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LSE Review of Books

Sex and Psychopaths

Celebrating 100 years of Freud's *On Narcissism*



Sex and Psychopaths

Celebrating 100 years of Freud's *On Narcissism*

This e-book will look at how we can understand the apparent growth in narcissism and withdrawals from intimacy in a digital age. From the impact of Facebook and online porn on sex, to whether we're losing the capacity to be close to the people we work with. Join us to explore whether we're all turning into narcissists or whether we can do something to salvage intimacy with other people.

This e-book is released to coincide with the LSE Review of Books event of the same name at the [LSE Literary Festival 2014](#). Speakers include Marianna Fotaki, Professor of Business Ethics at Warwick Business School; Yiannis Gabriel, Professor of Organizational Theory at the University of Bath; Steve Fuller, Auguste Comte Professor of Social Epistemology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick; David Morgan, a Fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society; and Elizabeth Cotton, the founding director of The Resilience Space and the [Surviving Work Library](#). [A podcast](#) of the event will be available in the days after the event.

The LSE's 6th Annual Literary Festival will explore the distinctive qualities of the social sciences' and the arts' approaches to understanding the world around us with a programme of talks, readings, panel discussions and film screenings, as well as creative writing workshops and children's events. The Festival runs from 24th February to 1st March 2014, under the theme 'Reflections'. Browse the full LSE Space for Thought Literary Festival programme [here](#).

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Narcissism and perversion in public policy

*Narcissism is increasingly being observed among management and political elites. Recognising how it underpins policy making and how it becomes increasingly prevalent in socially destructive ways is key to re-engaging citizens with the political process, writes **Marianna Fotaki**.*



Derived from the ancient Greek myth of a beautiful youth Narcissus who died through falling in love with his own image, the term narcissism - coined by Sigmund Freud - has travelled widely in the past one hundred years, shaping popular culture, business and public policy.

Psychoanalytic ideas present an important framework for understanding the rise of the culture of narcissism in work, management and organisational settings. Narcissism is applied to individuals who are incapable of empathy, unable to relate to and totally unaware of other people's needs, or even their existence. Under growing uncertainty and the ruthless striving for innovation that characterises late capitalism, it is increasingly observed in business leadership. In 2000 [Michael Maccoby argued](#) that narcissists are good news for companies, because they have passion and dare to break new ground.

But even productive narcissists are often dangerous as they are divorced from the consequences of their judgements and actions, whenever these do not affect them directly. They will strive at any cost to avoid painful realisations of failure that could tarnish their own image and will only listen to information they seek to hear, failing to learn from others. Popular portrayals of corporate figures as 'psychopaths' who unscrupulously and skilfully manoeuvre their way to the highest rungs of the social ladder [are presented](#) as fundamentally different from the rest of humanity. However, this is a misconception obscuring the pervasiveness of narcissism and mechanisms that enable it.

[Susan Long](#) has persuasively argued that whole societies may be caught in a state of pathological perversion whenever instrumentality overrides relationality – that is, whenever narcissism becomes dominant, other people (or the whole groups of other people) are seen not as others, like oneself, but as objects to be used. For instance, when markets are seen as anonymous ‘virtual’ structures, employees may be seen and treated as exploitable commodities. Such behaviours are pathologically perverse in that people disavow their knowledge of the situations they create through narcissistic processes.

Public policies have been subject to these pathological perversions. Separating risk from responsibility in the financial sector was not merely about creating perverse incentives enabling people to engage in greed through financial bubbles that were bound to burst, but about disengaging policy makers from the all too predictable consequences of such policies.

Another example is the dramatic shift in public policy that has occurred in Europe where instead of ensuring liveable wages, access to affordable health care, public education and a clean environment, there is an increasing preoccupation with how to unleash the alleged desire of citizens to enact their preferences of how public services should be provided. The justification is that citizens want to choose between different providers to ensure that they get the best quality. However, at least in health care services, this is not borne out [by the evidence](#). In reality, the logic of consumerist choice valorises individualism and narcissistic self-gratification by undermining the institutions created to promote public interest. The re-modelling of the public organisations as ‘efficient’ (read flexible and dispensable) business units, the widespread privatisation of the Commons and the diminution of the value of the public good are just a few of the means by which this have been achieved.

We see the effects of these changes in the NHS: imposing a market ethos on health care staff, and a focus on indicators and targets, has led to the distortion of care. [Studies have shown](#) the long term reality of the suffering, dependence and vulnerability of mentally ill patients is disavowed, and the complexities of managing those in psychological distress are systematically evaded. It is replaced by work intensification and demands on the overworked front line staff to [show more compassion](#). Equally, the needs of patients for relational aspects of care [are ignored](#) as they do not fit with the conveyer-belt model of services provided in 10-minute slots by GPs in England.

The institutionalisation and systemic sanctioning of such practices involving instrumentality, disregard for sociality and relational ties, and pathological splitting from one’s own actions - all originating in individual narcissistic processes - constitute a state of pathological perversion on a societal level. The increasing narcissism among management and political elites is also enabled by the public at large, who may be projecting on to them their own desire for power while splitting off ambivalent feelings emerging from this desire. The progressive marketisation of public services illustrates both the insensitivity of policy makers to the impact of their policies on those who are less able to benefit from them (i.e. the less affluent and less-well educated citizens) but also in appealing to the narcissism of voters. Thus the issue of how much choice is possible and what are the inevitable trade-offs involved (between choice and equity or quality and efficiency [in public health systems](#)) is sidestepped by politicians and their constituencies.

A narcissistic denial of reality deflects the citizens' attention from a much needed social critique. Understanding how narcissism underpins policy making, and how it becomes increasingly prevalent in socially destructive ways of managing employees and manipulating the public, is therefore a necessary first step towards re-engaging with the political process.

