Between the mirror and the mask or "truth [that] lies at the bottom of a well"

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Abstract

Narcissus – the mythological character whose self-obsession resulted in his undoing – provided the namesake for a series of personality disorders that have become synonymous with our modern culture. The qualities attributed to Narcissus in classical literature and mythology highly resemble the particularities of the narcissistic disorder that affects our society. Similarly to Narcissus, in modernity people are afflicted by the inability to connect in a healthy manner with each other which is the result of a warped subject-object relationship, megalomania, pathologic self-love, and a sadness and anger that are reflected in how relationships are built. This essay follows the development of the disorder, pointing out some new worrying trends that are emerging in the present, blurring the distinguishing lines between narcissism and paranoia.

Keywords: Narcissism, Freud, Frosh, Disorder, Modernity

Essay

He spoke, and returned madly to the same reflection, and his tears stirred the water, and the image became obscured in the rippling pool. As he saw it vanishing, he cried out 'Where do you fly to? Stay, cruel one, do not abandon one who loves you! I am allowed to gaze at what I cannot touch, and so provide food for my miserable passion!'…As he sees all this reflected in the dissolving waves, he can bear it no longer, but as yellow wax melts in a light flame, as morning frost thaws in the sun, so he is weakened and melted by love, and worn away little by little by the hidden fire… - Ovid, Metamorphoses[1]

The description of Narcissus lamenting his self-love and his unfortunate reality, as exhibited in Ovid's Metamorphoses (2000), shares many similarities with the particularities of the narcissistic

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[1] Ovid (2000). *The Metamorphoses Book III: 474-510*. Translated by Kline, A.S. Houston: Boarders Classics.

disorder: an inflated sense of one's importance, and a need for attention and admiration that is the result of a self that is "worn away little by little by the hidden fire". Modernity has created the perfect conditions for feeding the inflated sense of grandiosity and identity disturbance that characterizes our society. However, in order to understand how a psychological condition can be used to describe a historic era, first one must analyse how the ties of the individual to the society have changed, and why these changes have led to a predominance of the narcissistic character.

For Greek Philosophers, "truth lies at the bottom of a well, the water which serves as a mirror in which objects are reflected" (Gray 2016, p. 39). The 1900s, the century of the advent of psychoanalysis, were characterized by a new way of looking at society from inwards outwards. Through looking into the depth of the human mind, psychology shed light into the inner workings of man, attempting to break through the "mirror" that reflected how the human psyche worked. The individual - as a symbol of modernity and of all the processes that accompanied the attitudinal changes brought by the technological advent of the new age – was to become the centre of a world where until now he had been just another cog in the machine. Psychoanalysis offered an innovative 'tool' for analysing a society that was becoming more and more focused on the individual, giving rise to a framework that allowed a minute investigation of reality in all its elements. As such, the advent of the era of *Homo Psychologicus (*Jacoby 2017, p.2) facilitated the analysis of major disorders that afflicted the individual and in turn it helped create a basis for the investigations of problems that troubled the individual on a societal scale.

In turn, a historical analysis of society shows that certain periods have a particular disorder that best characterises them. The building block of society is the individual; hence, the afflictions of the individuals contribute to creating societal disorders that become the psychocultural archetypes of an age. According to Christopher Lasch, "every age develops its own peculiar form of pathology, which expresses in exaggerated form its underlying character structure" (Frosh 1989, p.1). Shifting from hysteria to depression, and finally to narcissism as the archetypal disorder that has characterized our society from the 1970s onwards, these manifestations stand as cornerstones of the unity (or in this case lack) of the self in modern society. They also offer an interesting insight in the changes in the ways we think and how we relate with each-other and our surroundings.

The emphasis on material wealth that characterises modernity, the importance of seeking attention to re-affirm yourself, and the dissolution of interpersonal ties between people, are all

underlying factors of the cultural shift that highlights the transformation of narcissism into "psychocultural affliction rather than a disease" (Twenge and Campbell 2013,p.2). Narcissism ceases being an affliction only of the individual and metamorphoses into a disturbance of the group, spreading like an epidemic until it becomes the best adjective to delineate our society. The shift to narcissism -as the archetypal societal problem of our age- summarises the psychological and philosophical crisis of a self that is "mediated by electronic images" (Lasch in Frosh 1989,p.3) and is limited to the confinement of the surface levels of things.

