Can Narcissism Be Healthy? Character Formation in a Fragmented World

Michael J. DeVries, Ph.D.

North Park University

Michael DeVries is currently Professor of Psychology and Director of the Masters Program in Counseling Psychology at North Park University in Chicago. A Licensed Clinical Psychologist in Illinois since 1988, he maintains a private psychotherapy practice at Olive Branch Counseling Associates in Tinley Park, Illinois.

Abstract

Some researchers have claimed narcissism has reached "epidemic" proportions in contemporary society. In this presentation, narcissism is discussed as a dimensional trait best considered on a spectrum and not exclusively from the standpoint of pathology. Considered in relation to contemporary culture, narcissistic character traits can form the basis for both a cohesive self and a stable social identity. However, in pathological character types, narcissistic traits serve as the basis for identities permeated by hostility, grandiosity, deception, ideological extremism, and insensitivity to others.

Introduction

The ancient Greek myth of Narcissus has been appropriated in Western discussions of human character and personality initially through Freud who borrowed the concept from others. Following Freud narcissism became a concept employed in the service of personality theory and clinical practice eventually coming to assume a place in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association as the condition known as Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Alongside the clinical perspective narcissism has become the focus of social and cultural analysis as the 20th century has progressed into the new millennium. Various social science theorists and social commentators have pointed to a correspondence between the ideals, norms and practices of modern Western cultures and the development of narcissistic personality traits Most recently the concept has become the focus of large-scale studies using a psychological instrument claiming to measure narcissistic traits in the general population. The "Narcissistic Personality Inventory" purports to provide an index of narcissism in entire societies. In most of the social science analysis regarding narcissism the concept has been seen as a defect in human character linked to flaws in modern Western values and social structures. However, in the work of some clinical psychologists the concept of narcissism has emerged from moral darkness into the light of positive virtue. Some clinical and developmental psychologists point to what can be described as a "healthy narcissism". This paper will survey both the nay-sayers and the yea-sayers in response to the question, Can narcissism be healthy? The significance of the answer points toward differing approaches to what we mean by "good character" in the larger discussion about human flourishing. In briefly surveying what has become a broad discussion in both clinical and non-clinical literature the conclusion is offered that narcissism is a complex psychological concept open to multiple interpretations. Narcissism resists a purely negative or positive assessment in terms of its meaning for character development, moral values, and social structure. The narrative of individual development, personal growth, self-esteem and self-improvement runs through much of post-WWII psychology. At the same time a corresponding narrative bemoans the focus upon the self as evidence of a loss of moral character. This strongly critical narrative often identifies narcissism as the cause behind the loss of social cooperation, community values, and conformity to cultural standards. Narcissism lies at the

intersection of these two approaches to the understanding of character. The clinical, self-help literature distinguishes between healthy and pathological personality while the sociological and moral literature tends to link a critique of individualism and moral subjectivism to the discussion of good and bad character formation.

The "nay-sayers"

Narcissism in Freud

To understand the concept of narcissism it is important to begin with Freud. In his pivotal 1914 monograph, "On Narcissism, Freud said, p.88: "We say that a human being has originally two sexual objects—himself and the woman who nurses him" (Freud, 1914, p. 88). In this statement Freud identifies two types of libido, first a "narcissistic libido" residing initially in the infant and referred to as a state of "primary narcissism". Secondarily the infant develops "object libido" through the necessity and dependence upon the mother. The narcissistic libido remains an original and permanent structural component of human personality rooted ultimately in the biological instinct of self-preservation. Object libido develops soon thereafter as the infant comes to experience the mother as a source of nurturance and pleasure. According to Freud the normal trajectory of human development can be represented as a movement from narcissistic libido to object libido or from self-love to love of others. Psychoses for Freud represented an extreme withdrawal from external reality and a pathological regression to a narcissistic orientation. Less severe forms of regression to a narcissistic orientation remain an ever-present possibility and in some persons become a pathological narcissistic character. Narcissistic libido is never depleted entirely in favor of object libido except in transient states such as the experience of "falling in love". Freud clearly regarded healthy or mature human character as requiring that libido become attached to "objects" in relationships with others. In sexual terms this shift from narcissistic attachment to self to attachment to objects becomes evident in the movement from auto-eroticism to s intercourse with the opposite sex. Interestingly Freud viewed homosexuality as reflecting a form of narcissistic attachment that falls short of truly mature character.   In the case of secondary narcissism libido remains fixated upon the self as its object with identifiable character traits manifested in attitude and behavior.   Freud describes traits many of which have been codified by the APA as reflective of a "narcissistic personality disorder": lack of empathy, grandiosity, entitlement, etc. Such narcissistic personalities are ill-equipped to achieve the goals Freud suggested were characteristics of mature human beings: "to love and to work".