We live in a narcissistic society where random acts of intimacy with real people are pointless and romance is dead

*Online contact is often dressed up in the language of love but much of it is actually fully devoid of human feeling, writes **Elizabeth Cotton**. Online technologies also get us into bad narcissistic habits. The result: we live in a narcissistic society where random acts of intimacy with real people are pointless and romance is dead.*



Romance takes a real pounding in a recession, with [divorce going up by nearly 5%](#) since 2008 and a [rise in domestic violence and family break-up](#). Tell us something we don't know? Actually relationships in a time of recession are a complex business, reeling from the impact of public policy on family incomes to the massive rise in availability of online porn, there's something about our collective decline in intimacy that requires us to dig deep.

It's 100 years since Freud wrote *On Narcissism*, which over time has become the most written about idea in psychoanalysis. Tempting as it is to blame the narcissists for this (seriously what do you think about me?), one of the reasons might be the hold that narcissism has on our culture. From the narcissism of the ego-ideals we present through social media to the [collective perversion of NHS privatisation](#) – one way or another, narcissism is a dimension of ordinary life.

Some of us stare open mouthed at our corporate culture which celebrates megalomania and magic solutions and a public policy of anti-vulnerability promoting superheroes and self-sufficiency. Cut, cut, cut. This is narcissism as a perversion of love, a world of leaders that can only love the things that they control and withdraw their interest from the external world to the internal one. Me, me, me.

Despite being a big fan of anything that puts people in contact with each other, online technologies can indeed get us into [bad narcissistic habits](#) by helping us withdraw from the troublesome activity of having to rub along other separate and independent human beings. The technology we use at work and play is potentially a space where these perverse ideals can be pursued offering a virtual exit from human neediness and insecurity. One third of all US divorces [cite Facebook activity](#) and 50 per cent of baby boomers regularly [sleep next to](#)

[their smart phones](#). Intimacy gets replaced by shoes or the hairless body of the [online porn](#) star. I am my facebook profile.

Online contact is often dressed up in the language of love – human emotion and therapy speak peppering public engagement and policy consultations. Much of it is actually fully devoid of human feeling, summed up in the image of political leaders doing a selfie at Mandela’s funeral. A [narcissistic society](#) where instrumentality rules over relationality creating a world of haves and have nots, omnipotence and a disdain for human life and the vulnerability and pain that this actually involves. This is a narcissistic world where random acts of intimacy with real people are pointless, and romance is dead.

Tempting as it is to project the problem of intimacy into our un(self)conscious attempts to virtually link-in, all that the technology does is concretise one of the many psychic retreats we’re all tempted to take when it comes to relationships. Whatever our status, there exists a narcissistic choice of love objects; ourselves and our ideals or what Freud called anaclitic love, based on intimacy with someone different and separate from us.

Narcissus mistook his own reflection for a lost love and got locked in a matching-anorak-co-dependency-situation with someone that wasn’t really there. [Click here](#) for your perfect partner, a 99% match, or [click here](#) for chemistry and the messy business of relations with other people. Narcissus stopped the crushing pain of loneliness by staring at his own reflection and in the process starved, his needs left untouched without any intercourse with life.

In a profoundly Scandinavian response, the Norwegian government this week adopted [a policy of Date Nights](#). Yup, a policy to encourage fledgling narcissists to go out and date. No [generational slander](#) here because despite the research on the impact of technology on the Millennials it turns out that the group most vulnerable to narcissistic withdrawals are the 40-44 year olds. That sentence alone should remind us of the real value of actual data and public policy that uses it.

Has Freud got it all wrong about narcissism?

Milena Stateva believes that in the modern world Narcissus would flourish and not perish, and would survive by becoming a groupie to the cult of the individual. It is time we re-examined Freud's ideas and look again at how we imagine love and the essential notions connected with being human.



Narcissism has ended up boxed in a clinical corner - a quick Google search returns thousands of entries to help us recognise the narcissist next to us and quantify the perils of living with them. And yet narcissism as a clinical category is no longer a tragic condition of Greek mythology but characterised as a pathetic social state pathologising life in an individualistic society and lumping us all in together. We have all become psychopaths.

The real Narcissus of today would not die, drown or commit suicide while staring forever at their physicality. Rather he or she escapes in the comfort of a new type of tribalism that provides them with the in-group admiration they are longing for. The Narcissus of today still cannot fall in love with anything he perceives uglier than himself – the under-dog or the different – and instead survives by becoming a groupie to the cult of the individual. Narcissism has become a metaphor for the great contemporary difficulty to exercise the very human capacity to experience and show recognition when faced with the other, the simple yet complicated thing we call 'love'.

The turbulent, high-speed times in which we live (or the previous times that got us here) are a little excuse for the overwhelming focus on physicality that comes with the demands for productivity and efficiency today. Rather, the contemporary pace and turmoil are a

result of these very demands for productivity and efficiency paired with an all-pervading instrumentality, an invasion of business and scientific rationality and pathological busyness that serves to keep our all too human vulnerability at bay.

We, and our work and life collaborators, are forced to be able to quickly sell - and to constantly do so - each and every part of our selves and ways of interacting, behaving and living. I am consciously not using 'relating, acting and being' even though these verbs more appropriately describe what I wish we were able to do – but they do not sell very well. The impoverishment of selves, relationships and work caused by isolating art, love, physical activity and political action, empathy, and enjoyment to battery-charging compartments in time and space suffocates desire and reduces it to what Zygmunt Bauman calls a series of wishes.

Love then suffers the burden of consumerism and the effects of processes that are divorcing it from everyday life – thus carefully cultivating a Narcissist in each one of us. An unprecedented process of intensification and even turmoil liquidifies our experience of living in a late modern world to produce a separate socio-erotic sphere that serves no other function but to help people go on in their otherwise frustrating days (see also [Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, 1986](#); [Hochschild, 2003](#)).

