

On Being Perfect

The narcissist's guerrilla war against reality
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Introduction

Over the past few years I've met a lot of people online, people posing questions and opinions about programming, science, and diverse other topics. Before the Internet, in spite of my age, I hadn't met even a tenth of the people I've met online. And, as has been said by many, Internet communications aren't remotely like face-to-face encounters. In online communications people tend to be much more reckless, aggressive and candid, shielded as they believe themselves to be from any immediate consequences of misbehavior, also because they can (at least temporarily) assume any identity they want.

The anonymity and power of Internet communications has two immediate effects:

- A personality disorder that might remain hidden in perpetuity is instead displayed openly, usually with some precautions about anonymity or at least geographical separation from the audience.
- The impression created by Internet communications is that people are more pathological than the impression created by similar face-to-face communications. I say "impression" because the Internet doesn't create the pathology exhibited by the participants, it only reveals what is there already.
- By adopting a make-believe online persona, Internet participants can pretend to be anyone they please, with scant probability of exposure. Famous scientist, military hero, demigod.
- Because of these factors, narcissists are attracted to the Internet like moths to a candle.

I decided to research and write this article because over the past five years I have met a lot of people online with traits in common, to the degree that I started recognizing similarities. So I decided to find out what that similarity was — did it have a name? First, the traits. Someone would write me to discuss ... something: one of my articles, or a topic they believed I might be interested in based on the content of my site, or something out of the blue. Then this would happen:

- I would disagree with some part of the writer's presentation, based on the fact that it lacked plausibility (the New Age factor), or it contradicted well-established facts, or, if the issue was more technical or scientific, the presentation lacked any supporting evidence.

- On receiving my reply, instead of looking for supporting evidence to defend their claims, the writers would quickly abandon the original discussion and launch a personal attack.
- Hoping to rescue the original discussion, I would then either present evidence for my position, or ask for evidence for the writers' position, or both.
- At this point the writers would diverge like holiday fireworks, exploding in a hundred directions — every direction except that of debating the original issue using evidence.

Over time I have entertained a number of ideas about this behavior — people aren't trained to think in school, so they enter adulthood thinking issues are resolved by shouting, a viewpoint imperfectly expressed in this article. Or perhaps the people I've been talking with are all male twenty-somethings, saturated with testosterone and therefore hostages to their emotions, so that there is no chance for reasoned discussion. There's some evidence for the latter view, but it doesn't explain the sheer number of people who simply cannot stand to be told there is any defect in their views. I have lately realized that psychologists have a name and a description for the behavior I've been witnessing. To those familiar with psychology, it will come as no surprise that it has a description — it seems that clinical psychology's primary goal is to describe everything, while explaining nothing.

The name for the condition is narcissism, and the description is of someone permanently stuck in a six-year-old's view of reality. Not to oversimplify a complex condition, but narcissists (by which I mean the severe, clinical kind, not everyday narcissism) replace both the real person they are, and their real relationship with the world, with fantasies. For a six-year-old this is a normal stage of development, and normal children later figure out that they are not perfect or omnipotent, but that life is interesting and worthwhile anyway.

Narcissists, by contrast, and for reasons no one has sorted out, get stuck in a post-infant, pre-adult stage of development, usually forever. For their entire lives the typical narcissist exhibits some traits that are normal for a six-year-old, like a naïve reliance on the views of authority figures, while secretly resenting the power of those authorities. But adult narcissists show behaviors that are brought on by their having gotten stuck in infantile behavior while simultaneously being pushed into adulthood.

Adults are expected to possess some resilience toward reasoned disagreement, and by so doing derive benefit from the knowledge and experience of other adults. Unfortunately, people discover about adult narcissists that they can't lift themselves above a deadly cycle of fantastic claims and a pathological inability to listen, followed by rage, over and over, forever.

To summarize, narcissists are people who have not grown up, and who will probably never grow up. They only appear to be adults. Adults welcome the chance to learn something new, to correct mistaken beliefs, while narcissists, when confronted by the report of any personal shortcoming, would prefer killing the reporter to accepting the report.

