything more than our appearance revealed.

Despite our ambivalence about seeing our own reflections, mirrors allow us to see ourselves as others see us, making them powerful tools for self-examination. Mirrors force us to deal with ourselves at a much deeper level; they allow us to make sense of our physical appearance as well as our associated thoughts and emotions. What we see can compel us to compare our external image with the internal image we have of ourselves, making mirrors a highly effective tool for introspection and self-reflection. Through conscious reflection—finding a balance between our inner and outer worlds—we may be able to find an equilibrium between the spheres of fantasy and reality. In other words, the process of physical self-reflection can encourage philosophical self-reflection.

For all of us, the first mirror in which we see ourselves is in our mother's eyes. These early mirroring processes are critical for our emotional and cognitive development. As children, starting with the primary caregiver (usually the mother), all of us learn to understand ourselves through the reflections of the people around us. Consider Narcissus, the prototypical narcissist. Given the universality of this aspect of human development, we can assume that Narcissus would have been exposed to this form of mirroring even if he was deprived of other means of self-reflection. However, we can speculate that his conception (through rape), and the prophetic pronouncement following his birth, were traumatic for his mother, making the mirroring process he experienced defective.

Assuming this, we can also assume that the first act of looking at himself in a reflective surface would have elicited a range of intense emotions, from self-love and self-confidence to self-doubt and insecurity. It would have been an extraordinarily transformative moment. Suddenly, Narcissus would have seen parts of himself that had always been hidden. And as consciousness rises, the tension between consciousness and unconsciousness can be extremely bewildering. However, unable to distinguish the "me" in his reflection from the "real me," Narcissus became completely disoriented. The moment he first saw himself in a mirror was also the moment he lost himself.

The Double

When Narcissus saw himself in the surface of the pool, he was also faced with his double. According to one version of the myth, he had a real double, in the shape of a sister. Interestingly, the archetype of twins often concerns opposites, doubles who together form a whole, with similarities that can be physical, psychological, or both, as a long tradition of narratives that deal with the theme of the double indicate. For example, the writings of Ernst Hoffman, Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Vladimir Nabokov and others, all touch upon this theme. In some of these narratives, the “double” does not really exist and is a projection of the narrator’s imagination—an alternative personality or self—created from fear or wish-fulfilment. Often, the first person is a highly respectable individual, while the second is representative of the individual’s wickedness. The alter ego may even perform an anti-social act for which the first character will be blamed. Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, is a classic example of this kind of story.

The concept of the doppelgänger can be viewed as an exploration of two sides of the same personality, presented as opposites and reflecting the complex divisions or contradictions that can exist within one individual. Often, the “darker” part represents characterological themes that most people prefer to deny in order to preserve a “proper” self-image. In fact, this binary theme can be seen in the way that one person abides by the rules and social standards set by society while the other follows a basic human desire to satisfy forbidden or irrational impulses, activities that the first prefers not to be aware of.

The psychologist Carl Jung considered the doppelgänger concept in terms of people's shadow side, that part of us that resides in the unconscious, aspects of ourselves that we prefer not to see but are nevertheless part of us,² like sadness, rage, envy, laziness, and cruelty. In other words, our blind spots. However, Jung also believed that these repressed thoughts and feelings are not necessarily "bad." Positive traits can also exist within the shadow, characteristics that have been invalidated or minimized by others, leading us to repress them—they can include creativity, intuition, and sexual preferences. Jung maintained that a complete personality consists of both our positive and negative qualities.

The notion of the double comes from a primitive psychological defense mechanism called splitting, whereby polarized views of self and others arise due to intolerable, conflicting emotions. It refers to the aspects of personality that people prefer to deny so that they're perceived by others in a better, if less realistic, light. But should we only show the aspect of our personality that we want others to perceive? We need to accept that our shadow side is also part of us; by understanding it better, we can obtain greater insight about ourselves. According to Jung, making sense of our shadow self, despite its name, is a great way to shine a light on those parts of ourselves that need healing and improvement. It's only when these qualities are repressed or denied that they become labelled as negative or shadowy.