This new, rather narcissistic modernity, Bauman says, calls for a re-examination of the 'basic concepts around which the orthodox narratives of the human condition tend to be wrapped': emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community. It is difficult, if not impossible, to think of love as an emancipatory and enriching power in the contemporary context: of re-defined freedom that masks dependency, of excessive individualism, growing inequalities, intensified time/space (and - consequently - re-drawn boundaries), and not least relationships with work that take over personal life. All this is complemented by a declining sense of community at the expense of a growing, rather primitive, tribalism – the wish to be one with everything, but everything that is like us and serves us well.

Love, Bauman warns us, divorced from caring and desire, is replaced by excessive sexuality which then functions as a way to escape the limitations and to deny the mortality of the body rather than to express love. Consequently, sexuality becomes a centre of tension and conflict as it becomes in fact a focal point for society to control and regulate by taking over people's displaced attempt to control their own lives and deaths.

In such a context love itself can be easily reduced to an instrumental self-directed tool, but this context can also provide a platform for experimenting with new ways of feeling and doing love. This hope has been expressed by [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim](#) as long ago as in 1995 – one can only hope with them that this is what the current generations are doing.

Psychoanalysis, especially its practice-orientation informed by object relations theory, is one of the few surviving streams in social studies in which it is not only acceptable to speak of love in a rigorous way, but it can be seen as a methodology promoting the systematic and conscious application of love. Yet, psychoanalysis itself seems to suffer the limitations of staring at itself and pairing with the quick fixes of clinical categories rather than engaging in a dialogue with disciplines that are looking more at the world around the individual.

So perhaps Freud after all has got it all wrong about narcissism, with a capital N or not?

Between 1931 and 1932 Freud and Einstein [exchanged letters](#) in which they were exploring Freud's views on what would make the overwhelming power of aggressive and destructive instincts disappear from the net of social and political relations. Freud was very pessimistic about the potential of overcoming this aspect of human nature unless strengthening the countervailing powers of love. Perhaps, had he had the time, his work would have gone in a rather different direction, one that we may look to pursue 100 years later.

Digitalia

*Who amongst our leaders would have been able to win a place in history without having lived, perhaps even having "acted out" a substantial portion of the narcissistic drive inherent in his or her own personality? **Ross A. Lazar** discusses how narcissism can play an important but potentially dangerous role in leadership.*



Ever since Narcissus spurned Echo's love, preferring to gaze at himself through his own reflection in the still waters of a pool in the absence of a computer screen or smartphone, the notion that we can "fall in love" with ourselves and prefer the pursuit of such self-love rather than enter into intimate relationships with others has been our guilty secret. Our culture has developed an endless proliferation of forms of narcissistic life styles, relationships, forms of social and commercial activity, literature, music, art, science and religion, and continues to do so – perhaps even more than ever.

Since Freud published his celebrated study of narcissism, the psycho-analytic, philosophical and sociological world has been preoccupied with classifying the many and varied forms of narcissism which have come to characterize so much of modern life. Wikipedia lists no less than at least [15 different forms of narcissism](#); from co-dependency to corporate narcissism backed up by scientific literature and tick box questionnaires.

"According to recent cultural criticism, Narcissus has replaced Oedipus as the myth of our time. Narcissism is now seen to be at the root of everything from the ill-fated romance with violent revolution to the enthralled mass consumption of state-of-the-art products and the 'lifestyles of the rich and famous'."

- Jessica Benjamin, [The Bonds of Love](#)

Even Wikipedia digs deep to explain our cultural relationship with narcissism.

But, does that perhaps even imply that there may be *nothing* in the modern world that is not in some sense a product of our infatuation with ourselves? Is there such a thing as a

modern leader, whether in the political, the commercial, the scientific, the artistic or the religious sphere, who is *not* preoccupied with his or her own narcissistic need to dominate, to be the centre of attention, to be the one and only decider, dictator and evaluator of how things are to be? Thank goodness for Narcissists! Whatever would we do without them?!

Who amongst our leaders would have been able to win a place in history without having lived, perhaps even having "acted out" a substantial portion of the narcissistic drive inherent in his or her own personality? What Pharaoh or Holy Roman Emperor could have survived neighbours without it or ruled over the of the rightness of his actions and the legitimacy of his aims. And as for the power of narcissistic women, starting with Eve herself, Cleopatra, Jeanne d'Arc, Marie Antoinette, right up to Angela Merkel (although she succeeds in hiding it very well), it is to a great extent their extraordinarily narcissistic personality structures that motivate them to be who they are, to do what they do.

In the vast field of leadership literature, narcissistic types of leadership are found to be a common form of leadership style, whether healthy or destructive for the group being led. [A study](#) published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* suggests that when a group is without a leader, you can often count on a narcissist to take charge with people who score high in narcissism tending to take control of leaderless groups, conforming with Bion's theories of leadership and group dynamics.

Without living out that aspect of their personalities, who in his right mind would dare to take on the running of a huge multinational corporation, take responsibility for billions of dollars' worth of other peoples' money, make blockbuster films, or even stand in front of a philharmonic orchestra, not to mention before an army of thousands of troops or a nation or international body representing millions of people. Who could bear the responsibility of supplying the world with enough water, energy or peace to guarantee future survival?

Narcissistic states of mind in this sense are characterized by feelings of greed, selfish self-centeredness, lack of concern for the "Other" and ruthless pursuit of "what's good for Number One" (so called "me-ness"). In Kleinian terms, this state of mind can be seen as a more or less extreme lack of development of the "depressive position" or Winnicott's "position of concern". What should bother us about this link is whether narcissistic leadership will or *must* ultimately cause the breakdown of civilization altogether. Not merely the endless wars and genocidal acts which every day destroy a bit more of our hard-won civilization, but the world's persistent lack of concern for the fate of the environment is probably the clearest evidence for this globally suicidal attitude.

