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Culture of Narcissism

Andrew Fellows

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to show that the modern person is in the grip of a new psychological consciousness - one that is extremely pre-occupied with the self. We have become a culture of Narcissism. I have given a perspective as I see it from a European point of view.

An ancient story from Greek mythology provides a door into the world of the narcissist. It centres on a very handsome young man called Narcissus. So attractive was this man that all the girls fell in love with him. He was aware of his charms and this made him arrogant and proud. Despite the efforts of the ladies to win his affections he ignored their overtures. One was especially attracted to him and did everything she could to win his attention. She too failed in her attempts. So desperate was she to win him that she prayed to a goddess that Narcissus would respond favourably. There was no answer. Finally with a broken heart she prayed that he would learn as she had what it was like to experience unrequited love. To this prayer there was an answer. One day as Narcissus was walking through the forest he stumbled upon a clear pool of water. As he knelt to drink - for he was very thirsty - the loveliest sight that had ever appeared captivated his attention. He immediately fell in love. So great was his attraction that he could not leave the pool and his appetite vanished. Before long his health deteriorated and he began to fade. In the end he died staring at this image in the pool - striving the embrace the one object of his desire - himself.

This ancient myth is an apt illustration of the modern narcissistic consciousness. Today the term belongs to the world of psychology. Sigmund Freud first introduced it. He used it to describe the earliest stage of childhood where the infant has no sense of a reality beyond his/her existence. It lacks the consciousness that uses the subject/object distinction. So, when the baby looks at the mother it says I AM YOU (you are an extension of me) - rather than I/YOU (which acknowledges real distinction between subject and object).

Freud recognized a similar trait in some of his adult patients. There was an extreme preoccupation with the self that distorted ones relationship to reality. This resulted in an inability to make a clear distinction between themselves as the subject and that which existed outside them (the other). They were so focused on themselves that they lost awareness of the real beyond them.

Because the narcissist does not recognize the separate existence of 'the other' they tend to use reality as a mirror to reflect messages back to the self. The other is there to impress, to be admired by, and to get pity from. The Narcissist is so identified with his/her needs that the other person is simply there to be available for them.

In his book 'Culture of Narcissism' Christopher Lasch describes the Narcissistic personality like this; ' the Narcissist can function in the everyday world - and is often very charming. However, his devaluation of others, together with a lack of curiosity about them impoverishes personal life. With little capacity for detachment the Narcissist must depend on others for constant infusions of approval and admiration. At the same time his fear of emotional dependence, together with manipulative, exploitive approaches to personal relations makes these relations bland, superficial and deeply unsatisfying.... The Narcissist tends to be bored, restlessly in search of instantaneous intimacy, looking for emotional titillation without involvement.'

It is important to see the Narcissistic condition as a response to pain and loss in relationship to the objective world. Everyone needs others in order to gain healthy representations of the self. Self-knowledge only comes in relationship. We cannot know ourselves outside of the context of community. If we are immersed in an environment in early childhood where we are valued we develop a healthy self-image. When this happens we are able to treat 'the other' - not as a mirror reflecting back messages to the self - but as real and separate. We can do this because we have a solid sense of self gained in the early period of childhood development.

However, if we receive constant messages about the self that are negative, our images of who we are (self-representation systems) are bad. This is experienced as a deficit – or emptiness. The way we deal with this deficit is by means of compensation. This is done by the 'inward turn' where we construct our own self-representation systems. This is why the Narcissist is extremely self- conscious. Every interaction with the objective world is an attempt to create (and recreate) the self. This however is done at the expense of the other, which is not treated as real and distinct from the self but merely as a mirror.

As a psychological personality disorder the diagnosis of 'Narcissist' is extremely rare. However, the condition provides a model for understanding our own culture. There are factors at work that have produced a new character that is narcissistic. This is the age of self in a unique way. Where humans have universally been selfish (since the fall) Narcissism is something unique. It is not a metaphor of the human condition; rather, it provides a way of understanding the psychological impact of recent social and ideological changes in our culture.