I sort narcissists into two varieties, overt and covert. Overt narcissists proclaim their wildly distorted view of the world and face the consequences, a recipe for one personal disaster after another. Most of us know the names of a few overt narcissists — Charlie Manson (California, 1969), Jim Jones (French Guiana, 1978), David Koresh (Waco, Texas, 1993). These are people who would rather kill everyone in sight (including themselves) than acknowledge any personal shortcoming. Covert narcissists are equally handicapped, but they use a strategy that conceals their pathology in the short term: instead of asserting personal authority, they choose authority figures whose views roughly correspond to their own.

By adopting the protective coloration of the True Believer, covert narcissists fit into everyday society better than the overt variety. By carefully selecting authority figures, the covert narcissist can lead a seemingly normal life, until and unless someone doubts the authority of their authorities, at which point they revert to a classic narcissistic rage, followed by the selection of a new authority. All this posturing is meant to avoid the

circumstance that all varieties of narcissist deeply dread — having to acknowledge that they are wrong, and that there is something they haven't yet learned. For a narcissist, that is an occasion for panic and rage, not reflection and study.

Modern society offers all sorts of havens for the covert narcissist: religion, some parts of academia, even clinical psychology. Each of these shelters offers an association with seemingly unimpeachable authority, therefore it meets the narcissist's need to be thought correct without the drudgery of learning anything difficult or engaging in the high-wire act of original thought.

Science

By giving evidence the highest standing, and by dismissing all authority out of hand, at first glance science seems to represent the antithesis of the narcissist's game plan. In a pure, abstract sense this is true, and if science were entirely uniform and separate from the world, narcissists would avoid science at all costs. But the reality is more complex. This may surprise some who have learned the basics of science and the scientific method, but some covert narcissists actually become scientists, publish papers, and win wide recognition. This is deplorable but true, but it is never true for long, because ... well, to put it simply, truth has a persistence that falsehood can't bear.

A case in point is the recently exposed South Korean scientist Dr. Hwang Woo Suk, who had previously been lauded as a pioneer in the new field of stem-cell research. This is a particularly egregious example of scientific fraud, because recent investigations show that nearly all of Dr. Hwang's most important work was faked. And, true to the credo of the narcissist, in the midst of his public humiliation, while apologizing for his fakery, Dr. Hwang brightened up and proceeded to place blame on his coworkers for misleading him (avoidance of personal responsibility is a litmus test for narcissism).

This fraud will be examined for a long time, because Dr. Hwang wasn't toiling in darkness and secrecy, but in a very public forum, and he published a number of claims over a period of years that could have been checked out by other scientists in a more timely way. He was named "Researcher of the Year" by the prestigious journal *Scientific American*, while *Time Magazine* proclaimed that "the quality of Hwang's science is unimpeachable." The latter claim is typical of journalists, who never seem to grasp that all scientific theories and evidence are by definition impeachable, and for all time. What is interesting about this case is the sort of "science" that narcissists do. To a scientist, all that matters is testing theories against reality: does nature support my theory? Consequently, putting forth a theory is only the beginning of a process that ends with either confirming evidence gleaned from direct observation of nature, or the discarding of the theory. By contrast, to a narcissist, evidence is an adversary, therefore once a theory is uttered, the process grinds to a halt and someone uncorks the champagne. To understand why this is true, one must remember that a narcissist is in essence a child, not an adult, and when deciding how to cope, reality testing can't compare to magical thinking.

Notwithstanding this and other examples of scientific fraud, over the long term science really is antithetical to narcissism. The simplest way of saying it is that in the spotlight of reality, a scientist presents evidence, while a narcissist lapses into denial and rage. At their respective best, the scientist might create a vaccine, while the narcissist will likely create an embarrassing spectacle.

New Age Thinking and Postmodernism

The so-called New Age movement, and New Age thinking, at least to the degree that the latter expression isn't an oxymoron, turns out to be an ideal playground for narcissism. New Age believers proclaim their independence from the boring, excessively strict ideas of their forebears, their fixation on evidence, their silly assertion that effects arise from causes for other than magical reasons, and the idea that science is a legitimate way to evaluate reality. Such silly, old-fashioned ideas.

