

REINHARD HALLER

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*A Field Guide to
Our Selves and Other People*

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Note to the Reader

Inevitably you will be convinced that you know one of the people described in the case studies to follow. Please be assured that all identifying personal details have been altered beyond recognition.

*Dedicated to those who have seen me as a mirror
and those who have been a mirror to me.*

The Scent of the Narcissus

My boss is an incredible narcissist. My colleague has narcissistic reactions to the tiniest things. I can spot my competitor's narcissism from a mile away. Relationships with narcissists are insufferable. Narcissism is a prerequisite for an executive position. I couldn't bear to spend one more minute with that hyper-narcissist I talked to today. Even my Facebook feed is plagued by cyber-narcissists. The business world is infested with career narcissists and at work I'm always putting up with their narcissist lackeys. Just now, in my last therapy session, my patient was complaining bitterly about "Narcissus the Great": her husband. Narcissism is accused of being the basis for all mental illness, and of course a criminal's motives are assumed to be narcissistic. Then there's the question of which profession is the real breeding ground for narcissists. Is it artists or their critics? Doctors or lawyers? Managers or stock brokers? Or perhaps it's the people we've been suspecting all along: politicians and journalists. Obviously, anyone in charge is a narcissist to the core. Narcissists are our perpetual, everyday rivals, determined to unsettle our egos. Narcissists come in all shapes and sizes: from dogged overachievers to self-conscious conformists, from the insensitively hypersensitive to the obnoxiously fussy. Why does John only talk about himself? That's narcissistic. And how come Jane is always upset about something? That's narcissistic too. Let alone their combined arrogance when the two join forces. This planet is teeming with narcissists. We are convinced of it. Wherever we go, we encounter narcissistic personality types and untold members of the flourishing narcissistic cult. Even more sinister than women's narcissism is the kind practiced by men. We're overcome by narcissistic anger, entrapped in the inner

prison of narcissism, intoxicated by narcissistic ecstasy, and deluded by deep narcissistic crises.

Narcissism makes life unbearable. Narcissism injects craziness into our daily routines, inviting us all on a great big ego-trip. Narcissism poisons every relationship and devastates every business. The whole world is getting more and more narcissistic by the day. It's no longer just an epidemic; it's the dawn of the Age of Narcissism. Recently someone even published a "Narcissism Inventory" to catalog the myriad forms that narcissism can take and ensure that not a single variety of the disorder goes overlooked.

There's narcissism wherever you turn. Anything anyone wants to describe, it's narcissistic through and through. Beyond a doubt, the words "narcissist," "narcissism," and "narcissistic" are booming and becoming increasingly common in conversation. There must be a reason why this old technical term that was once reserved for bookworms and psychologists has suddenly become an everyday figure of speech, why narcissists are no longer confused with Nazis. Either the traits and behavior that the term refers to are now drastically more common, or we've simply started to notice and pay attention to them. Either way, we are attaching more importance to the concept than ever before.

No matter how you explain it, narcissism and all it implies are gaining significance on both a personal and societal level. In terms of our perceptions, judgments, attitudes, tendencies, and personal explanations for things, it is playing a more and more significant—you might say, more narcissistic—role. All roads lead to narcissism.

And why is that? Are we really getting more self-centered, more in love with ourselves? Has the age of narcissism really begun, as many eagerly claim? Is our era truly defined by aspects of narcissism such as image cultivation, egocentricity, delusions of grandeur, haughtiness, thirst for fame, and machismo? Are our tendencies for image

cultivation and boundless grandiosity reflections of some prevailing mood in society? Are the idealization of self and the devaluation of others really turning into principles of modern life? Are rational egotists or eco-narcissists to blame for the economic crisis? And can we really find traces of online narcissism in the offline world? However you look at it, there's narcissism in the air: on personal, interpersonal, and societal levels. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at this term, this fundamental psychological attitude, this potent psychological force.

Yet the trait known as narcissism is nothing new. In fact, it's human nature. Narcissistic behavior is even older than the legend of Narcissus, that self-loving handsome lad. It is a timeless phenomenon, but one whose significance for individuals, society, culture, and therapy is receiving ever more recognition. Narcissism is a person's unquenchable desire for recognition and admiration and their overblown assessment of their own importance. It is a powerful force and a psychological engine, a fortress of self-confidence, and yes, a character trait and a mental attitude. It has become a pattern of behavior for lone individuals as well as entire societies. Contrary to appearances, we must realize that behind its shiny exterior and selfish actions, there usually hides a flimsy sense of self-worth and stunted emotional intelligence.

But narcissism is more than a disorder. It is a primal psychological energy that can take both negative and positive forms. In order to develop healthy self-confidence, a human being needs a certain amount of narcissism. This only becomes a problem when it harms someone. It might harm narcissists themselves by isolating them when everyone else has had enough of them and their inconsiderate egocentrism. Or it might harm the people around them, who simply cannot bear the narcissist's inconsideration and constant devaluation of others. Indeed

narcissism is a psychological superpower that pervades both individuals and society more than ever.

