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Narcissism and Ideals

Introduction to the Topic
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The concept of narcissism occupied psychoanalytic thought quite early—before the first comprehensive study on narcissism in Freud's 1914 essay. Initial approaches to narcissism concerned homosexuality, as seen in Freud's essay on Leonardo da Vinci (1910), and delusional thinking, in the case of Schreber (1911). In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud describes narcissism as an intermediate stage in which sexual drives are no longer isolated as in initial autoeroticism but have been unified and already have an object—yet "this object is not an external one, foreign to the individual; it is the ego itself, already established at that time." The person behaves as if in love with themselves.

In *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), Freud considers narcissism an expression of the instinct for self-preservation, characterized primarily by megalomania and withdrawal of interest from the external world. He stresses the contrast between the psychic energy invested in the ego (ego-libido) and the energy invested in objects (object-libido): the more one is used, the more the other is depleted. He notes: "A strong egoism protects against illness, but in the end, one must love to avoid falling ill."

In this same work, narcissism is approached from two angles: one equates narcissism with self-love and the relative withdrawal of interest from the external world. The other presupposes the existence of an early state (primary narcissism) in which the external reality has not yet been separated from the self and the psychic state is dominated by feelings of omnipotence. Narcissism is considered an intermediate phase in infancy between autoeroticism and object-choice, and as the libidinal complement to the self-preservation drive. Thus, primary narcissism is defined as a sense of completeness and omnipotence, which persists and reemerges through regression in pathological forms of narcissism. This primary narcissism corresponds to the infant's illusion of self-sufficiency, which is facilitated by the lack of distinction between self and external reality. It can only be understood if we accept that the "infant-maternal care" system constitutes the narcissistic unit.

The more the child is an object onto which the parents project their narcissism—through overvaluation as part of object-choice (narcissistic object-choice)—the more they become a victim of narcissistic illusion. According to this type of choice, "We love: a) what we are, b) what we were, c) what we would like to be, and d) the person who was part of ourselves."

Freud also notes in his 1914 text that narcissism cannot be studied directly. Its main path of study is through schizophrenia, paranoia, organic illness, hypochondria, and erotic life. The patient withdraws libidinal investment from love objects and "ceases to love insofar as they suffer," as they fold their libidinal investments back onto the self.

B. Grunberger (1971), in his book on narcissism, also argues that narcissism itself cannot be observed directly but must be inferred from its derivatives. He lists the following features:

- the memory of a unique, privileged state of bliss;
- the well-being associated with this memory—a feeling of wholeness and omnipotence;

- the pride that derives from this experience and the illusion of uniqueness, originating from fetal experience—a megalomaniac experience tied to a sense of value, the psychic equivalent of kinesthetic sensation;
- a special relationship with the object, both negative and positive: on one hand, a sense of exalted isolation; on the other, a desperate search for connection through a mirror relationship.

Grunberger also returns to Freud's idea that "the Id sends part of the libido outward toward object-love, while the Ego, which has since become stronger, tries to retain this object-libido and offers itself to the Id as a love-object." He emphasizes that narcissistic investment constitutes a necessary complement to the workings of the Ego, key to its development—whether in positive or negative directions.

This perspective on narcissistic investment helps us understand what happens to a patient's narcissism during psychoanalytic treatment. The analytic process increases self-investment; the Ego has more libido at its disposal, altering its stance toward Superego demands. In other words, the Ego depends less on the Superego and its love, and more on self-love (self-esteem).

The ancient myth of Narcissus, on which the psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism is based, tells of Narcissus kneeling over a lake, enchanted by his reflection. Eventually, unable to resist the allure of his image, he tries to touch it, falls into the water, and drowns. The essence of the myth isn't that Narcissus loves himself, but that this self-love blinds him. He does not recognize that the image is a reflection—he has no awareness of the distinction between himself and his environment. He understands reality through ego images, a stance that harbors the danger of destruction.

Other psychoanalysts like H. Kohut (1968) and H. Rosenfeldt (1964), addressing the personality disorder of disconnection and inner emptiness—and the disregard for others as distinct individuals, to the point of annihilating relationships—also focus on the fantasy of infantile omnipotence, which ignores difference and saturates the self with primitive aggression. O. Kernberg (2014) highlights how people with narcissistic personality disorder tend to envy others excessively, idealize those who offer narcissistic support, and treat those who do not with contempt. Their relationships are often exploitative and parasitic. Beneath a captivating exterior, there lies coldness and cruelty. Within the context of relationships with others, and especially with the therapist, Kernberg will speak of malignant narcissism.

A. Green (2001) points out that when the conflictual organization reaches levels of regression beyond the classic fixations observed in transference neuroses, it becomes evident that narcissism plays a more significant role, even in conflicts where it is not the dominant feature.

Extending the concept of primary narcissism, Freud links the infantile ego's self-love—characterized by perfection and value—to the ideal ego (an early form of the ego ideal). He locates the origin of the ego ideal in the child's early identification with parental figures. Later, narcissistic perfection is limited by interpersonal and intrapsychic influences: parental criticism and the child's own self-criticism. At this stage, the evolving ego ideal aims to restore the lost sense of perfection.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud introduces the idea that individuals project their ego ideal onto the leader, who takes the place of the father. Freud explains that each member of a crowd (or followers) establishes a direct relationship with the leader, parallel to others, sharing “a common ego ideal” that functions as a paternal substitute, assumed to love all members equally.