Most New Age believers are too poorly educated to recognize what they are giving up along with intellectual rigor. But many in academia, people who in principle should know better, have adopted a notion that is the cerebral equivalent of the distinctly blue-collar New Age agenda, something called "postmodernism." At some small risk of oversimplification, postmodernism is the idea that there are no shared truths, that all experience is subjective. Therefore (just an example of something a postmodernist might say) science and logic, by proclaiming the legitimacy of shared experience and observation, are just ways to enslave otherwise free spirits.

The intellectual bankruptcy at the heart of postmodernism seems to be lost on most of its advocates (except, of course, for the nihilists, who don't care). Put simply, if the postmodernist thesis is true, then it's pointless to say so, because there is no legitimacy to shared ideas, including the shared idea of postmodernism. Or, as Cedric Watts of the University of Sussex put it, very clearly reveling in the irony: "Postmodernism: the Grande Narrative that denies Grande Narrative."

But to narcissists, in their special, twisted relationship with reality, postmodernism and New Age ideas merely affirm the behaviors they have already adopted (or, in truth, been forced into by circumstances). Another litmus test for narcissism is pathological lying, but by adopting a postmodernist outlook, the narcissist can rationalize lying on the ground that there aren't any real truths anyway. Postmodernism being what it is, the narcissist can't persuade anyone else of this notion, but that is not important, because a narcissist's thought processes are for internal consumption — narcissists don't ordinarily care how other people react to what they think or do until it's too late, just like the six-year-old they really are.

But there is a sad fact at the core of narcissists' personalities, one that explains their preference for lies over truth. It is that the most absurd falsehood they might craft is more attractive overall than any truth about themselves or their circumstances. A narcissist's life is a beauty contest where a dark pond's false reflection struggles against daylight's ugly truth.

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Encountering the Perfect

Psychologists are perfectly competent to describe mental conditions, but are unable to explain them. The latter fact stands in the way of anything resembling an overarching theory of mental conditions, which is why clinical psychology is not a science, a topic I address in [this article](#). Meanwhile, psychologists, doing what they do best, estimate that narcissists, by which I mean serious, clinical narcissists, make up 0.5 to 1% of the U.S. general population. That is a staggering number of narcissists, as in three million, if one grants credence to the estimate's high side.

But, sheer numbers aside, the ratio of narcissists to normal people in my online encounters is much higher than 0.5-1% overall. Some of this arises from the moth and candle effect I describe above, where narcissists see the Internet as a safe playground. Another factor is that I post a lot of articles on my site, articles that lead to dialogues, dialogues that preferentially attract narcissists.

All fine, except for the practical difficulty that *narcissists don't have dialogues*. A dialogue is by definition a communication between equals, either of whom might adjust his thinking when confronted by some new useful fact or avenue for research. Narcissists can't engage in dialogues because, in a free exchange of ideas, they might turn out to be wrong, and that is unthinkable.

The Physics Illiterates

Of all the articles on my site that have attracted their share of narcissists, my piece on Olbers' Paradox entitled "[Why is the sky dark at night?](#)" has produced an extraordinary number of encounters with narcissists since its publication in 1997. The problem became so severe that I was moved to ask that people learn physics before posting any comments, a plea that had no effect on the flow of misguided posts.

The article is really rather conservative from a physical and scientific point of view, breaking no new ground and asserting only the most well-established views on its topic.

The problem with the article is that it requires a certain amount of abstract reasoning and visualization, to a greater degree than is obvious at first glance. It deals with some cosmological and physical notions outside everyday experience and addresses processes that are in principle infinite in both time and space.

In other words, it is an article bound to attract narcissists who, along with many other characteristic traits, **tend to be undereducated because of their fear of being found wrong.**

When a normal person reads the article, they either follow the logic or they don't. But a normal person will take the time to learn what they don't know before objecting to the article itself — after all, the problem might lie with the reader, not the article. **To a narcissist, by definition unable to accept personal responsibility for anything, this is impossible — the only reason they don't understand the article and agree with every word, is because the article is defective.**

Now that the article has been online for almost a decade, in retrospect I wish I had kept all the particularly brainless posts that objected to its content. If I had filtered out only those that made completely false arguments, on matters familiar to freshman physics students, I would have around 250 posts. But I threw them away, not thinking what a research treasure trove they would eventually represent.