Many signs point to unhealthy individual and social trends, specifically the rise of egotism, self-absorption, greed, and inflated self-worth. Expert psychologists and sociologists have found evidence to back up our general impression that self-worth has moved into the fast lane over the last few years. As many scientific studies have confirmed, the trend has moved away from moderation and increasingly towards egocentricity and selfishness, self-overestimation, and uncritical opinions of one's own magnificence. The modern world places value on admiration and influence, no longer humility and modesty. And that's where the danger lies. If the guiding principle of modern life is only to think of oneself, this will inevitably lead to a loss of solidarity and ultimately to the exclusion and isolation of the egotists.

This book is about the individual and collective shift towards a self-involved, inconsiderate, and cold-hearted way of being. Appropriate for an investigation of pathological self-love, this book is also intended as a mirror: not a physical one, but a psychological one, a "mirror of narcissism" in fact. The countless examples of narcissistic situations and people in the following pages will allow you, the reader, to recognize yourself and people you know. As with any mirror, the reflection is realistic, not distorted, sugarcoated, or disfigured. It is clear, and leaves nothing out. The mirror serves as an unbiased observer and incorruptible portrait artist, a neutral analyst, a portal to genuine realization. The mirror techniques used in this book correspond with the golden method of psychoanalysis that has been tried and tested in self-discovery seminars, group dynamics exercises, and family therapy. This book too will help improve your awareness of yourself and others.

Take a look, dear reader, into the mirror of Narcissus. Discover within it your compatriots' unkindness, your supervisor's inconsiderate actions, and the egotism of the

world. You will see your neighbor's quickness to take offense and the arrogance of people in power, the superficiality of the "bluff" society, the sadism of reality television, and the heartlessness of business. The narcissist's mirror reflects the image of your irritable employee, your oversensitive friend, or your easily offended spouse. You will recognize the indifference of the cold-hearted criminal and the narcissistic fury of the school shooter. At the same time, the narcissist's mirror will also illuminate the positive forces of personal strength and self-love. It will reflect all your misplaced doubts and feelings of inadequacy, your unnecessary complexes, your fears, and your depression. In it you will encounter the naked truth and nothing else. Take a look into this psychological mirror. Examine the face of modern society. See the world around you. Recognize what it means to be human. Recognize yourself.

Living Up to Its Name, or

THE BRILLIANT TRAGEDY OF THE GRANDIOSE EGO

A renowned professor of medicine was well-known for his lectures, and his very appearance was impressive and imposing. The man's legendary reputation extended far beyond the university and many flocked to see him speak, including the most fashionable people in town who wouldn't miss the event of the season. His lectures had a style midway between a television show and a circus act, with the professor playing the roles of presenter and clown rolled into one. Such was the atmosphere at the events organized in 19th-century Paris by the great neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, where he exhibited his female hysteria patients before an awestruck audience of thrill-seekers at the famous Salpêtrière School. The professor was a skilled lecturer, a trained orator, and a dramatic performer. He inspired his students and fascinated his spectators. When he spoke, he always said "we" and never "I." He would announce that "we have found" this or "we have discovered" that, and pose rhetorical questions such as: What do we mean by that? What can we conclude? What does that tell us?

A woman in the audience who was active in the early feminist movement and represented the women studying at the university asked him in front of everyone, "Monsieur le professeur, when you say 'we,' to whom are you referring? Is it your laboratory team? The research group? The faculty?" Without a moment's pause, oblivious to the student's ironic tone, and hardly looking her in the eye, he replied with a sweeping gesture as if to say that the entire auditorium and even the world outside it revolved around him. "When we say 'we,' we mean us," he said.

This true story, more amusing than aggravating, demonstrates narcissism in its classic form and all that we typically associate with it. The emphasis here is on image cultivation and vanity, magnetic charisma, and above all a generous helping of self-confidence. The neurologist, radiating self-directed enthusiasm, uses the royal “we,” once reserved for kings and queens. He does so as if it were a matter of course, without a grain of doubt or the slightest bit of embarrassment at his self-aggrandizing speech patterns. Some narcissism experts believe that pronounced attention to oneself is incompatible with highly intellectual thought, or at least requires a shortage of emotional and social intelligence. The professor ignores the obvious criticism aimed at him and devalues the questioner by paying her no attention. With almost virtuosic ease, he fends off the attack and converts it into an even greater performance of self-adulation. Meanwhile, his reaction unwittingly confirms the old joke about the difference between God and a university professor: God knows better than ever to become a professor.