In the essay on narcissism Freud avoids pointing out possible social causes behind narcissistic character development other than to suggest that typically narcissists are found more frequently among women than men—a suggestion that might be reversed in contemporary discussions of pathological narcissism.   The connection with moral character is made more explicit in Freud's Introductory Lectures delivered several years after the essay on narcissism. There Freud connects narcissism with egoism and object-love with altruism. He describes narcissism as the "libidinal complement to egoism". While he seems to suggest egoism is a tendency to maximize one's advantage, Freud claims it can be found apart from narcissism. However when egoism and narcissism are found together the result is the is pathological .   Freud's distinction reminds me of a friend who exhibited a tendency or forget his wallet when out to dinner. The egoism displayed in my friend's behavior was not a fully developed narcissistic character but may a trait part of a larger constellation of traits composing a enduring and pervasive character pattern identified as pathological narcissism.

Summarizing for the purposes of this discussion Freud clearly saw the trajectory of human development moving from a narcissistic to an object-oriented. The telos of human development lies in relationships with others. Thus, for Freud developing mature character is a process of growing beyond an original state of self-love toward love of others or from egoism to altruism. Attitudes or behaviors manifesting narcissism reflected either arrested psychological development as in homosexuality or psychotic regression from engagement with objects in the external world. For Freud narcissism represented the ever-present danger of regression to self-absorption and self-love. Narcissistic libido always remained partially attached to the self and in moderate form appeared in the phenomenon of self-esteem.

Narcissism in Freudian Revisionists

A second generation of psychoanalysts emerged at the end of Freud's life. Known as "revisionists" or the "cultural school" thinkers such as Erich Fromm and Karen Horney took psychoanalytic thought in directions at odds with "orthodox psychoanalysis". The cultural school sought to retain Freudian notions of intrapsychic conflict and the formative role of childhood in personality development, but shifted the nature of conflict away from sexuality toward the tension between interpersonal needs and environment. Failure to meet the needs of children on the part of the social environment became the source of abnormal patterns of personality development.   Erich Fromm devoted considerable attention to the analysis of the "narcissistic person" in his text The Heart of Man. For purposes of this paper the discussion of the cultural school and its views on narcissism will be limited to Fromm since he most explicitly addresses narcissism as such. Like Freud Fromm linked the origins of narcissism to the biological instinct of self-preservation. As a biological endowment narcissism represents an evolutionary inheritance necessary for individual survival. Taking the biological origin of narcissism as his starting point Fromm focuses upon the dangers narcissism presents to the individual's role in society.

> We arrive then at the paradoxical result that narcissism is necessary for survival,
>
> and at the same time that it is a threat to survival. The solution of this paradox lies
>
> in two directions. One is that *optimal* rather than *maximal* narcissism serves survival;
>
> that is to say, the biologically necessary degree of narcissism is reduced to the degree
>
> of narcissism that is compatible with social cooperation. The other lies in the fact that
>
> individual narcissism is transformed into group narcissism, that the clan, nation, religion
>
> race and so on, become objects of narcissistic passion instead of the individual. (p. 70)

Fromm's discussion of narcissistic persons moves immediately toward those traits not compatible with social cooperation –traits which are not optimal but exhibit what might be called a "surplus narcissism". It is the excess of narcissism which threatens the welfare of society and its requirement for social cooperation. It is clear in Fromm that narcissistic traits exceeding basic needs for biological survival represent a kind of moral defect. Viewed from the perspective of social cooperation Fromm distinguishes between "benign" and "pathological" narcissism. Benign narcissism is present in

an appropriate sense of pride in one's accomplishments and according to Fromm poses no threat to society:

> The dynamics of this benign narcissism thus are self-checking. The energy which
>
> propels the work is, to a large extent of a narcissistic nature, but the very fact
>
> that the work itself makes it necessary to be related to reality, constantly curbs
>
> the narcissism and keeps it within bounds. This mechanism may explain why we
>
> find so many narcissistic people who are at the same time highly creative (Fromm, p.74).

Fromm's analysis moves from narcissism as a self-preservative, biologically based impulse that threatens social cooperation to narcissistic reactions stemming from performing social roles that have only an indirect relation to survival but have much to do with creativity and optimal human functioning. Fromm's analysis returns to the analysis of the pathological side of narcissism without exploring how "benign" narcissism might play an important role in society. His interest in narcissism is not in the ways narcissism might play a "healthy" role in human personality or how strengthening "benign narcissism" might serve a counterweight to the development of "pathological narcissism".