For such an article, there is always something to object to on legitimate grounds, and over the years I have responded to legitimate critics by changing the article in a number of ways. Also, my article emphasizes the expansion of the universe, and doesn't bother to address the age of the universe, as the primary factor to explain why the night sky is dark. Both are legitimate factors, but one is essential to the explanation and the other is not. To avoid an overly complex explanation I chose to address the single essential element: expansion.

In a recent, rather pointless e-mail exchange, I was reminded of the first wave of scientific illiterates who objected to the article. In the recent example, the correspondent simply didn't understand enough physics or thermodynamics to make any kind of reasoned objection, but because he was a narcissist, ignorance hindered him not at all. I replied and addressed his misconceptions by correcting all of them, simply and directly. He believed, and expressed, that most light energy escapes into the "empty far distance of space" and never encounters anything else, so it can't contribute to universal warming. He then went on to say that, when light does strike something, it can't realistically be expected to heat the target up to the point that the target emits radiation of its own. He then said that a body, when heated by another, responds by emitting more radiation than it receives.

This is just a short list, but if you understand physics, you will have gotten the idea. In case you aren't a student of physics, everything the correspondent asserted was flat wrong, contradicting the most basic kinds of physical principles. I replied in detail, explaining that each of his points was wrong, and explaining why, sometimes using equations and in-depth explanations, all for naught.

Because he was a narcissist, instead of accepting my reply as a source of useful information, he went ballistic, dropped any pretense of addressing the original topic, and accused me of being rude, on the ground that I had bluntly corrected him. **At this point I realized he was a narcissist and there would be no point in trying to reason with him, so I stopped corresponding. But he had just begun — now in a narcissistic rage, he wrote me dozens of times over the next few days, concluding by saying he was going to create a website dedicated to refuting what I had said about him. He overlooked the fact that I had addressed, not him, but his ideas, but to a narcissist that is a distinction without a difference.**

On rereading his posts, I see the alacrity with which he abandoned anything resembling rational thought. The first post was merely untutored, but it didn't really give away that he was a narcissist — the second post confirmed that, and made me wish I hadn't bothered to reply to the first.

Now, as so often happens with narcissists, he's been desperately trying to write me, persuade me of the merit of his unphysical ideas, in terror (or fury) that someone has found him out. I've been responding by blacklisting his e-mail addresses, and he has

retaliated by creating new, random e-mail addresses to circumvent my blacklist, a strategy that breaks the law. But I have discovered in recent years that breaking the law is scarcely important enough to appear on narcissists' radar screens, consumed as they are by righteous wrath that someone — anyone — doubts their perception of themselves as infallible gifts to humanity.

For contrast, here is how a recent, normal correspondent summarized our physics conversation:

Thank you for your response to my question. You explained the science in such a simple and straightforward manner that I would guess you're a teacher by inclination if not by profession. I had accepted the Doppler effect as fact, as well as the [constant] speed of light, C. But I just couldn't visually reconcile the two. Your explanation ... brought it all into focus.

I had replied to this correspondent in much the same way that I replied to the narcissist, but because this correspondent preferred listening to arguing, he learned something new.

The Psychology Experts

Don't make the mistake of thinking that psychologists typically enter the field to share their remarkably well-adjusted personalities with the rest of humanity. It is more likely, based both on personal observation and a certain amount of evidence in the field, that being a clinical psychologist is more like being in Alcoholics Anonymous — you can help other alcoholics because you have credibility with them, because you are one yourself. What I have found in writing about psychology, in particular when saying that clinical psychology isn't a science, is that when psychologists write to argue against my thesis, they are very likely to abandon any pretense of reason. Because their capacity to reason boarded the last bus out of town, which is just now a small dust spot on a very large horizon, they fail to grasp that by arguing emotionally for one viewpoint and refusing to evaluate any contrary evidence, they are only confirming my original point.

Case in point. A psychology professor replied to my article "[Is Psychology a Science?](#)" by arguing rather half-heartedly that it is, but in a fashion that undercut his own position. Read the original exchange [here](#) ([click on "You're totally wrong"](#)).

In his response, this psychology professor's position consisted largely of *ad hominem* and *ad auctoritatem* arguments, arguing against the person rather than the position, and arguing from authority respectively; both fatal logical errors.

But to get back to our topic. This was a covert narcissist, positioned in academia in such a fashion that he is permanently shielded from any challenge to his ideas (e.g. tenured), possessed little grasp of how science works, and showed little awareness of the kinds of arguments that are universally recognized as logical errors.