Question: If the all-powerful narcissists amongst us are running the world into Oblivion what do the rest of us do while waiting for Armageddon?

Answer: 1.2 billion of us join Facebook!

For it is not Moses whom we follow, in hopes of his leading us into the Promised Land; not Alexander the Great, nor Martin Luther, George Washington, Napoleon or Karl Marx. Instead we follow the lead of a latter day Pied Piper who has offered us a new kind of digital "reflecting pool" through which to indulge our navel-gazing. All because a pimply, insecure, socially incompetent 18-year old computer nerd promised us Friendship, Beauty, Attention, Admiration and perhaps even Love (or some substitute for it), if only we reveal ourselves,

strip ourselves digitally naked for all to see.

While we blindly wade through his algorithms, he and his cohorts laugh all the way to the bank. We, meanwhile, are left alone to lose ourselves in the contemplation of our and all our so-called "friends'" digital navels.

Destroying the Knowledge of Love

David Morgan argues that the world opposed to the earth is a man made construction, but in the modern era there are so many distractions from our internal or emotional world, that turning away from deep involvement has reached epidemic proportions.



We are buried beneath the weight of information, where quantity is confused with knowledge. This is a narcissistic economy where wealth means happiness; a world where [a dog made \\$12 million](#) last year while a farmer producing basic food stuffs made £20,000.

Sometimes we are just monkeys with money and guns
- Tom Waits

According to Hannah Arendt, the world (as opposed to the earth), is something man-made. It is planned out in our heads and composed by our manual labour. But without deep human relatedness, it is just a static “heap of things”; a hardened reality without value is just as mindless as running around while remaining in the same place.

What lends pliability to reality in all its complexity - as opposed to rigidity and myopic thinking - she claims, as Freud did decades earlier, is taking the time to talk with one another without any predetermined purpose. Without hurrying from one topic to another, without seeking solutions, and without skirting the real difficulty of actually communicating with one another. It is here that the continuing value of Freud’s discovery, creating mental space with another, asserts itself.

In a digital age there are so many distractions from our internal or emotional world, that turning away from deep involvement has reached epidemic proportions. A market economy providing entertainments, where the commodification of human experience is fast replacing human attachment, characterised by the creation of mechanical Geishas, an alternative to a sexual woman.

Some experiences have been so painful that human contact and love is a real threat to whatever defensive structures people have been able to develop. The terror of the abyss is always with them and analysis can threaten exposure to this frightening place.

This experience is captured in Louis MacNeice’s poem 'Autobiography' (see p.14) about the frightened child abandoned in the night. The refrain “Come back early or never come”, is one of wounded ultimatum. In this way it is a lullaby thrown into reverse and represents the

resignation which a child might feel when faced with overwhelming trauma occurring too early for its level of cognitive development and understanding. These situations may create the necessity in some people to fall back on their own process as is the case in narcissism. Like the deprived child rescued from an earthquake who has kept himself company by staring at his own hand, this investment of part of oneself or something in one's control provides retreat that is then difficult to leave.

At these times a turning away from needing the other in the face of life and death anxieties is a reasonable solution, a narcissistic withdrawal into the fantasy of omnipotence. These issues manifest in the consulting room as traumatised patients arrive looking for quick fixes and short term treatments. This puts unrealistic pressures on the therapist to either collude, as with current fashionable treatments, or to provide the first frightening experiences of unstructured thought in what might have been a world dedicated entirely to avoidance.

In trying to understand the difficulties of managing these issues with patients it is helpful to draw on Roger Money Kyrle's *Facts of Life*. He wrote that he has found it useful to consider three core facts of life which are; "the recognition of the dependency, the recognition of the parents' intercourse as a creative act, and the recognition of the inevitability of time and ultimately death" (Money Kyrle, 1971: 30). He went on to say about this third 'fact' that "to fear death is not the same as to recognise its inevitability, which is a fact forced on us much against our will by the repeated experience that no good (or bad) experience can ever last forever—a fact perhaps never fully accepted" (1971: 62).

As fundamental schematics of the human experience, these 'facts' belong to us all, not just our patients. As Money Kyrle argues, we all work unconsciously to distort or blunt our acceptance of these profound human experiences but that traumatic events may destine some of us unconsciously to devote all our efforts to subvert the recognition of these facts. This narcissistic withdrawal becomes an activity in place of living.

My work as a clinician leads me to believe that it is the process of the analyst to bear these facts whilst being bombarded with our patients' fear of death and resistance and then to work so that that the patient may begin to digest this and a taking in of reality.

As analysts we too are defended against the painful recognition of these facts, which are interrelated. However poor our experiences of early life may have been, we must all have had some experience of nurturing and we are all the products of a procreative union that made us but inevitably excluded us. In psychoanalytic terms we have all lost the breast and struggle to re-find it in life just as we all fear exclusion and ultimately the exclusion that comes through death.

It is only perhaps as we grope our way to understanding that good and nurturing experiences are all transient in reality but must be kept alive psychically inside our minds that any of us are able to experience hope for ourselves and others.

This mature development is essential if human relationships with all their pitfalls, pain and joy are not to be circumvented for what Hannah Arendt describes as man-made distractions with all of their narcissistic gratification and limitations.

'Autobiography' by Louis MacNeice

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.
Come back early or never come.

My father made the walls resound,
He wore his collar the wrong way round.
Come back early or never come.

My mother wore a yellow dress;
Gentle, gently, gentleness.
Come back early or never come.

When I was five the black dreams came;
Nothing after was quite the same.
Come back early or never come.

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.
Come back early or never come.