Fromm's analysis of "pathological narcissism" contains a rich treasure of insights stemming from the urgent attempt to make sense of modern tyrants. He further develops Freud's suggestion regarding the role of narcissism in the willingness of individuals to identify with and follow tyrannical leaders. While acknowledging in parallel to individual narcissism that a benign form of pride in social groups is non-threatening the transformation from personal narcissism into "social narcissism" can become pathological. Fromm points to social conditions, such as poverty and racism as responsible for the development of pathological social narcissism. The biologically rooted source of individual narcissism is understood to be a dangerous vulnerability when combined with poor social conditions. Individual narcissism can be absorbed into identification with the absolute narcissism of tyrants like Hitler.

In the end of his discussion the larger vision of ethical humanism which Fromm outlines as the ultimate solution to the human condition rejects narcissism as fundamentally opposed to humanistic values:

> By the very nature of the narcissistic orientation, it prevents one—to the
>
> extent which it exists—from seeing reality as it is, that is, objectively; in
>
> other words, it restricts reason. (Fromm, p. 84).

Pushing the claim that narcissism is antithetical to the true nature of human being Fromm asserts, "It is the goal of man to overcome one's narcissism". The ultimate goal according to Fromm would be the "replacement of narcissism with relatedness to the world". Falling short of this utopian vision Fromm suggest that's the object of narcissism might be shifted away from race, nation and class toward the rich diversity of humanity as a whole. Ultimately the goal would be to reduce narcissism itself although Fromm modestly suggests this might take generations through the progress of education and social change aimed at rectifying the oppressive features of modern societies. Once Fromm enters the domain of ethical speculation narcissism emerges as the major obstacle to personal development into full

humanity and to the triumph of enlightened humanism. Narcissism is an ongoing thorn in the side of Fromm's vision of an ethical humanism.

New Left Critics

The decades after World War II offered a new focus upon the social pathology connected narcissism linked with politics of the New Left and Progressive analysis of post-war social changes in American society. A notable example of this movement is found in the work of Christopher Lasch and his widely The Culture of Narcissism. Lasch's focus on narcissism has many similarities to Fromm and yet clearly the focus has shifted from Fromm's emphasis upon the emergence of tyrannical leaders to the structure of post-WWWII societies as materialist, consumer driven, and media saturated. Lasch lacks the optimism of Fromm.   He is skeptical of the capacity of Western societies to achieve either in the short-term or after "many generations" the utopian dream of peace and understanding between individuals and the peoples of the world. In Lasch the possibility of revolutionary change in the social order linked with a Marxist vision of utopia has been replaced with New Left concepts of community and participatory democracy. Individual narcissism stands in the way of this communitarian social vision. For Lasch the origins of this narcissism lie not in the biological endowment of self-preservation but in the manipulation of the mass society by forces seeking to maintain social inequity, wealth, and corporate power of social elites. He states in his introduction:

> This book describes a way of life that is dying—the culture of competitive individualism,
>
> which in its decadence has carried the logic of individualism to the extreme of a war of
>
> all against all, the pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation
>
> with the self. Strategies of narcissistic survival now present themselves as emancipation
>
> from the repressive conditions of the past, thus giving rise to a "cultural revolution"
>
> that reproduces the worst features of the collapsing civilization it claims to criticize (Lasch,
> 1979, p. xv).

For Lasch the "narcissistic pre-occupation with the self" is only the latest and perhaps most decadent manifestation of individualism in a consumer-driven, image obsessed, therapy- focused culture. For Lasch narcissism is understood to be a pathological reflection of a deeply pathological society.

Moral Critics

Another perspective relevant to understanding of the nature of narcissism can be found in extensive literature focused upon "moral character". Narcissism when it enters the purview of reflection upon contemporary moral character typically is identified with a range of personal and social evils. Perhaps the most widely read of moral critics can be found in the work of Philip Reiff. Writing in the time of social turmoil in the 1960s Rieff bemoaned the triumph of the "therapeutic culture". In Freud: The Mind of the Moralist Rieff claimed:

> Every order of existence, individual and collective, character and culture derives
>
> from the recurrent splitting motion by which master passions are kept at a
>
> civilizing distance from direct enactment. Repression not sublimation represents

the ruling power of culture (Rieff, 1959, 372).