I pointed this out to him, and in his reply he described science as a "preference," saying several times "If you prefer to use scientific reasoning to argue then use the methods of science," as though science were an optional component in sorting out reality. Apparently a postmodernist as well as a narcissist.

In another, very similar correspondence, a psychology professor responded to the issue of whether psychology is a science by criticizing science. This was very clearly a narcissist, entirely unaware of how he sounded, and one who persisted in writing me long after I had abandoned the correspondence as pointless, and I finally had to blacklist him from my site.

But neither of these examples was a severe narcissist. Debilitating in both cases to be sure, but not incapacitating. On the other hand, having a razor-sharp intellect and a thorough grasp of scientific reasoning are not prerequisites for their positions. In fact, such qualifications might work against them.

Blind Fury

I've noticed something about women — when they take up something that men are known for, often as not they do it better (while getting paid half as much). But the meaning of "better" can depend on circumstances — if the thing men are doing is bad, when women do it, it's better ... meaning it's worse.

As it happens, most narcissists are men, about 75% overall. But women can be narcissists too, and for those who are, consistent with my theory, they put the male version to shame.

Some years ago I had an encounter with a female narcissist, before I even knew the term. And it is only by recently studying this condition that I made an association with that earlier time.

The events in this story sprang as much from my naïveté as anything else. At that time I didn't appreciate how dangerous and reckless narcissists are, or how I could become the victim of my own trusting nature. In the final analysis, just as with the physics illiterate, when this person first wrote me, I should have had the good sense not to reply.

Briefly (and I apologize to my regular readers for yet another reference to [this story](#)), a mother contacted me hoping I would mentor her son (some details in this section are changed to protect the identities of the participants). I had lost interest in this activity so I politely declined.

But mom refused to take no for an answer. Against polite demurrers from me, mom persisted in her requests for seven months, then she finally brought her son to a place she knew I would be and forced a meeting. Her son was very bright, very isolated for some reason I couldn't sort out, and I should have run from the room. Instead I accepted her son as a friend.

For the next year I mentored this boy, changing his perspective on himself and his substantial gifts. He was remarkably bright but very insecure for a reason I didn't understand at first. I encouraged him to see himself as an intelligent person, but this wasn't difficult — he was very talented, starved for any kind of encouragement, and his personal development took off.

I had not figured out mom's motivations yet, but I was soon to discover what they were. Her personal knowledge of the world had the distinctly narcissistic property that everything was either true or false and there was always a convenient unimpeachable authority to tell her which was which, e. g. she possessed a very shallow and fragile grasp of reality. She knew very well that her son was gifted, but it had come to her that she would eventually lose control of him as he passed her up in intellectual development. Mom's uniquely narcissistic solution to this "problem" was to insist that her son was mentally handicapped, something she persisted in saying against overwhelming contrary evidence.

As time passed, as her son came out of his mom-imposed shell, as he realized he had a rightful place among gifted children, the day of reckoning finally arrived. Increasingly frustrated at her son's accelerating personal development and my role in it, mom finally thought of a way to force an end to the threat I posed to her control — she began to invent imaginary crimes for me to be guilty of. Most of them were too poorly articulated to bother with, but when she claimed that a child sitting on the lap of an adult constituted molestation, then refused to discuss this belief, I knew I had to leave.

Because she was a narcissist, possessed of no personal common sense or restraint, I realized she would say such things to anyone, anywhere, therefore my leaving would minimize the harm she could do to her son. I offered a weak and false explanation to her son (that she and I had important philosophical differences).

I stayed in touch with her son by way of e-mail, hoping I could prevent his relapse into the clinical depression that had preceded my appearance on the scene, but mom realized what I was doing and arranged a civil court hearing in which, as I expected, she abandoned the original issue of e-mails and made a series of claims that would easily have impressed anyone with an IQ below 70, but that had no effect on the seasoned judge who heard her recital. I simply pointed out that mom's claims were a fantasy. The judge agreed, but mom got her way, no more e-mails.