A sought-after management trainer with impeccable teaching skills and correspondingly high fees gave a seminar at a leadership training center on the topic of “Self-Confidence, Poise, and Keeping Your Cool.” She brilliantly explained the psychological basis behind the self and self-esteem, demonstrated compelling ways to improve self-awareness, gave countless tips on how to respond to criticism, and presented sophisticated techniques for reinforcing the self. Her specialty, she said, was the high art of keeping one’s cool. “Think of your enemy as your teacher!” she drilled the participants. “Take criticism as a positive incentive. Why shouldn’t you be the one to decide who gets under your skin?” She went into great detail on how to defend against and cope with an insult. “It’s

impossible to irritate a truly cool-headed person. Such people only ever react positively and are never offended.”

Armed with their new bulletproof psychology training, the seminar participants—all of them rising managers and young entrepreneurs—were very impressed and deeply motivated. Afterwards, the workshop organizer asked them to complete an anonymous survey about the seminar’s organization, the timeliness and relevance of the topics covered, and the quality of the presenter. In this last category, the survey included questions about her theoretical knowledge, practical experience, speaking skills, and educational effectiveness. The presenter received outstanding ratings almost across the board. Only two participants complained that her explanations were too superficial, that she hadn’t delved in deeply enough, and hadn’t focused enough on practical applications. When the presenter got the results of the feedback—with a 95 percent satisfaction rate—she immediately sent the organizers an angry email declaring that she would never work for such incompetent people again. Who were such “peasant-like participants” to judge her?

This story illustrates that narcissism spares no one and that even experts are susceptible. Having theoretical knowledge on how to handle an insult does not necessarily mean that a person can always cope when the insult is directed at them. Not only does this narcissism expert have thin skin—unlike “Professor We”—she is also unable to hide it. In her case, narcissism manifests itself in a different way entirely, making her extremely sensitive and almost pathologically prone to taking offense. Tellingly, despite all her knowledge, she has a blind spot for her own vulnerability.

The soup served at the reform school cafeteria was what the kids called the “weekly special”: a broth floating with leftover food from the last few days, plus a splash of vinegar

to mask the stench of decay. Fourteen-year-old Jimmy, a recent arrival at the residential school, had gulped it down as best he could. Noticing the queasy look on Jimmy's face, the chaperone supervising the cafeteria refilled his bowl twice. Finally Jimmy couldn't hold it in anymore and threw up all over the bowl, the table, and the floor. "I see our little gentleman is too good for the food," the chaperone said in a threatening voice. "I'll show you what fine cuisine we have here! Eat up!" None of the other boys dared to react. They all kept eating, too afraid even to watch. The boy, his stomach still wrenching, fighting back tears and nausea, dipped his spoon in the vomit. "And look on the floor. There's some more delectable soup. Lick it up!"

Despite their differences, the stars of all three episodes share some clear similarities in their attitudes and behavior. All three are entirely self-absorbed in their thoughts and feelings: the professor with his grandiosity, the motivational speaker with her vulnerability, and the teacher with his sadistic need to exercise power. Self-love is evident in all three cases, be it with the neurologist obsessed with his own rhetoric or the easily offended corporate psychology expert, who is too sensitive to see why someone wouldn't lavish her with praise, or the chaperone, who quenches his thirst for power by debasing a helpless child. At the deepest level, all three are insecure and sensitive. The professor keeps going full steam ahead, and the workshop presenter retreats offended. Neither of them can believe that someone less qualified would question them. The chaperone, who is uneducated and suffers from feelings of inferiority, makes himself feel better by putting others down. None of the three characters takes other people's feelings into account: the feminist student's curiosity, the seminar participants' eagerness for knowledge, or the poor boy's fear. The professor's gesture is derisive, the vain expert's belittling

comments are even more vicious, and the chaperone's sadistic commands are the worst of all.

* * *

Narcissism has a wide variety of manifestations, severity levels, and functions. It can be attractive or disagreeable, intrusive or unassuming, auspicious or dangerous, fascinating or repulsive. In any case, it always remains slightly mysterious. In moderation, it nourishes the ego and promotes healthy self-esteem. In diluted form, it can spread contagiously around a family or workplace. When it becomes pathological, it is one of the most difficult disorders to treat and usually even drives therapists to desperation. Malignant narcissism, with its heartlessness and contempt for humanity, is essentially the psychiatric equivalent of "evil."

As you can see, narcissism has many faces. It would not be exaggerating to say that it is probably the most interesting, multifaceted, and colorful of psychological phenomena—and the most difficult to handle. Its set of symptoms spans both extremes of the emotional spectrum and includes elements from the entire repertoire of mental disorders. Narcissistic behavior ranges all the way from a sense of one's own grandiosity to crumbling self-esteem, from schemes for attaining infinite power to cold-blooded devaluation of one's fellow human beings, from an unquenchable sense of entitlement to masochistic humility. A narcissistic person's egocentricity is set in stone, and this is often accompanied by an arrogant attitude, a lack of sympathy for others, and constant private insecurities. The feeling of being the envy of everyone due to one's own magnificence allows narcissists to develop a dangerous attitude whereby they manage always to receive more than they give.