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud sees the ego ideal as part of the Superego, the heir to the Oedipus complex. Later, D. Lagache (1966) developed the distinction between ‘ideal ego’ and ‘ego ideal’ and differentiated between the Superego as authority and the Ego Ideal as the internalized model the subject strives to match.

According to J. Chasseguet-Smirgel, the core of the ego ideal houses early concepts of value—like eternal happiness, brilliance, wealth, physical or mental strength—which can dominate patients whose Superego never matured. She notes that it is often unclear whether narcissism is being projected onto the object (which then constitutes the ego ideal), or whether it is the result of internalized idealized parents or restrictive norms imposed externally.

The role of ideals in society (Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, 1927) is developed only when the ego ideal—though still an heir to primary narcissism—forms through the internalization of Oedipal guilt and identifications with parental figures that replace the original ones. Thus, the late ego ideal becomes the product of secondary identifications with figures who over time replace primary parental objects.

H. Blass, in his keynote at the 35th Congress of the European Psychoanalytic Federation, clarifies that in terms of the division between life-affirming and potentially destructive ideals: “We find early ideals which, through processes of projective identification, can be linked with the omnipotent self—through admiration or idealization of the object, but also through rage and persecution. And we find ideals arising from the Oedipal phase, which take effect through the recognition of limitation and difference. The first form expresses the ideal ego, the second the ego ideal. Both appear in individuals and groups.” (Blass, 2022)

The problematic of narcissism and its ideal derivatives or social values has been widely studied by social scientists, since narcissism is a key to understanding the individual's bond with group and society. These scholars use the term "narcissism" to analyze social patterns and how they affect societal development. Some argue that society’s suffering can largely be understood as resulting from egocentrism, alienation, and emotional detachment, which are increasingly dominant behavioral types. Social norms now emphasize subjectivity and withdrawal from public engagement unless it draws attention to the self. In politics and public life, personality and preferences take precedence over social roles and action.

Sociologist Richard Sennett, in *The Fall of Public Man (*1977*),* notes that narcissism now permeates social relationships due to a culture that has lost faith in public life and values intimacy as the measure of reality. Reality is shaped so that people working within its structures experience social settings as mirrors of themselves. Because reality is shaped in such a way that people who work and act within its structures tend to perceive social situations as mirrors of the ego, and avoid seeing them as forms that carry non-personal meaning. Professor of history Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism (1979)*, links the narcissistic culture of our time—as he calls it—with the fantasy of infantile omnipotence and the corresponding inability to accept dependence on external reality. In

particular, he sees what he terms the Faustian view of technology as embodying a tendency toward nature that rests on the belief that we can mold the world to our desires, harness nature to our goals, and achieve a state of complete self-sufficiency.

The ongoing study of narcissism and object relations led—initially Freud, and later his successors, as already mentioned—to the hypothesis of the death drive as a drive toward the complete cessation of tension, a return to the zero point. Narcissism, in this wholly negative form, becomes a longing to be released from external reality.

The myth of Narcissus directly connects us with the dimension of negative narcissism: Narcissus dies to unite with his reflection (to touch his ideal). The myth raises the following question: This boundless love of the self—linked to the denial of the other, of difference—how closely does it border on destructiveness?

André Green (2001), referring to negative narcissism or death narcissism, emphasizes the tendency—encountered clinically—toward the zero point, which expresses not just a simple withdrawal of investment from external objects, but a disinvestment of the very capacity to invest in external reality. In the same text, Green distinguishes positive primary narcissism (associated with Eros), which tends toward unity and identity, from negative primary narcissism (associated with destructive drives). Negative narcissism does not manifest as hatred of the object—which would be fully compatible with the withdrawal of positive primary narcissism—but as the ego's tendency to nullify its own unity and move toward nothingness, which clinically manifests as a feeling of emptiness.

Concluding this necessarily selective retrospective, I add the contribution of R. Roussillon (1999) on the issue of narcissism. He defines narcissistic identity pain as pathologies that obstruct the ego's subjectivizing function and lie at the root of a "lack of being." According to him, they arise from primary traumatic situations.

Thus, on the one hand, narcissism has early penetrated the field of social sciences, while on the other, it remains to some extent vague and subject to further psychoanalytic exploration—particularly regarding its topographic and economic nature.

To conclude this introduction to the topic, I would like to raise certain questions and further objectives for study:

- Is narcissism instinctual in nature, or is it a neutral energy that can be used either positively or negatively?
- Is it a part of the ego, or—having instinctual qualities—is it an offshoot of the id?
- How can we further understand the role of narcissism in clinical entities, particularly in depression, psychosomatic pathology, and borderline cases?
- What happens in therapies and analyses? How can we understand the role of narcissism in transference–countertransference entanglements in analytic work? To what extent might transference and countertransference become narcissistic mirrorings of the analysands in the analysts and vice versa?
- Finally, what is happening with the current ideals of psychoanalysts? How likely is it that psychoanalysis, through today's analysts, might drift toward ideologies and principles that do not align with the psychoanalytic methodology and ethics and deviate from its original humanistic character?

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