² Carl Jung (1912/ 2003). *Psychology of the Unconscious*. New York: Dover.

In this context, the warning that Narcissus' safety depended on his never knowing himself is highly ominous. What aspects of his shadow self might he have seen when he looked into a mirror for the first time? What opportunities would introspection and reflection have given him to gain more insight into himself? But the myth also suggests that Narcissus did not have the psychological resources to recognize himself. Instead, his fate was determined by the more destructive parts of his personality. However, we should be grateful to Narcissus for helping us understand the behavior of certain individuals better. His story has enabled us not only to make sense of mirroring and doubling but has also given us a deeper understanding of the nature of narcissism—a legacy that has made this mythological figure immortal.

Narcissism

People often discount narcissistic behavior as relatively harmless. The myth of Narcissus generally conjures up the image of a beautiful young man staring longingly at his reflection in a pool. But in the context of the story of Narcissus, there is much more to his story than meets the eye. It is in fact a very complex tale about mirroring, doubling, shadowing and arrested development. Narcissism can be a devastating condition for the individuals who display it—and for the people who have to deal with them.

We now know that a narcissist is a person who has a grandiose sense of self-importance, harbors unrealistic fantasies of unbounded glory, feels rage or intense shame when criticized, and has a great sense of entitlement. And that's not all. Even though narcissists appear to be full of themselves, their behavior could also be seen as a defensive strategy.

They may hide their sense of insecurity behind a false persona of bravado. In fact, when narcissists display exhibitionistic behavior, they're looking for admiration in the same way as toddlers do, and for the same reasons. They are desperate for attention. Examples of exhibitionistic behavior include an inappropriate flashy dress code, talking too loudly, or gesturing in expansive and space-intruding ways. It has been said that big egos are often big shields for a lot of empty space. Narcissistic behavior should be seen as a survival mechanism.

Essentially shallow, narcissists spend an enormous amount of energy supporting and maintaining a completely fake self to compensate for a deep, dark, cold inner void. To maintain and sustain this false persona, they exploit, use and abuse others. This behavior rests on the assumption that they cannot reliably depend on anyone's love or loyalty. Instead, they believe that they must rely on themselves for any gratification life has to offer. They do not care about or have respect for others. They are incapable of empathy and have great difficulty when it comes to forming and sustaining intimate relationships. The fake self that they create is contrived in the absence of any sense of connectivity. Consequently, narcissists can be very destructive and dangerous people to be around.

But it is too glib to equate narcissism with self-love; deep down, it looks more like self-hatred. Although narcissists come across as arrogant and extremely self-confident, in reality this can be a veneer covering feelings of low self-esteem. This explains why narcissists are preoccupied with establishing their adequacy, whether it is in terms of

power, beauty, status, prestige, or superiority. All these are ways to hide their feelings of low self-esteem.

Underneath it all, narcissists have a persistent belief that they are unlovable. This explains why they need the constant love, attention, and admiration of others to survive. They don't possess enough healthy self-respect to be at peace with themselves. Their need for admiration becomes an addiction. As with drugs, whatever attention they receive provides only a temporary high. But not only is this pursuit of attention draining for narcissists, it is also exhausting for the people who have to deal with them. And when people no longer give them narcissistic gratification, they discard them, causing great pain. As a result, they are always in search of new people who are prepared to admire them and bolster their flimsy self-esteem. Like any addict, they will do whatever it takes to get their next "fix." Other people function to fulfill the narcissist's needs and desires. No wonder that these others feel depersonalized, objectified and devalued.

While narcissists often seem to be cruel or harsh, they are sometimes simply careless. Their sense of entitlement means that their own wishes deserve special consideration and take precedence over those of others. Naturally, with this outlook on life, they cause great damage, especially if they obtain positions of power.

