

DEPRESSION AND GRANDIOSITY AS RELATED FORMS OF NARCISSISTIC DISTURBANCES

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to present some ideas which have occurred to me over the years in the course of my analytic work. This work has included analyses, supervision and many interviews with people who have been looking for an analyst, and whom I have seen for one or two sessions. In these short encounters, the tragedy of each individual destiny can often be seen with moving clarity and intensity. What is described as depression, and experienced as emptiness, futility, fear of impoverishment and loneliness, is frequently recognizable as the tragedy of loss of the self, or alienation from the self, which is seen regularly in our generation and society. Thanks to years of reconstructive work with my analysands, I think I have come nearer to the child origins of this alienation from the self.

The observations of early mother-child interaction recorded by M. Mahler, R. Spitz, and J. Robertson, confirmed my suppositions. On reading Winnicott I felt on familiar ground and encouraged to continue along this path. Lastly, H. Kohut's studies on narcissism, especially his concept of *narcissistic cathexis*, helped me to conceptualize the relationships I had discovered.

In what follows I shall dispense with the meta-psychological language of structure theory and try to develop the connections I want to show on the basis of the mother-child relationship. Obviously a large part of the events here described take place intrapsychically, but an object relationship precedes every internalization and its language seems to me to be emotionally truer, and, for many analysts, more understandable.

A. THE VICISSITUDES OF NARCISSISTIC NEEDS

According to H. Kohut (1971), an object is narcissistically cathected when we experience it not as the centre of its own activity but as a part of ourselves. If the object does not behave in the way in which we expect or wish, we may at times be immeasurably disappointed or offended, almost as if an arm ceased to obey us, or a function that we take for granted (such as memory) lets us down. This sudden loss of control can also lead to intense narcissistic rage.

This sort of attitude is met far more frequently in adults than one might imagine, however much we like to regard it as pathological, unrealistic or egocentric. At the beginning of life, however, it is the only attitude possible. Not only during the phase of primary narcissism (the symbiotic phase) but also after the gradual separation between self- and object-representations, does the mother normally remain a narcissistically cathected object, a function of the developing individual.

Every child has a legitimate narcissistic need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by its mother. In the first weeks and months of life it has to have the mother at its disposal, must be able to use her and to be mirrored by her. This is beautifully illustrated in one of Winnicott's images: the mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at its mother's face and finds itself therein . . . provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own introjects on to the child, nor her own expectations, fears and plans for the child. In that case, the child would not find itself in its

mother's face but rather the mother's own predicaments. It would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of its life would be seeking this mirror in vain.

i. Healthy narcissism

If a child is lucky enough to grow up with a mirroring mother, who allows herself to be cathected narcissistically, who is at the child's disposal, that is, who allows herself to be 'made use of' as a function of the child's narcissistic development, as M. Mahler (1968) says, then a healthy self-feeling can gradually develop in the growing child. Ideally this should be a mother who can also provide the necessary emotional climate and understanding of the child's needs. But even a mother who is not especially warm-hearted can make this development possible, if she only refrains from preventing it. This enables the child to acquire from other people what its mother lacks. Various investigations have shown the incredible ability which a healthy child displays in making use of the smallest affective 'nourishment' (stimulation) to be found in its surroundings.

I regard as a healthy self-feeling, the unquestioned *certainty* that the feelings and wishes which one experiences are a *part of one's self*. This certainty is not something based upon reflection, but is there like one's own pulse, which one does not notice as long as it functions normally.

This automatic, natural contact with his own emotions and wishes gives an individual strength and *self esteem*. He may live out his feelings, be sad, despairing or in need of help, without fear of making the introjected mother insecure. He can allow himself to be afraid when he is threatened, or angry when his wishes are not fulfilled. He knows not only what he does not want, but also what he does, and is able to express this, irrespective of whether he will be loved or hated for it.

I will now enumerate some characteristics of a successful narcissistic development but would like to make it clear that here, as also later on, I am describing constructions of phenomena which are only approximated in reality. Instead of 'healthy narcissism', it would be possible also to speak of inner freedom and vitality.

1. *Aggressive impulses* could be neutralized because they did not upset the confidence and self esteem of the mother.

2. *Strivings towards autonomy* were not experienced as an attack.

3. The child was allowed to experience and express 'ordinary' impulses (such as jealousy, rage, defiance) because his mother did not require him to be 'special', for instance to represent her own ethical attitudes.

4. There was no need to please anybody (under optimal conditions) and the child could develop and *exhibit* whatever was active in him during each developmental phase.

5. He could use his parents because they were independent of him.

6. These preconditions enabled him to *separate self- and object-representations* successfully.

7. Being able to display ambivalent feelings, the child could learn to regard both his self and the object as '*both good and bad*', and did not need to split off the 'good' from the 'bad' object.

8. *Object love* was made possible because the parents also loved the child as a separate object.

9. Provided there were phase-appropriate and non-traumatic frustrations, the child was able to *integrate* his narcissistic needs and did not have to resort to repression or splitting.

10. This integration made their transformation possible, as well as the development of a drive regulating matrix, based on the child's own *trial and error experiences*.

ii. Narcissistic disturbance

What happens if the mother not only is unable to take over the narcissistic functions for the child, but also, as very often happens, is herself in need of narcissistic supplies? Quite unconsciously and counter to her own good intentions, the mother then tries to assuage her own narcissistic needs through her child, i.e. *she cathects him narcissistically*. This does not rule out strong affection. On the contrary, the mother often loves her child as her self-object, passionately, but not in the way he needs to be loved. Among other things, therefore, the continuity and constancy that would be so important, are missing from this love, but above