In its positive form, narcissism is an engine for our performance and progress. It promotes creativity and gives us strength, while allowing us to soar above the competition. On the negative side, it can give rise to offense, jealousy, hatred, conflict, crime, and war. Narcissism can ruin partnerships and friendships, destroy marriages and families, ignite arguments and conflicts, and create lifelong enemies.

Narcissism accompanies a person from birth—yes, you read that correctly—until their last breath. It is the foundation of our self-assertiveness and feeds our longing for power. The ongoing effort to be better and more excellent than others is the root of performance and creativity as well as greed and power. Inspired by the desire to get ahead and be superior to others, it encourages people to become ever better, ever stronger, and ever more influential. Psychoanalysis considers the aggressive instinct and the sex drive to be the primal forces of life, providing fundamental vital energy. In contrast, narcissism can be seen as the most frequent and significant implementation of that energy. It is a kind of mental software that shapes one's attitudes, behavior, and personality. Dictating our feelings and actions, it supplies us with motivations and helps us to set crucial goals. Narcissistic sensations reinforce self-esteem and narcissistic personality traits promote one's career, whether honest or crooked in nature. On the other hand, an excess of narcissism leads to isolation and mental illness. Narcissism informs people's choice of partners and professions and affects their behavior in groups or in society. It is a determining factor underlying ambitions and rivalries, competition and progress. The narcissism of entire nations has led to wars, and narcissistic views have provoked profound hostilities. Narcissistic actions have proved to be a critical factor behind recessions and banking crises, modern-day robber barons, the troubles of the developing world, and the destruction of the environment.

The question of what is normal or healthy and what is disturbed or pathological could not be harder to answer than in the case of narcissism. Narcissism provides an almost classic example of the sliding scale. The contradictions between appearances and inner experience, between theory and reality, between glory and desperation are not as pronounced in any other mental disorder as they are with narcissism. In what other area is the cultural and psychological baggage so heavy but the mass of scientific findings so thin on the ground? As mentioned earlier, therapists are scarcely faced with a more difficult condition to treat. Even hysteria is no match for narcissism in terms of inner emotional risks, poor demarcations, and negative transference on others. The contrast between the clear demand for therapy and the available treatment options is more striking than is the case for any other condition.

If one only considers the superficial stereotypes, narcissism could be taken for something terrible, a modern plague, evidence of the degradation of our times. After all, narcissists are a burden on society, ruin communities, and have all kinds of nasty characteristics: egotism, self-worship, conceitedness, recklessness. They are generally despicable. Or are they? Aren't we all aware of the narcissist's grandiosity, the narcissistic elite, and narcissist executives? Why are there so many narcissists among managers, film stars, artists, and politicians? Why are so many of our idols narcissists? Does narcissism bring advantages? Are narcissists better at following through on their potential? Are they born success stories? Is narcissism a career opportunity, a prerequisite for social mobility?

Our responses to the narcissist attitudes that are increasingly pervading society are not all negative; at some level, we react with ambivalence if not full-blown admiration. Despite its disparaging tone, the connotations of the word "narcissistic" are not as negative as those of other psychiatric terms such as "psychopath" or

“hysterical.” While these originally neutral, purely descriptive terms are now spoken with disgust and have become insults, narcissism is different. It is starting to dawn on us that the basic characteristics implied by the term narcissism might be useful for getting ahead in life, beneficial for our careers, and compatible with principles of modern living. The formerly celebrated virtues of modesty, humility, and restraint have lost their prominence, replaced by the will to succeed, self-promotion, and aspirations to property and power. Narcissism is on the threshold between a problematic, pathological disorder and a legitimate outlook on life. Narcissism is becoming socially acceptable.

* * *

A description of narcissism as a phenomenon would not be complete, however, if it did not also discuss the energy a narcissist emanates, infusing his surroundings and affecting us all. The fascination with narcissism is clearly based on how it impacts the world at large. Narcissists create a unique atmosphere around themselves. The impenetrable walls that narcissists construct around their persons simultaneously repel us and attract us. The aura that develops between a narcissist and their environment, hard to describe and even harder to analyze, makes narcissists stand out even more from the crowd. Narcissists have a certain glow that reflects on their surroundings. When a narcissist enters a room, they immediately conquer it. When they begin to speak, all eyes turn to watch. The aura of a narcissist is penetrating and spares no one. Even if the narcissist doesn't say anything, express an opinion, or assert their will, we are all somehow affected anyway.

Few people can escape this aura. However we feel about it, we are spellbound in both the positive and negative senses of the word. Everyone who interacts with a narcissist