It must be emphasized, however, that these behavioral qualities occur with different degrees of intensity. We all, at times, show signs of narcissistic behavior. In fact, all humans need a certain dose of narcissism in order to function effectively. Depending on

the intensity of an individual's narcissistic behavioral patterns, a distinction can be made between constructive and reactive narcissism, with excess narcissism generally falling in the latter category and healthy narcissism falling into the former.

Constructive narcissists are people who have been fortunate enough to have caregivers who knew how to provide their growing children with age-appropriate frustration—i.e., enough frustration to challenge them but not so much as to overwhelm them. Such caretakers were able to provide a supportive environment that led to feelings of basic trust and agency. As adults, people who experienced this kind of parenting tend to be relatively well balanced. They will have a positive sense of self-esteem, a capacity for introspection, and an empathetic outlook toward others.

Reactive narcissists have not been as fortunate as their more constructive peers while growing up. Instead, they may have been on the receiving end of over, under, or chaotic stimulation by their caregivers. As a result, in adulthood they are left with a legacy of feelings of deprivation, insecurity, and inadequacy. What might otherwise be a healthy pursuit of self-interest and self-realization turns into self-absorption; in their eyes, other people lose their intrinsic value and become mere means for the fulfillment of their needs and desires.

Narcissism and leadership

Although constructive narcissists can be larger than life, they are not just searching for personal power. Although they are prepared to make the ultimate decisions, they take

advice and consult others. As transformational leaders, even as role models, they inspire others not only to be better at what they do, but also to change what they're doing. It is reactive narcissists who have given narcissism its pejorative sense, in that narcissism is generally associated with intense preoccupation with the self, exploitation of others, excessive rigidity, narrowness of outlook, resistance to change, and the inability to adapt to the external environment.

Reactive narcissists have feelings of entitlement. They believe that rules and regulations don't apply to them, only to others. Essentially, they always expect special treatment from others. Their underlying sense of inadequacy and insecurity means they develop an exaggerated sense of self-importance and grandiosity and a concomitant need for admiration. They become fixated on issues of power, status, prestige, and superiority. Unsurprisingly, it's far from unusual for reactive narcissists to reach leadership positions. In social settings and any organizational context, they see life as a zero-sum game with either winners or losers. Their need for positions of power can also be driven by their need to get even for perceived slights. Vengefulness is a close companion of pride and vanity.

Echoists

Unlike constructive narcissists, reactive narcissists aren't prepared to share power. Compromise is alien to them. As they will not tolerate disagreement or criticism, they rarely consult with colleagues, and when they do, consultation is purely ritualistic. In leadership positions, reactive narcissists surround themselves with "yea-sayers," or

echoists. And here we might recall the encounter between Narcissus and the nymph Echo, yet another illustration of the richness of the original myth. True narcissists often live in an echo chamber, only wanting to hear what they like to hear. Echoists have difficulty asserting themselves and are prone to people-pleasing—often at the expense of their own needs and feelings. On a spectrum of grandstanding, echoism would be at one end and narcissism at the other. Reactive narcissists only look out for number one, while echoists think very little of themselves. In a leadership context, this can be an unholy dynamic.

Paranoia

Even when things go well, reactive narcissists can be cruel and verbally abusive to the people they deal with. When setbacks occur, they take no personal responsibility. Instead, they scapegoat other people. Their world is split between those who are for them and those who are against them. There is a world with only one version of reality: their own. Some may dig lies so deep, that they end up floundering in their own delusions. Their skewed, paranoid outlook makes them perceive others' comments as personal attacks even when none has been intended, leading to outbursts of rage. Such "tantrums" should be seen as reenactments of childhood behavior, originating in early feelings of helplessness and humiliation. But, given the power that some leaders hold, the impact of their rage on their immediate environment can be devastating. Their tantrums will intimidate their followers, who might themselves regress to childlike, dependent behavior.