For Rieff the 20th century focus upon self, inaugurated by Freud, represented the "impoverishment of Western culture".

A more recent assessment of moral character development displaying strong affinities with Rieff can be found in the work of James David Hunter. In Hunter's analysis the discipline of psychology and its attendant self-help applications are the source of a decline in moral character education. In The Death of Character Hunter describes the loss of moral authority anchored in particular communities of faith. Hunter's carefully reasoned review of contemporary moral education bemoans the apparent fragmentation of modern culture. Hunter mourns the loss of moral authority and the reluctance of educators, parents, clergy and intellectuals to "communicate to children their standards and god-terms that give them sanction". What little remains of moral education Hunter finds misguided, weak, and ineffective. Relativistic appeals to "consensus values" and "inclusiveness" Hunter finds shallow and superficial, lacking substance and sufficient grounding to be effective. Although he is reticent to state as much it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Hunter retains a nostalgia for the 19th and early 20th century in which time "the powerful institutions and ideals of a Protestant-Republican habitus (that) broadly defined the nation's character ideal, moral sensibilities, and civic ethos."

While Hunter does not mention narcissism directly his definition of character and its formative elements suggests an intentional dismissal of the narcissistic aspects of the self. Much of his analysis rejects the psychology of moral development in which the formation of the self is the central focus. Hunter defines character largely in terms of discipline and restraint (the ability to say no) and by implication endorses the goal to put aside one's self in service of commitments to a greater good and the habits defined by one's community.   Moral character is described as a process of internalizing standards that shape behavior according to authority imposed from without and backed by firmly held "god-terms" embraced by entire communities. Moral development implies a taming of the self, a process of molding of a self that requires moral shaping provided by externally imposed authority. The psychology in Hunter's thought echoes a return to the rigid superego of the Freudian triparte model of the personality . Hunter seems unable to find in contemporary moral ideals the sort of moral authority he desires. While Hunter criticisms may accurately assess much of the flaws and inadequacies of contemporary moral education, the question remains whether the kind of moral character he seeks is a reactionary attempt to recover a moral ethos that no longer can address the pluralistic and fragmented post-modern world. The moral ethos implied in Hunter's analysis seeks cultivate a "no" to self and a "yes" to behaviors and attitudes in conformity to "commands" rooted in authoritative "god-terms". The moral character suggested by Hunter is largely selfless, passive, and reflective of community standards. The process of moral formation he describes involves learning to internalize and submit to pre-established moral standards, a possibility available to communities which manage to isolate themselves into private and total sub-cultures, a prospect increasingly unlikely in the age of social media and global communication. Hunter's analysis promotes a retreat from the pluralism and diversity of the global community into privately maintained pockets of social and cultural isolation.

A more popular approach offering a similar moral critique of the contemporary self can be found in the best-selling text by David Brooks, The Road to Character (2015). Like Hunter, Brooks does not explicitly address identify contemporary character types as narcissistic, but his distinction of "little

me culture" vs. "big me culture" carries a retrospective look to the past in hopes of recovering a culture of humility.

The campaign against narcissism on moral grounds has received some support from empirical psychology. Narcissism has been described as reaching "epidemic" proportions according to a recent publication (Twenge and Campbell, 2009) claiming to provide empirical evidence supporting the ever-widening culture of excessive self-admiration and self-esteem. Based upon data acquired through administration of the Narcissism Personality Inventory, Twenge and Campbell warn of the growing menace represented by increasing numbers of individuals exhibiting excessive narcissism. Their report is filled with ominous examples of moral decline in American culture:

> Every time we turn on the TV, it seemed that another symptom of narcissism
>
> was rearing its ugly head—Botox ads, the mortgage meltdown, fake paparazzi,
>
> We found so many examples of narcissism in American culture that we had to
>
> stop collecting them. This book could have been twice as long (Twenge and Campbell,
>
> p. 7).

It is important to note that recent large-scale studies dispute the claim that the millennial generation exhibits a greater amount of narcissism than previous generations. See Wetzel, et al, 2008 and Trzesniewski, et al, 2008.

Yea-sayers

So far the discussion of whether narcissism can be considered healthy has focused on approaches which reject narcissism outright as a social plague or are deeply suspicious of narcissistic trends in modern personality. In the nay-sayers narcissism is a result of a corrupt social system, moral decadence, loss of authority in society or an ongoing threat to society rooted in our biological instinct for self-preservation. In these perspectives narcissism must be resisted, tamed, rendered benign, extinguished or overcome through education and eventual cultural change. In any case the starting point begins with the posing of narcissistic aspects of the self in fundamental opposition to the achievement of good moral character, human flourishing and the good society.