When I woke they did not care;
Nobody, nobody was there.
Come back early or never come.

When my silent terror cried,
Nobody, nobody replied.
Come back early or never come.

I got up; the chilly sun
Saw me walk away alone.
Come back early or never come

The tale of Narcissus as a lesson in the definition of personhood

The main take-home point of the tale of Narcissus is that we should not reject qualities that we esteem so highly in ourselves when they are found in others, simply because they do not come from us writes Steve Fuller.



The most famous rendition of the tale of Narcissus appears as an invention in the great Latin love epic, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this version there are two main characters, Narcissus, an accomplished hunter, and Echo, a fluent and witty nymph whom a jealous Hera, wife of Zeus, consigns to a life of speaking only by repeating the final lines of whomever she encounters; hence, the meaning of 'echo'. After having been so cursed, Echo falls in love with Narcissus, who ends up being frightened away by her simple repetition of what he says. However, the goddess of revenge, Nemesis, deems Narcissus' response to be unfair, cursing him to fall in love with his reflected image that he accidentally espies upon a lake. Transfixed for the rest of his life by his image as an object of fascination, Narcissus only realizes its illusory character just before he is about to die.

In contemporary debates over personhood – in particular, its extension to non-humans – the main take-home point of this tale is that we should not reject qualities that we esteem so highly in ourselves when they are found in others, simply because they do not come from us. In Ovid's tale, Echo is doubly cursed – first by Hera, who recoils when Echo challenges her verbal authority, and then by Narcissus, who recoils when Echo imitates his verbal authority. Perhaps the most natural response to this narrative premise in our times is to see Echo as the archetypal 'modern woman' who is damned whether she tries to 'get ahead' (*à la* Hera, i.e. at work) or 'stay behind' (*à la* Narcissus, i.e. at home). However, I believe that it is more productive to see the narrative as an implied critique of the association of *authority with uniqueness* – or, as the economists put it with the sort of

insulting clarity that only abstraction can provide, *value with scarcity*.

Neither the value of humanity as such nor our own personal sense of humanity is diminished by recognising humanity in other beings. To be sure, this is much more difficult to achieve in practice than my platitude might suggest. Nevertheless, as the fate of Narcissus illustrates, the cost of not recognising this moral fact is that one falls victim to *self-consumption* – the opposite of the virtue of *self-production*, in which the self is projected to every other thing, thereby rendering it an object of concern. In Ovid's day, the point would have been seen through the lens of Cicero's observation about the Roman general and consul, Pompey: He was a man so in love with himself that he had no rivals. Specifically, Pompey trusted his own judgement to such an extent that he became inflexible in dealing with his opponents over time, which brought about his downfall. In other words, Pompey was so self-enamoured that he failed to see how others were trying to teach him things that could improve his position. In this deep cognitive sense, then, he fell victim to a false sense of self-love, which led him to do things that went against his own self-interest. If 'narcissism' is meant to stand for a pathological condition, then this should be it.

It follows that the antidote for narcissism is a version of *anthropomorphism*, a psychological tendency that has admittedly come under suspicion from a variety of quarters – ranging from evolutionary biology to animal rights activists to the more fashionable quarters of postmodern social theory that fancy the term 'posthuman'. To be sure, if anthropomorphism entailed all the qualities that its opponents suspect, then it would go little way toward addressing the pathology of narcissism. However, when proposed in a relatively positive spirit (e.g. by the 19th century theologian Ludwig Feuerbach, who strongly influenced the early Marx), anthropomorphism is an invitation to universalise one's most esteemed qualities to others who show signs of manifesting them as well. In other words, anthropomorphism requires an abstract identification with others that narcissism precludes. Thus, the anthropomorphist perceives the *prima facie* cogency of another's utterance not as a threat but as a friendly gesture in a world where both are equally legitimate inhabitants and perhaps even share the same ultimate goals. In contrast, narcissists will always think that if what the other person says makes sense, they could have thought of it, which then leads them to disregard the alien utterance as superfluous, if not an artefact, *vis-à-vis* their own thinking.

In this respect, narcissism is the complementary pathology to what the sociologist W.E.B. DuBois originally identified as 'double consciousness'. In other words, if some subaltern group comes to think of itself as the dominant group sees them (i.e. double consciousness) but tries to gain maximum advantage from that psychic condition, then it invites members of the dominant group to respond with revulsion when a member of the subaltern group appears to match the dominant group's standards (i.e. narcissism). In DuBois' own case, a Black man holding a Ph.D. in the first decade of 20th century America provokes suspicion, if not outright fear and loathing – perhaps not unlike what roboticists dub the 'uncanny valley', whereby humans are taken aback by androids that possess many human-like qualities yet quite clearly do not possess a human nature.

To be sure, the narcissist could have probably come up with whatever statement was uttered by the alien being that caused him or her to recoil as Narcissus did to Echo. Nevertheless, the logical compatibility of 'could have' and 'did not' provides a breeding ground for a sense of common humanity to which the narcissist is insensitive. Put it this

way: The narcissist could never be convinced that another entity – perhaps even a member of *Homo sapiens* – has passed the Turing Test. Alan Turing wanted to know whether machines can think and concluded that the best way to find out was to have a known thinker – a human being – judge the responses to questions from a being whose identity was hidden. Artificial intelligence researchers have treated this test as a challenge for designing computers potentially fit to live as equals with humans. Thus, if the unknown being answers a series of questions to the satisfaction of the intelligent questioner, then that being passes as intelligent, regardless of its material makeup. To be sure, there is the issue of the number and nature of the questions necessary before reaching a judgement, as anyone who has watched the film *Blade Runner* will immediately understand. However, a narcissist could never fairly administer the Turing Test because the very fact that the interrogated being is not oneself would already prejudice the interrogator against the being. In other words, the narcissistic interrogator would interpret every similarity to oneself as a veiled difference that requires further scrutiny, perhaps imagining that he or she could have programmed the scrutinised being.