Leader-follower dynamics

The two-way process of mirroring—the interaction between the person looking in the mirror and what the mirror reflects—is part of the human condition. This makes for a complex interplay of emotions, memories, and subconscious actions. It also plays out in an interpersonal context, giving rise to transference reactions, that is, what happens when people unknowingly transfer feelings about someone from their past on to people they interact with in the present.³ Mirroring and idealizing are prime examples of transference reactions and in a leadership context will be par for the course.⁴ Followers could experience the leader as a powerful and benevolent parental figure, their feelings arising from the desire to defend themselves against their sense of helplessness. In this case, the idealizing transference appears to serve as a protective shield. However, the qualities and attitudes that followers attribute to the leader may turn out to be connected to a childhood image of the idealized parent who would protect them from danger and have very little to do with the actual leader. In other words, in the imagination of their followers, leaders may be transformed into figures who embody all the positive qualities they wished their important caregivers had had—wisdom, strength, kindness, admiration for, and interest in them. On the leaders' part, this idealizing process will reactivate their grandiose self, replicating as it does an early phase of their lives when their caregivers admired their exhibitionistic behavior. Leaders rarely mind this idealizing process. Indeed, they may find this kind of affirmation by their followers hard to resist.

³ Sigmund Freud & Joseph Breuer (1895). *Studies in Hysteria*. Penguin Books; Heinrich Racker (2001). *Transference and Counter-Transference*, New York: International Universities Press.

⁴ Heinz Kohut (1968). The psychoanalytic treatment of narcissistic personality disorders. In *The search for the self* (vol. I, pp. 477-509). New York: International Universities Press; Heinz Kohut (1971). *The analysis of the self*. New York: International Universities Press.

Of course, both idealizing and mirroring can have a positive side. They can generate a bond that creates commitment in difficult times. However, these unconscious psychological dynamics can also be risky, involving temporary suspension of insight and self-criticism. This can lead to gradual suspension of reality testing, allowing unrealistic hopes and fantasies to govern decision-making. With reactive narcissists, these interpersonal dynamics can become highly collusive and encourage leaders to act to shore up their image rather than serve the greater needs of society. Far too often, the juggernaut of narcissism creates highly destructive behavior, as the narcissistic leader shifts the gears into overdrive while drunk on power.

The reappearance of Narcissus

In contemporary society, narcissistic behavior has become part of the new world order. Social media have given us the means to fall even harder in love with our own image. Our projected self can now be reflected back in a digital mirror and shared with the world via the Internet. The result is a culture of superficiality that permeates work, education, and parenting—every aspect of life. This is not a place in which true relationships can flourish. In fact, it may destroy our capacity for human connectedness, compassion, and empathy. In such a society, critical thinking can fall by the wayside, as authenticity is replaced by branding, showmanship, and posturing.

The warnings contained in the Narcissus myth become more relevant than ever in this superficial society, where there is the danger that large numbers of people will get stuck in the same destructive imaging that enslaved Narcissus. The pursuit of the selfie is a

poor replacement for real relationships, and a world of artifice, built on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and the tallying of “likes” and comments, will not provide the emotional satisfaction needed for a life well lived. If the world evolves in this way— only the exterior counts, the interior be damned—everything will become an object of display.

Our drive to project ourselves on these social platforms implies that we have become disconnected from the traditions that formed the bedrock of our human experience. Ironically, while the world is more connected than ever before, feelings of loneliness and alienation have never been so widespread. Our compulsion to construct some kind of superficial identity could derive from our need to stave off the existential dread of a meaningless life. Resorting to materialism is a way to fill this void; acquisition and consumption are easier means of self-gratification than investing in relationships and self-development. But past a certain point, this becomes unsustainable, leading to disappointment, distress, and, increasingly, mental health problems.

Our exploration of narcissism began by putting the prototypical Narcissus of ancient myths on the analyst’s couch and took us to contemporary society and back again. I will end with the words of the psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm, who said, “The opposite pole to narcissism is objectivity; it is the faculty to see other people and things as they are, objectively, and to be able to separate this objective picture from a picture which is formed by one's desires and fears.”⁵ We can only hope that the lessons contained in the myth of Narcissus will convince many of us to take this route.

⁵ Erich Fromm (1956), *The Art of Loving*. New York: Harper & Row,