There are perspectives that offer a different starting point and propose a different answer to our question. It is possible to conceive of narcissism in a manner that allows a "Yes" answer to the question, "Can Narcissism Be Healthy?" An affirming perspective on narcissism can be found in the work of Heinz Kohut, a psychoanalyst whose "Self Psychology" has emerged in the past several decades. Self psychology offers a significant contribution to our understanding of narcissism and its role in character formation. Kohut defined his work as an extension of Freudian theory although as his thought developed it emerged as an entirely distinctive approach from it Freudian roots. Kohut like Freud postulates an original narcissistic orientation in the beginning of life and like Freud Kohut affirms the formative role of childhood experience in the development of adult character. However, Kohut moves beyond Freud in several significant ways. Kohut formulates his theory of personality apart from the starting point of conflict between instinct and external reality. Kohut's theory begins with a concept of a nuclear self that seeks to maintain a cohesive and robust unity through the course of human development. A robust, healthy, cohesive self depends upon the fulfillment of needs Kohut defines as

narcissistic. For Self psychology the fragmentation of the modern world demands a healthy narcissism. For Kohut narcissism is defined psychoanalytically as "libidinal investment in the self". Unlike Freud, Kohut does not view conflict as the basis for understanding personality. Internal fragmentation is not a structural feature of human personality but a consequence arising from the fragmentation of the self and its nurturing relationships. For Kohut changing social conditions have shifted the agenda for our understanding of narcissism. In today's world the issues facing human development are no longer the conflicts centered around guilt, but instead the focus rests upon the tragedy of unfulfilled potential of the self and its failure to flourish. For Kohut Freud's Guilty Man of the 19th century gives way to the Tragic Man of the late 20th century. Siegle summarizes this Kohut's divergence from Freud this way:

> Kohut's view of the human condition, on the other hand, is quite different. He understands narcissism as a normal part of life, present from birth to death, not to be relinquished in favor of object love. For Kohut, narcissism has a natural course of development that eventuates in a whole and functioning self. (Siegle, 1996 p. 20)

Kohut's approach, articulated in The Analysis of the Self (1971) and The Restoration of the Self (1977) suggests that narcissism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of mature character. To the degree that solid character depends upon the foundation of a healthy self it can be asserted that narcissism is at least in part a vital foundation on which mature character develops. When the integrity of the self is not sustained and nurtured through the meeting of narcissistic needs a mature character fails to develop or collapses into dysfunctional behaviors and pathological attitudes often manifested in a narcissistic personality disorder. Pathological narcissism is a distorted version of healthy narcissism. Kohut's approach provides evidence for healthy narcissism through case examples of narcissism gone awry. When narcissism develops normatively the adult ego has transformed the archaic narcissism of childhood into mature character traits of creativity, charisma, ambition, resilience and wisdom. In Kohut's positive account of narcissistic development specific internal and interpersonal structures sustain the healthy narcissistic self, serving as the inner emotional resource for meeting the frustrations, failures, disappointments and limitations of actual experience.

According to Kohut the narcissistic self of the child develops in relation to two poles. Healthy narcissistic development requires adequate "mirroring" from an admiring and attentive caretaker. The child through the responsiveness of an adoring mother/caretaker acquires a larger than life, grandiose self. A second dimension of the self develops as the child merges with an idealized parental imago of greatness and strength drawn from a caretaker. These experiences of mirroring and idealization determine the basic narcissistic investment in the self. The internal world of the child is structured around these two poles. The child acquires a set of internal "selfobjects" which form the characterological bedrock from which subsequent selfhood is developed. In the child this kind of admiring attention affirms the "specialness" of the individual thereby supporting an expansive, vital engagement with the world. The merger with an idealized object forms a selfobject that supports a sense of greatness, poise, calmness and strength. As his thinking developed Kohut added a third type of selfobject arising later than the initial bipolar dimensions. Kohut called this aspect--"twinship". Experiences of "alikeness" with others became important sources of narcissistic affirmation of the self. Kohut's analysis diverges from approaches that pathologize the needs for mirroring, merger and alikeness he identifies with healthy narcissism. He asserts that the narcissistic needs are ongoing and ought not to be viewed as something to overcome in favor of devotion to the needs of others. He states:

Self psychology asserts that normality is properly defined by positing a

meaningful sequence of changes in the nature of self-selfobject relations

throughout the course of a person's life; that normality is not tantamount

to the claim—the unrealistic claim—that the need for selfobjects is re-

linquished by the adult and replaced by autonomy and object love. We

see a movement from archaic to mature narcissism, side by side and

intertwined with a movement from archaic to mature object love; we

do not see and abandonment of self-love and its replacement by the

love of others. (Kohut, p 208).