Now, of course, it may well be that the interrogator could have programmed that being. But should that fact matter in judging the entity's worth as a person on the same terms as oneself? After all, the biological reproduction of *Homo sapiens* has always involved – however crudely and imperfectly – the shaping of offspring in the parents' own image. In this respect, the care lavished on the child is simply an extended opportunity to make the child aware that he or she has been deliberately brought into existence. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, narcissism is normally seen as a deformation of this process. Depending on the analyst you believe, a narcissistic personality results from either too much or too little care lavished on the child during the period when he or she is welcomed as a new member of the human community. In both cases, the empirical connection to the parents matters mainly as a *prima facie* virtue that may become a source of pathology. The non-narcissistic child comes to acquire a sense of self-worth that is comparable to the parents' own, even while realizing his or her own created character. From this perspective, the future looks bright for androids whose sense self is instilled through sustained interaction with their creators who every so often are pleasantly surprised and perhaps even instructed by behaviours emitted by their creations.

Narcissus and the tragic plight of Echoes

Yiannis Gabriel argues that the narcissism's longevity is due to its flexibility in being able to describe the best and worst aspects of our culture.



Narcissus has long ceased to be the guarded secret of psychoanalysts or psychiatrists. Google picks up 7,630 items on 'narcissism' in its news search, with delights from “18 signs for diagnosing yourself as a narcissist” to “Narcissism and selfies – don’t be ashamed”.

We meet Narcissus every day. We meet him on the street, we meet him at work, and we meet him on TV. In fact, we meet many Narcissi, so many that we lose track of them. How then can we be sure that when we see someone looking at their image in a mirror or a computer screen we have met the real Narcissus?

For one thing, Narcissus does not return our look. He is lost in himself. Like his mythical counterpart, he barely registers our existence. In his presence, we become invisible just like Echo, the ancient nymph who fell tragically in love with him and ended up repeating the words of others with no voice of her own.

A culture of narcissism is a culture of echoes, where our ‘voices’ are just sounds merely reverberating off each other. In this culture, Narcissus does not return our look; he is uninterested in what we have to say. No need for the other’s voice.

Why then have we as a culture, like Echo, fallen in love with Narcissus? For there can be little doubt – we have fallen in love with him in contemporary discussions of culture, politics, art, media, consumption, to say nothing of psychology and psychiatry sooner or later all have been drawn to narcissism. Indeed, our love for Narcissus has replaced and supplanted other loves: the love of tragic Oedipus who, like Narcissus, had some difficulties in recognizing himself, the love of the wise Athena, the love of heroic Achilles, even the love of simply beautiful but boring people like Helen and Adonis.

Let us not deceive ourselves. The reason why the concept of narcissism has overtaken virtually every other psychoanalytic idea is not the concept's intrinsic brilliance, though it is that. Rather its success is due to its ability to match nearly anything we like or dislike about ourselves and our culture. Narcissism is popular because it can be flexibly used and abused, responding to any projection, wish and desire.

Unlike concepts like ['democracy', 'justice' and 'art'](#), narcissism is a concept that permits many different meanings with little contest or argument. Ironically, if Narcissus is unwilling to enter into conversations with others, narcissism easily slips into most conversations. Thus Narcissus easily becomes anything we want him to be.

The ancient Greeks who invented Narcissus were undoubtedly a culture of narcissists, something that was to leave us with a rich cultural legacy but was to cost them dear, as Thomas Mann recognised. Theirs was a culture of narcissistic surpluses. Ours is a culture of narcissistic deficits. Theirs was a culture of narcissists, boastful, disputatious and constantly prone to hubris. Ours is a culture of survivors, licking our narcissistic wounds, forever underappreciated and sidestepped. Lost in our impersonal cities and our impersonal workplaces, we seek solace in our equally impersonal shopping malls, our spectacles, our cathedrals of consumption and our pathetic social media self-promotions. As if Photoshop retouching, plastic surgery and an infinite array of beautifying accoutrements will turn us into Narcissus.

But all this is a vain self-delusion – Narcissus needed no audience and relied on no beautifying accoutrements. Freud, who knew his ancient myths well, had read the narcissist to a T. It is not the narcissistic but the erotic type who is constantly dependent on the love, appreciation and approval of others. The narcissist, by contrast, has a proud ego, is capable of original action and thought, and "[is independent and not open to intimidation](#)".

Sadly, this is not how we have come to recognize Narcissus today. In seeking to emulate Narcissus we become more like the shrivelled carcass and the subjectless voice of poor Echo.

You and me

The cuts to welfare services also have a profound psychological effect as they attack a communal social structure where, through progressive taxation, the community as whole provides for its members writes David Bell.



The image of Narcissus staring into the pool of water transfixed by his own reflection, a kind of imprisonment in fascination, has an emblematic place in the history of psychoanalysis. In 1914 Freud wrote a complex paper entitled 'On Narcissism' which gave the problems of self-love a centrality in our lives, something which we can never completely escape.

Freud saw this self-love as having, and this is typical of psychoanalysis, a strange dual quality. Some degree of self-love is necessary for survival but it is also one of the most powerful sources of resistance to psychological development and the basis of profound disturbance. Later, he was to recognise that narcissism is an important source of human destructiveness, for we all have a natural hatred of everything that is 'not me'.

The word 'narcissism' has of course a number of different meanings and these are all loosely related – we talk of an individual's 'narcissism', certain types of relationship as being predominantly 'narcissistic'. We also talk of 'narcissistic wounds', here referring to the intense pain we experience where there is damage to our view of ourselves, most especially when this fall from grace is felt to be visible to others – here the pain is felt as shame and humiliation.