Today, narcissism seems to be an affirmed reality. Not only is there extensive literature that debates and confirms this (Lash 1991; Frosh 1989, 2016), but we see the term narcissism having achieved a more widespread usage outside the clinic than any other pathology before it. The focus in academic and clinical debate now revolves around the question if the current archetype that best describes the existing psychological condition of contemporary society is indeed narcissism or if we are facing yet another change and are moving to the age of paranoia. Stephen Frosh (2016) in *Relationality in a time of Surveillance: Narcissism, Melancholia, Paranoia* argues that we have moved to "the sort of hate-filled paranoia that only narcissism can induce" (4). He believes that narcissism was the product of the neo-liberal age and that the society of surveillance we live in produces a form of subjectivity that is inevitably paranoid. "To be accepted as 'citizens', we somehow have to be constantly scrutinized and self-scrutinizing, aware that we are being watched and so monitoring everything we do…aware that we leave traces behind us wherever we go, that there are few places to hide" (Frosh 2016, p.3). The suggestion here is that we are moving in a sort of perpetual manic state where our ego is not only facing problems in building a coherent self but is in a status of constant threat from its surrounding.

While agreeing with at the same time both Frosh's (2016, p.13) description of a paranoid ego that is "essentially narcissistic", and Twenge and Campbell's (2013) arguments about the existence of a *narcissistic epidemic*, today's condition seems to be more of a merge between narcissism and paranoia rather than a shift from one condition to the other. The Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines paranoia as "an extreme and unreasonable feeling that other people do not like you or are going to harm and criticize you [and that] someone who has paranoia has unreasonable false beliefs as a part of another mental illness". This definition helps in understanding

the connection Frosh makes between the two conditions, and it also assists in highlighting how we can have a narcissistic society that is highly paranoid.

The current reality seems to be characterised by a form of 'cultural' narcissism that is enframed and moulded by paranoia. According to Pulver, narcissism is one of the most important concepts, however, "it is very confusing" (in Jacoby 2017, p.3). It stands almost as an umbrella term for many different conditions which range from "serious disturbances in self-evaluation and an overwhelming self-hatred… [people] suffer from not being 'the fairest of them all' and look at themselves as nothing but ugly and inferior… [simultaneously we find the opposite end of the spectrum an insistence on] 'perfect beauty'…total intelligence, brilliant genius" (Jacoby 2017, p.3). This dual aspect of narcissism fits perfectly with a society that is going through an affirmation crisis by trying to find its balance between nature and technology, real and unreal, surface level experiences and real ones. At the same time, a discrepancy seems to exist between how we see ourselves, and how we want to be seen; the divide and distortion between 'inside' and 'outside' seems to reach a dangerous level in a society that promotes a narcissistic way of seeking value only in skin-deep things.

However, as a social pathology, narcissism reflects the societal problems, and as society and technology develop so does the condition itself. The narcissism Freud (1914) talked about is certainly different from our current manifestation of narcissistic disorder which incorporates the paranoia of a society that is under constant self-scrutiny. The interpersonal ties between people and the way we construct our self-image have undergone a radical change with the advent of the new media. "Each society constructs human subjects in its own image" (Frosh 1989, p.4), and a society that has been facing the results of the disenchantment of modernity cannot produce individuals that develop in a healthy way. Philosophers such as Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), have continuously pointed out the consequences we as humans face because of manifested egoism of consumer capitalism which inevitably led to a self-centredness that is at the heart of the narcissistic disorder. This process produces a massive crisis of identity, where our self-image or ego ideal is built on an empty narrative or depthless images instead of meaningful objects.

The problem of how the environment affects the individual has been a concern from the beginning of psychoanalysis as seen in Freud's (1914) *Moses and Monotheism* or *the Future of an Illusion*. However, it was especially with Christopher Lasch(1991), issues of the society as a whole began

being seen as the cause of socio-pathological conditions. His analysis of pathological conditions through economic, political, and cultural angles facilitates the understanding of how the advance in technology has created a shift in the way we form relationship from in person to online. This in turn has added to the valorisation of commodities and a self that is faced with the dilemma of how to form coherence and stability. In our culture, "everything is the look, and if an object has value and specificity only in its surface, then so will the ego. 'I am so like an object' becomes 'I am an image, nothing more'" (Frosh 1989,p. 2). This image-oriented perception of reality has as its symbol the mirror imagery which also dominates narcissistic pathologies. Hence, the unwilling absorption of the myth of Narcissus into our culture disintegrates the self, which is faced with a constant crisis for survival.