For Kohut the narcissistic needs are essential to the well-being of the Self, e.g. the mirroring other provides experiences of feeling loved, admired, and appreciated by others remain constant throughout life.   An idealized other who serves as guide, inspiration and trusted critic is life-long need upon which creativity and maturity depend. Finding kindred spirits who nurture and share one's values and goals supports the stability of the Self. If these needs are not met in childhood when the foundations of character are established the individual can be said to be lacking in emotional resilience and vulnerable to various breakdowns of self-regulation and interpersonal relationships. Healthy narcissism provides the character strength necessary for the discipline and capacity for repression called for by moral critics such as Rieff and Hunter.

The course of healthy narcissistic development necessarily entails experiences of optimal frustration as well as gratification of the child's nuclear self. Distortions in narcissistic development arise where sub-optimal or severe deficiencies in either frustration or gratification are experienced by the childhood self. The development of a sturdy, robust character composed of affirming and strengthening internalized selfobjects produces a resiliency in the face of narcissistic wounds to the self, arising from through encounters with the harsh limitations imposed by reality, failures and the disappointments frequently experienced in close relationships, career, and society.

Kohut was deeply aware of the prejorative views of narcissism prevalent both inside the psychoanalytic community and in the broader culture. In response Kohut offered remarks like the one below:

Although in theoretical discussions it will usually not be disputed that

narcissism, the libidinal investment of the self, is per se neither pathological

nor obnoxious, there exists an understandable tendency to look at it with a

negatively toned evaluation as soon as the field of theory is left. Where such

a prejudice exists it is undoubtedly based on a comparison between narcissism

and object-love, and is justified by the assertion that it is the more primitive

and less adaptive of the two forms of libido distribution.   I believe, however,

that these views do not stem from an objective assessment either of the

developmental position or the adaptive value of narcissism, but that they

are due to the improper intrusion of the altruistic value system of Western

civilization. (Kohut, 1985,pp. 97-98).

For Kohut Western civilization tends to ignore, neglect or even reject the narcissistic aspects of the self in favor of a biased ethic of altruism. In Kohut's view the self in Western thought is crushed under the weight of the other as reflected in extreme altruism. For Kohut loving self is equally important to human flourishing and mature character as loving the other.

Another approach strongly influenced by Kohut's thinking sees narcissism as a personality trait that ought not to be conceived as a binary, all or nothing concept. Psychologist Craig Malkin in his text, Re-Thinking Narcissism (2015) suggests the path toward a sharper understanding may lie in adopting a spectrum-based approach in which healthy narcissism can be found in the mid-point between two extremes. Malkin sees narcissism or what he describes as "the feeling of being special" on a spectrum between persons who exhibit a complete absence of narcissism—what Malkin calls "echoists" (taken from the character in the Narcissus myth) and extreme or malignant narcissists who are often recognized as grandiose, arrogant, exploitative and completely lacking in empathy. For Malkin "healthy narcissism" is a feeling of being special that is especially important in childhood but remains important to adults as well. In adulthood healthy narcissism or the need to feel special rises and falls at various points during the course of life. At times adults need to be admired, merge with stronger figures who can support them when times are tough and kindred spirits who can share moments of triumph and tragedy. I think of birthday parties, promotion celebrations, wedding days, mother's days, Valentine's Day etc.   All these times in adult life repeat and gratify the narcissistic need of adults to be the focus of attention and take pleasure in being who they are. Narcissism drives heroic efforts to achieve excellence, exhibit virtue, to strive for high ideals and display strength of character. In the inner life narcissism drives our pursuit of "specialness" and distinction—what sets us apart from others in what are referred to in Positive Psychology as our "signature strengths". (see Seligman,) Narcissism drives the care and creativity of the self that parallels and frequently intersects with care and empathy for others in a mature and healthy balance.

As highlighted in the J.D. Vance's Hillbilly Elegy (2016) it was the internalized selfobjects of Mamaw and Pawpaw that sustained the self-esteem, stability, and ambition of Vance's self despite the emotional chaos and social deprivation he experienced. In specific individuals the selfobjects acquired in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are typically a complex constellation of both supportive and inhibiting, enhancing and diminishing influences. Psychologist Craig Malkin describes the dynamics of healthy narcissism this way:

But where Freud saw narcissism as a mark of immaturity, an infantile dependency

to be outgrown, Kohut saw it as vital to well-being throughout life. Even as adults

we need to depend on others from time to time—to look up to them, to enjoy

their admiration, to turn to them for comfort and satisfaction. (Malkin, p. 19).