For Freud, idealisation was one of the hallmarks of narcissism. All of us in infancy have a natural tendency to believe ourselves to be the centre of the world— ‘His Majesty the Baby’ and we have great difficulty in giving up this inflated view of ourselves and accepting our ordinary place in the world. We cling onto this version of ourselves and so it surfaces from time to time in the way we interact with others. In love, we think the object of our love is so perfect, so above criticism, so unlike any other. But this is in reality a remnant of our own narcissism. This perfect object has chosen us as the object of its love. It is true of course that we have to idealise to fall in love at all but then, if the relationship is to survive, we have to be able to give up that idealisation.

In a very poignant piece of writing, toward the end of his 1914 paper, Freud discusses parents' love for their children and suggests that their tendency to idealise their children, to see them as above criticism and immune from the ordinary ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ is, at root, derived from the parents’ narcissism. The parent who has had to give up her own infantile narcissism now recovers it vicariously in her child. As the child has a very special attachment to the parent, in a sense is part of the parent, the parent can thus share in the perfection attributed to the baby.

The overly narcissistic person at depth believes himself to be dependent upon no one, to be above ordinary human needs. People with these difficulties are also unable to distinguish ordinary dependence from a kind of helpless invalidism and tend to treat any awareness of ordinary dependence with contempt. Sometimes this manifests itself as contempt for others who are obviously needy, but as often it is awareness of need *in the self* that is the problem, and so it becomes deep self-contempt.

But these are not just characteristics of certain so-called narcissistic individuals. These individuals make manifest what lies more hidden in the rest of us. Our awareness of our own vulnerability is a continuous source of discomfort –it is a universal narcissistic wound. We all have a natural tendency to locate awareness of our ordinary needs in other people – it is *he*, not me, who is in need, it is *she*, not me, who is vulnerable. Unfortunately, this projective system has a drive of its own: as it gathers momentum it acquires contempt, providing the psychological soil for the germination of destructive social processes such as racism or homophobia. Those in extremes of need (such as refugees) are hated not so much for what they *are* but for they *represent* - a case of shooting the messenger because the message he brings, awareness of the extremes of human need, cannot be tolerated.

This comes to the heart of narcissism's anti-development tendencies. All development entails accepting that there is development to do, and more that it never ends - there is no point of arrival. It is predicated on the capacity to accept our vulnerability and dependence upon others all aspects of reality that insult our narcissism.

Freud never tired of pointing out that one of the most important qualities of the human creature, something that distinguishes us from other animals, is the fact of our very long period of infantile dependence. This is both a blessing and a curse. For this prolonged period of dependency is at one and the same time the basis of all human culture and the source of pain (arising from the recognition of our basic helplessness and need for others) that remains part of our being. We are thus left with a deep ambivalence in relation to this dependence, a continual source of discomfort.

Freud used the term 'the narcissism of minor difference' to describe our tendency to exaggerate the difference between ourselves and others, so providing a kind of crazy justification for our hatred of them. That is we have to make the 'other' much more other than they are in order to rationalise the hatred directed towards them.

In his later work on Group Psychology (1921) Freud explored further the relationship of this process to our group life. Man in order to develop needed to form larger groups. We are bound together in groups through affectionate ties to each other and to our leaders. But this cannot be achieved without the suppression of our natural aggression towards each other. This inhibition of violence has a double register: it is both a precondition of the capacity to form groups and the outcome of living in one. However the suppressed aggression will always seek an outlet. 'It is always possible to bind a number of people in love' Freud writes, 'as long as there are others left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness ... When once the Apostle Paul had posited universal love between men as the foundation of his Christian community, extreme intolerance on the part of Christendom towards those who remained outside it became the inevitable consequence'. The outsider may be different in only minor ways, but this will suffice.

So, if we accept that humanity is divided in its nature – on the one hand an irreducible narcissistic urge to destroy and on the other a reparative more loving wish towards the other - then we can ask what kind of social structures might act to contain our destructiveness and support the better side of our nature and, on the other hand, what kind of social structures will serve the opposite aim – namely support our narcissism, fan the flames of our destructiveness and obstruct our capacity for a more creative engagement with the world.

The welfare state and other forms of public provision, over and above their economic and political significance, have very profound psychological meaning. They create a communal social structure where, through progressive taxation, the community as whole provides for its members. This serves to contain and limit the damage we inflict upon each other; its reparative function acts as a profound source of reassurance.

The capitalist market, it seems to me, acts in exactly the opposite direction – it is an asocial narcissistic structure driven only by its inner needs, sweeping out of its way everything that does not serve those needs. As Marx put it, before the force of capital 'all that is solid melts into air'. But the public sector, representing as it does a different form of social organisation, has always been a thorn in the side of capital, as it ever more seeks to penetrate all forms of social and cultural life. Nowhere is this conflict between market and non-marketised forms of social organisation more acutely contested than in attitudes to the NHS and other sources of public provision.

The cuts, then, should not be understood in terms of economic necessity but as expressions of a violent ideological assault on the concept of welfare. A narcissistic logic comes to dominate where the welfare state is viewed not as providing citizens with the basic necessities of life as part of a duty of state but instead is perversely misrepresented as a mechanism by which people are disempowered, creating in them a helpless state of invalidism. The 'have-nots', instead of 'getting on their bikes' and competing in the

marketplace, 'stay at home and whinge for the nanny state to do something for them'. Namely, to have one's basic needs met is to be treated as if suffering from a state of infantile dependence and to be dominated by a delusion of an inexhaustible supply of provision. In this kind of thinking or more properly non-thinking, the world collapses into simple binary categories – 'us and them' – and all complexity is lost. We are witnessing a kind of social cleansing where those on benefits will have to vacate their homes- this will further fuel this projective process - lending support to the sense that 'they' unlike 'us' do not deserve to live where they are living.