At the same time, we notice a particular turn in the fragmentation of the self which leads to the fragmentation of society where individuals become alienated and their only tie to reality is a self-constructed 'mirror'. The culture of Instagram and Facebook has created a sort of paranoia and fear of not being liked, not getting online attention, and the need for a constant validification that is presented in a considerably unhealthy way. These particularities of our current reality promote "the superficiality of interpersonal exchanges and [an increased] preoccupation with self-presentation which are often taken as characteristic of narcissistic personality" (Richards 2016, p.4). The unhealthy preoccupation with self-presentation is perpetuated by the "new media" which, according to Lev Manovich, "activates a 'narcissistic condition'" (in Tyler 2007, p.344). In social media we notice different means of entailing the channelling of specific traits of the disorder. Not only does this culture of 'pictures' enable the forming of a surface level self, but simultaneously it gives the narcissistic person an immediate gratification through the 'likes' they receive.

For these individuals, what really is an artificial world where their need for affirmation gets realised immediately, instead of a meaningful human relationship. Life itself becomes like a virtual game, and the ego ideal faces a continuous crisis from this ever-shifting chaotic means of self-realization. Social media offers a means of achieving the recognition and connection that cannot be achieved in reality. The distance that exists between the real person and his online persona facilitates behaviours that would be difficult to exist in the real world. Similarly to other addictions, social media entices the affirmation needing individual to have a larger online presence which in turn creates more anxiety.

Many of these narcissistic traits that we find in social media users seem to be characterised by a form of paranoia that serves as a warped 'instinctual' reaction for surviving modernity. Often, under the conditioning of society individual feel as they have no choice but to take part in a social process such as Instagram, Facebook, or more recently TikTok in order to stop feeling alienated. In a reality where humans are de-humanized and turned only into a commodity, it is not surprising that narcissistic pathologies would emerge as a coping mechanism where this 'domination' of modernity leads to a state of paranoia that best describes the constant race for online 'survival'. Frosh (1989, p.4) argues that behind the façade of "superficial aggrandizement and the glamour of modern culture lies a violence always threatening to erupt, always projected and materialized in modes of oppression and vicious domination". However, the debate we notice in Frosh (2016), Richards (2018), about the shift to paranoia as the 'archetypal' manifestation of our current reality can be understood better if we see our current condition as being "the sort of hate-filled paranoia that only narcissism can induce" (Frosh, 2016, p.4). The inability to master oneself, leads to paranoid state of projecting the inner narcissistic rage and address it either to society or interiorize it. What results is a picture consistent with the narcissistic inevitable lack of empathy, the inability to love or care for anything apart from an egoistic love of the self, and a rage which is the result of this almost artificially created narcissism.

The illusion of substantial experience which in the end results completely empty and problematic is the result of a process of individuation that happens between the "the mirror and the mask" (Bromberg in Frosh 1989, p.2). The 'mirroring behaviour' that young children use to understand the reality that surrounds them - where the parents are used as a means of identifying with, and in turn the understanding of the world is developed through this initial 'clan' structure and applied in a major scale to society in general – loses its effect when part of what its mirrored allows only for a superficial perception of society. The mask we put on is one that hides the insecurities and anxieties of this self-formation process. In this reading of narcissism, the normal process of individuation presented by Jung as the "inherent drive in people to seek and realize themselves" (Jacoby 2017, p.1) is impeded by the development of a technological reality which is forming the basis of how we self-represent and self-form our ego-ideal in our times: the web and social media. At the same time, the sense of rivalry that the commodity and online culture promotes in turn creates

"displacement…[as well as an] overwhelming sense of threat" directed at what endangers the consolidation of ego.