A background check then revealed this woman had made similar vile accusations against others. Then, six months later, mom arranged another hearing and tried to hold me responsible for her son's return to clinical depression, a depression that resulted directly from her earlier decision to exclude me. In her new claim she had the temerity to describe her very bright son as "developmentally delayed," which some of my readers may realize is a euphemism for "retarded." I explained this was utterly false, no one but

mom held this view, and the entire sequence of events resulted from mom being seriously dysfunctional. Mom had received my position in advance and had time to consider any rebuttal she cared to make, but I think she realized what would happen to her if she disputed it, so she silently accepted my description of her son's abilities and of her dysfunctional character.

At that point the judge had a clear picture of this woman, but in case there was any lingering doubt, mom ended the hearing by asking whether I could be punished even though I had done nothing wrong. Under the circumstances the judge exercised remarkable restraint and, saying "no," gaveled the proceedings to a close. This woman was an incredible narcissist — completely self-absorbed, unable to foresee the consequences of her own actions, and absolutely incapable of accepting personal responsibility for anything.

As to mentoring as a pastime, I had naïvely assumed that, because I can encourage most bright kids to develop their gifts, it was a worthwhile activity. I simply had not considered the possibility of such a dysfunctional parent, and now that I know they exist, I won't allow parents to arrange this sort of thing. The parents have too much control, they are often the real problem, and they sometimes don't understand themselves well enough to accept an excellent outcome.

While reviewing this story as part of my narcissism study, I've come to realize that courtrooms are a playground for narcissists. They are typically accomplished liars, they have little regard for the consequences of lying, and (TV courtroom dramas to the contrary) courts don't normally punish liars. It turns out that jurists hear from narcissists of all stripes on a daily basis, and over time become adept at gleaning the wheat from the chaff.

But things don't always turn out that way. I recently read a story from New Mexico, similar in some respects to my story, one that ended differently. A woman named Colleen Nestler appeared before a judge and accused David Letterman (yes, *that* David Letterman) of sending her secret, coded signals over the airwaves. In a six-page letter she prepared for the court, Nestler demanded that Letterman stay at least three yards away from her and not "think of me, and release me from his mental harassment and hammering."

Pretty funny story, right? Clearly this is a severe narcissist or worse, living in a world of her own creation. But would a court give this woman any credence? Well, guess what, readers — the judge in this case issued a restraining order against Letterman based on Nestler's petition, ordering him to stay away from her and not think of her. Letterman's attorneys traveled to New Mexico and succeeded in quashing the order, while I thought about how my story could have turned out differently.

Conclusion

According to many mental health professionals, the biggest single mistake people make in dealing with narcissists is to underestimate how dangerous they are. A good percentage of prison inmates are narcissists whose impulses got out of control, and the only thing separating a typical clinical narcissist from iron bars is a fortuitous mixture of circumstances. Narcissists live in a perpetual state of barely suppressed rage, are frequently unbelievably reckless, and appear to be oblivious to the risk their behavior poses to themselves and to others.

I don't think anyone can doubt that the above examples of clinical narcissism are involuntary, on the ground that they are so destructive to the narcissist that no one would choose to engage in the behavior. In the Blind Fury accusation story, she very clearly wasn't thinking about the consequences of her actions. If she possessed the insight of a normal person, she would realize she had systematically fed her credibility like firewood into a bonfire of narcissistic rage, and the courts on which she had depended for her public rants will now see her coming.

As to the physics illiterate, so long as he persists in arguing instead of thinking, he simply won't be able to learn the topic, and his unwillingness to reevaluate his own beliefs will cripple his intellectual development as long as it lasts. Which brings me to another point

about narcissists — they tend to have a rather shallow grasp of most topics, because they can't bring themselves to sincerely ask questions, for fear of appearing stupid. This leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the thing most feared becomes a certainty. This is all trivial to see from an adult perspective, but the point is narcissists don't *have* an adult perspective. They have the outlook and instincts of a six-year-old child, forever. It is this hard-wired intellectual and emotional limitation that motivates mental health professionals to almost universally offer this advice: the best way to deal with narcissists is to *get away from them, as soon as possible, before they destroy you.* That is a lesson I am still learning.

References

- [Narcissism \(Wikipedia\)](#)
- [Narcissism FAQ](#)
- [Narcissism as a hereditary condition](#)
- [Narcissism 101 \(an introduction\)](#)