Pathological Narcissism

If one accepts the possibility of even the value of achieving a "healthy" sort of narcissism the question still arises: How does one become a deeply pathological narcissist? If the basis for healthy narcissism is found in early childhood, what is typically lacking or distorted in the development of persons exhibiting a narcissistic personal disorder? Malkin summarizes Kohut's view of the process this way:

But when children face abuse, neglect, and other traumas that leave them

feeling small, insignificant, and unimportant they spend all their time looking

for admiration or finding people to look up to. In short, Kohut concluded,

they become *narcissists*—vulnerable, fragile, and empty on the inside; arrogant,

pompous, and hostile on the outside, to compensate for just how worthless

they feel. People, in their eyes, become jesters or servants in their court,

useful only for the ability to confirm the narcissist's importance. (Malkin, pp. 19-20).

Not all individuals manifesting a narcissistic personality disorder are survivors of abuse, neglect or trauma from their past. A second development pathway to narcissism may emerge not from trauma or neglect but rather from its opposite: too much parental attention. Parental overevaluation or "spoiling" of a child may lead to dysfunctional attitudes of superiority and entitlement. Personality theorist, Theodore Millon (1996) favored a social learning perspective on narcissism. It is this form of pathological narcissism which may be the target of much social and moral criticism from those I have labeled the "nay-sayers". Pathological narcissism may emerge from extremes of parental overvaluation or the opposite, parental indifference.

Concluding Thoughts

As may be evident my overall sympathies lie with the "yea-sayers". Healthy narcissism is a developmental achievement not a given. So what to make of these contrasting views on narcissism? On the one hand narcissism is reluctantly acknowledged to have a "normal" and culturally adaptive aspect but the pathological and even malignant aspects are viewed as the essential features. On the other hand narcissism is understood to be initially a healthy aspect of childhood that is carried into adulthood alongside more other-directed attitudes and behaviors. From this normalizing perspective narcissism is not intrinsically a threat or defect. Narcissism becomes pathological under certain conditions that can be minimized or avoided. Healthy narcissism is a product of a healthy family and particularly healthy social conditions. I would claim above all that taking pleasure in being one's self, feeling happy with one's creaturely powers while tempered with modesty and empathy for others is what healthy narcissism is all about and yes narcissism can be healthy when integrated with the whole range of our flourishing as human beings.

Narcissism is a response to a fragmented world where constant threats exist to the stability of the self. The stress exerted upon the self in modern urban environments is persistent and relentless.

The need for narcissistic experiences sustaining a sense of value, purpose and vision overshadows older notions of conformity to social norms based upon guilt. The collapse of traditional institutional forms of authority found in marriage, church, and family that once relied upon guilt to shape the self no longer hold.   Can we return to the earlier character patterns of externally imposed discipline and repression? Unlikely despite the sometime strident voices of our moral pundits and conservative intellectuals.

A brief addendum on President Trump

On the pathological side one can point to the existence of prominent and seeming dangerous narcissistic personalities. We live in a time where prominent psychiatrists and psychologists have felt enough urgency to warrant breaking the "Goldwater Rule" and going public with a diagnosis of our current President as exhibiting a case of malignant narcissistic personality disorder. See The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump (2017).   How valid is this assessment? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (5th Edition, 2013), the guidebook representing the consensus of mental health professionals, offers the overall description of NPD as follows: "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts…"(p.327).