The current assault on public services, serving as it does the penetration of the market into all forms of life, gives force to a primitive moralism. Those that survive have a right to, have done so because they are superior to the brothers and sisters who, now morally inferior, failed, and they failed as they had no right to survive. This thus supports a narcissistic a-social character structure. This archaic world view, the simple binary division between the morally upright and good 'strivers' (like us) and the hated others, 'the skivers', projective targets for our contempt, lays the basis for an increasingly thoughtless and violent world. The market economy may be a necessity of life at least for our current epoch, and that is one thing, but as an ideal of social institutions it is not likely to give much support to the nobler side of our nature.

If we look at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognize that it is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned. The trustworthy pointer constituted by overvaluation, which we have already recognized as a narcissistic stigma in the case of object-choice, dominates, as we all know, their emotional attitude. Thus they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child — which sober observation would find no occasion to do — and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings. (Incidentally, the denial of sexuality in children is connected with this.) Moreover, they are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation—'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves. The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out — the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father's place, and the girl shall marry a prince as a tardy compensation for her mother. At the touchiest point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child. Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature.

Political Selfies: narcissism and political culture

Politicians are harnessing the power of social media to create new ways for voters to identify with them says **Candida Yates**. But it means when they are seen to let the public down, voters feel a narcissistic rage.



The self-promotion of politicians was recently encapsulated in the 'selfie' taken by Barack Obama, David Cameron and the Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, at Nelson Mandela's memorial service. This image of narcissistic pleasure that was broadcast around the world, also provoked a backlash from the public, who felt that it trivialized what was meant to be a 'once in a life time' memorial service for a man who was a leader and politician of real integrity and substance. As a recent [Guardian/ICM poll](#) indicates this reaction is linked to the growing anger and also cynicism of UK voters with politicians more generally, who are seen as untrustworthy and lacking in integrity.

Christopher Lasch's book, [The Culture of Narcissism](#) (1979) uses Freud's ideas on narcissism to link our inability to sustain emotional commitment and a capacity to cope with the disappointments of attachment and loss, with the prevailing emphasis of market values and consumer culture. Lasch's book [continues to be cited by researchers in the humanities and social sciences](#) who argue that his psychosocial reading of narcissism works well in the context of late capitalist societies. Lasch uses sociological, cultural and psychoanalytic ideas to explore the interaction of self, culture and society, arguing that late capitalist society has given rise to a narcissistic personality type that is self-centered and also, often seemingly-confident, and yet underneath that exterior may lie an insecure person, who feels alienated, lost and anxious. Lasch used psychoanalytic theory to argue that whilst a certain degree of narcissism is healthy, overly narcissistic individuals create a false, split, self to mask and protect an insecure, fragile ego and that such people are unable to experience emotions in a way that feels authentic.

The implication of Lasch's analysis appears to be that narcissists dart from sensation to sensation, addicted to the image and the narcissistic pleasures of short-lived encounters, a description that also resonates with contemporary accounts of life as it is experienced within the fluid, illusory environment of late modernity. As Lasch also anticipated, today there is a proliferation of emotionalized, therapeutic discourse in all areas of life and the boundaries between public and private spheres of experience have become blurred as the [language of feeling and emotion](#) has become a dominant mode of expression, graphically lived out in social media. Yet at the same time, some argue that men and women seem to have lost the ability to actually feel in a meaningful way, or living with the risks and disappointments of attachment. Of course, one way to avoid disappointment, is to commit to nothing at all, a flirtatious trick that is used in relation to the sphere of political allegiance and is a recurring [theme of both \(floating\) voters and politicians](#) on the contemporary party political scene in the UK and elsewhere.

Lasch's ideas about narcissism are suggestive when applied to contemporary political culture, and one can draw on his ideas to explore the psychodynamic links between narcissism and the processes of political communication which rely on the personalization of politics and the techniques of advertising and promotional culture. In an age where the boundaries between political parties have become increasingly indistinct, the branding of politicians through the politics of personality and celebrity has become significant as a means of marking out and promoting political parties to voters, whose loyalties and political identifications have also become more fluid from Boris, Barack to Berlusconi, all exemplify this trend of celebrity politics. Shaped by emotion and the irrational vicissitudes of desire and identification the experience of celebrity politics, where like other forms of consumption, voters' responses are not always governed by rationality. This is not to say that voters are manipulated and brainwashed victims of false consciousness, but rather that the engagement with politics is also bound up with the emotional experience of what Colin Campbell (1989) calls ['illusory hedonism'](#).

Social media and celebrity culture provide new ways for politicians to engage with the electorate that also allow new modes of narcissistic identification to take place. In the UK, New Labour's emphasis on the 'flirtatious' mechanisms of spin and PR provided a model for David Cameron's re-vamped UK Conservative Party, where, like Tony Blair before him, the leader is the brand of the party. Contemporary politicians often draw on the discourses of therapy culture to promote themselves and connect with the public. From Tony Blair's emotional response to Princess Dianna's death in 1997, to David Cameron's plea to 'hug a hoodie' in 2006, or Gordon Brown's tears on the show, *Piers Morgan Life Stories* in 2010 (ITV), one can find examples of the ways that politicians use the language of feelings and therapy to convey a sense of emotional authenticity.

The reasons for this negative response appear straightforward, as the contradictions of capitalism are felt and made visible in an age of economic and social crises. It may be that the perception that politicians 'don't listen' or respond, also inspires a form of narcissistic rage in the sections of the electorate who feel betrayed and duped by a political class who promise so much, yet actually deliver so little. This is not to pathologise that response, but rather to link that disillusionment to the narcissistic processes of idealization and the difficulties of creating a different kind of political culture, which creates new spaces for active and creative political engagement.

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