The fixation of paranoid states of being often under threat and observation could be the other side of the coin of the narcissistic disorder. The narcissistic megalomania and need for affirmation combined with the reality of the online culture could result in an increased need to be noticed which in turn can take a more negative twist and turn this need into a fixation or a sense of being observed, that is a characteristic of paranoia. Lacan argues that "in each of us there is a paranoid function: the ego. The ego, constituted by successive identifications enacted during the mirror stage (*stade du miroir*), is essentially narcissistic" (in Frosh 2016, p.13). When this narcissistic need to mirror internally the outside world is based on non-stable objects. "When these objects keep disappearing, to be replaced by new, existing but equally disposable alternatives" (Frosh 1989, p.6) the self will often feel threatened by the lack of stability in its identification objects. The narcissistic potential of creating self-destructive behaviour could manifest itself in this paranoid state of threat as the sole constant in an ever-changing reality. Both narcissism and paranoia seem to be a response for a society that is progressing too quickly for the individual who tries to find a stable footing in his/her reality.

This convergence of paranoia and narcissism captures the modern condition and the destructive parts of the self that are easily recognisable in the current reality. According to Richards (2018, p.16), the narcissistic inflated sense of self is "a defence against the underlying anxiety and vulnerability" of the modern context. Frosh (1989, p.26) talks about an emphasis of the narcissistic pathology on "grandiosity and mirror fixation, a mixture of an inflated image of the self and a need to have this image constantly confirmed by others", Lacan(2006) proposes the mirror stage as a key development of the individual although his theory also makes it easier to notice what could go wrong in the formation of the self and lead from a normal narcissism to a pathological one. What all these theories have in common is the need to find the "truth [that] lies at the bottom of a well"; or, in this case, uncover the origin of the problematic formation of the self in modernity.

Our consumer capitalist culture inadvertently promotes the control of others in order to secure the self-affirmation that the narcissistic ego needs in order to survive. More and more often, individuals define themselves as mere 'things' due to agencies of mass production that promote a standardized attitude towards objects and people alike. The individual becomes part of this mass

production chain and loses his/her connection to the natural world by entering an artificially created narcissistic driven reality. The superficial images of our society form a façade that is becoming a reality for many individuals. More than any other pathological condition, narcissism, especially as argued from Lasch (1991) afterwards, offers an interactive view of psychoanalytic conditions while simultaneously focusing on how a society that is in constant flux affects our self-formation.

Taking in consideration the ever shifting economic, political, and technological realities, our culture still exhibits the classic elements of the narcissistic individual but on a societal scale. Megalomania, the need to control others in order to re-affirm yourself, and mirror fixation lead to a narcissistic rage that easily crosses borders with paranoia. As argued previously, the reality for the process of individuation seems to have shifted to narcissistic paranoia. The pressure of the surveillance society we live in has facilitated the crossing over of the domains between narcissism and paranoia. We can easily observe all the narcissistic traits but with a twist of the obsessive object relation that paranoia exhibits.

The best example of the paranoic-narcissistic shift in our society has become the concept of self-love which until recently was the symbol of a healthy self; something that showed the cornerstone of what an individual should aspire to. Nowadays, even this self-realizing concept is transformed in a narcissistic outlet driven by paranoia. The new practice of sologamy – or marrying oneself – shows how our fear of being alone mixed with a warped self -love have contaminated not only how we relate to each-other, but above all, how we relate to ourselves. A culture that promotes an unhealthy bordering to obsessive self-love with a focus from outwards inwards cannot but promote the narcissistic tendencies that our culture exhibits. Before, we were told that what counts is what's inside us. However, now this has changed to what counts is the outside, the surface, the images. We have inadvertently created a society with a focus on the surface-level importance of reality, where the inside doesn't matter. People paranoically fight about their 'images', and self-realization is perceived as successful when we look like the 'idols' we see in the new media.

Considering all the elements discussed, the aim of this essay is not to judge society or its individuals but to highlight a common worry that is made evident in our current reality. By arguing for the shift to a narcissistic driven paranoia, this essay is showing through the use of a 'clinical metaphor' some conditions that are crucial in understanding the ever-shifting reality we live in.

Between the mirror and the mask or "truth [that] lies at the bottom of the well"

The overlap of narcissistic traits with the paranoid states of mind is reaching a level that needs acknowledging. This reading stands for a need to review our understanding of individual conditions that affirm the need of more 'cross-condition' clinical and academic analysis in order to really understand what is at the "bottom of the well" of the human psyche. Only by taking down both the 'mirror' and the 'mask' do we stand a chance to continue the search for truth and understanding humanity that Freud initiated more than a century ago.

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