The key terms here are *pervasive* and *variety of contexts* in which within a given culture such attitudes and behaviors are deemed inappropriate and cause distress or impairment within a specific culture. Clearly the diagnosis of NPD is embedded within a particular cultural context and carries significant moral baggage in relation to judgements of what are appropriate levels of grandiosity, need for admiration, empathy and so forth. By implication the DSM suggest that some displays of grandiosity, self-admiration, and lack of empathy in particular contexts can be appropriate and perhaps considered normal or healthy. It is the "pervasiveness" of these displays in a "variety of contexts" that stands as the indicators of pathology. What have led some mental health professionals to venture a diagnosis of NPD in the case of Donald Trump are these very qualities. It was hoped by many that Mr. Trump's behavior and attitude would change once the shift from candidate Trump to President Trump occurred. In fact the traits exhibited by Trump most closely identified with NPD have remained as an "enduring pattern" that is pervasive and present across multiple contexts from gaffes in diplomacy to insults hurled at anyone who challenges or disagrees with him. What are we to make of Mr. Trump in the context of American cultural patterns? Does his behavior, according to DSM-5, "deviate markedly from the experience of the individual's culture"? To answer that question requires a description that reflects stable norms for American culture. But what if American culture itself is plural, fragmented, divided, partisan, and deeply ideological? Then the issue shifts into the territory of the postmodern. Whose America? Which America? In a given ideological context Trump's behavior and attitude may seem entirely appropriate--even brave and courageous. Clearly to those persons who make up Trump's political base, his behavior is viewed as laudatory. Is Trump's personality typical of the new America? Or is he more than typical in the sense of above average with respect to narcissistic traits? Perhaps Trump represents on a symbolic and larger than life level a set of attitudes and behaviors, a pattern that appears to a lesser degree in Americans across the culture.   It is constellation of personality traits that seems to appeal to so many Americans.

To label Trump as suffering from a mental disorder namely NPD may not be a purely objective clinical judgement. Rather diagnosis of Trump may reflect a morally loaded and ethnocentric response from a cultural milieu no longer reflective of postmodern America. Time will tell whether Trump's

personality is indeed pathological or the harbinger of new cultural pattern. After all the heroic prototype for many Americans, Ronald Reagan was himself an actor/celebrity, skilled in the arts of image-building and impression management. This is not to say that Trump can be said to be free of significant distress and impairment in important areas of functioning. There is little argument that Trump causes distress in others and lacks empathy. How much distress he himself experiences is difficult to determine precisely. His impairment can be assessed to some degree based on his effectiveness in achieving goals he has set for himself and how well he responds to the demand features of his current social environment but even in that context cultural and political convictions may lead to disagreement.

There can be little disagreement that Trump communicates with hyperbole, exaggeration and grandiosity. The question can be where does he fall on the narcissistic spectrum. Is Trump's brand of narcissism a "healthy narcissism" given the cultural context in which he lives. In his mantra "America First" there clearly is a strong element of what Erich Fromm called "social narcissism" and may reflect a healthy form of self-esteem, pride, and self-admiration lying dormant in American culture. Trump certainly rejects the "culture of humility" touted by NY Times columnist David Brooks in his widely read book, The Road to Character (2015). Trump's unabashed attention-seeking through tweets and speeches run in the opposite direction from a cultural consensus that insists upon modesty, restraint, understatement, measured judgements, etc. Trump's style seems more reflective of an impulsive, emotional expressivism. Can it be that Trump's success is due to an emergent character style that finally signals the public downfall of an older New England patrician style ultimately rooted in the Calvinistic values of our Puritan forefathers? What are the consequences for our country if the civility marked by restraint and moderation give way to a narcissistic style of communication?   Time will tell.

References

Brooks, D. (2015). *The road to character.* New York: Random House.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. (5th Ed.). Washington DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Fromm, E. (1964). *The heart of man.* New York: Harper & Row.

Hunter, J.H. (2000). *The death of character.* New York: Basic Books.

Kohut, H. (1971). *The analysis of the self.* New York: International Universities Press.

Kohut, H, (1977). *The restoration of the self.* New York: International Universities Press.

Kohut, H. (1985). *Self psychology and the humanities.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Lee, B. (2017). (Ed.). *The dangerous case of Donald Trump.* New York: St. Martin's Press.

Malkin, C. (2015). *Rethinking narcissism.* New York: Harper Collins.

Millon, T. (1996). *Disorders of personality: DSM-IV and beyond.* New York: Wiley & Sons.

Rieff, P. (1959). *Freud: The mind of the moralist.* (3rd Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Seligman, M.E. (2002). *Authentic happiness.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Siegal, A, (1996). *Heinz Kohut and the psychology of the self*. London: Routledge.

Trzesnicwski, K.H., Donnellan, M.B, & Robins, R.W. (2008). Do today's young people really think they are so extraordinary? *Psychological Science*, *19,* 181-188.

Twenge, J.M., & Campbell, W.K. (2009). *The narcissism epidemic: Living in the age of entitlement.* New York: Free Press.

Vance, J.D. (2016). *Hillbilly Elegy.* New York: HarperCollins.

Wetzel, E., Brown, A., Hill, P.L., Chung, J.M., Robins, R.W., & Roberts, B.W. (2017). The narcissism epidemic is dead; long live the narcissism epidemic. *Psychological Science, 28,* 1833-1847.