It is also important to distinguish Narcissism from modern individualism. Where individualism is a description of the 'economic' self, Narcissism is a description of the 'psychological self'. Individualism describes the pursuit of wealth and material comfort. Narcissism describes the pursuit of identity and personal well being. This is why I believe that the Narcissistic model describes a new state of human consciousness - one that redefines the nature of the real. It may literally be the fulfilment of the apostle Paul's description of the human in its last phase. 2 Tim 3:1-2 - "in the last days men will be lovers of self - literally they will fall in love with themselves".

In order for the church to understand its mission in the world in the 21st century it is important that we grapple with the challenges of this new consciousness.

Here in this paper I want to provide a broad overview of the culture of Narcissism. We will look at this under three main headings;

1. The CAUSES of Narcissism

Narcissism did not arise in a vacuum. It is the direct consequence of ideas. In the modern period (from the 16th century onward) Western culture has moved through four phases in terms of its 'idea of the universe'. To understand the culture of Narcissism we need to see the flow of these ideas.

Phase ONE - The Judeo-Christian Idea of the Universe

This is rooted in the reality of a personal Trinitarian God who is the cause of creation. Everything that is, finds its source in Him. This makes for a God-centered universe. We exist for Him and are called to live life as a response to His presence, which fills heaven and earth.

It is because He is at the centre that we stand under His revelation as the basis for truth. The Bible is the sufficient epistemological basis for understanding the world we live in.

Phase TWO - The Humanist Idea of the Universe

In the 18th Century the 'Enlightenment' gave the human self confidence to put himself at the centre of reality. This was a radical turn and provided a foundation for civilization never experimented with before. 'Man is the measure of all things' was the new centre. This meant that now the human self was self-sufficient. In terms of knowledge claims human reason alone was the basis of all truth.

This humanist idea of the universe provided huge dividends in terms of science and technology. The level of development and progress seemed to justify a self-centered universe.

The point to be noted in the interests of our subject is that humanism is in its essence a self-centred idea of the universe. Narcissism is present in the very foundations of humanism.

Phase THREE - the Skeptical idea of the universe

Within philosophy it was not long before the autonomous mind was seen as an insufficient basis of knowledge. This gave rise to a scepticism from which philosophy has never recovered. The self at the centre of reality now began to feel a certain insecurity with respect to truth.

As this insecurity grew so did our sense that the universe was larger than we ever imagined. For the modern self this created a sense of insignificance. We existed as tiny specks in a vast cosmos. This produced an inward retreat alongside a growing self-consciousness. The expanding universe shrunk the modern self giving us a deficit in terms of self-understanding. Now we needed to go inwards and build up our own. This was the retreat from the real into the self.

Phase FOUR - The Narcissist idea of the Universe

Up until the Enlightenment religion had been the integration point for the self's sense of identity. When this was displaced it fell to Philosophy and Science to provide it. When these could not give a positive sense of worth there was nowhere else to turn but to a retreat into the self. Now the self had to service the self. This was the withdrawal from the objective world into the Narcissistic state. When that which was outside could not provide a healthy self-understanding we had to retreat inwards and try to build up our own.

Having given the broad overview I now want to analyze the causes in a little more detail.

A. Modern philosophical trends

Rene Descartes is known as the father of modern philosophy. Back in the 16th century he wanted to defeat scepticism by finding an indubitable starting point for knowledge. This starting point is reflected in his famous statement 'I think, therefore I am'. What is most notable about this statement is that the self is the starting point for truth. We see that Descartes draws a line between the self as subject and the objective world outside.

This functions as a paradigm shift towards the self and growing subjectivity. The seeds of Narcissism are right there with Descartes. It all begins with the self. This is very different from the old ways of 'knowing'. In this sense Descartes is the founder of the modern philosophical obsession with the self.

Now, although the Cartesian project gave great confidence in the ability of self to discover the truth with indubitable certainty we can see that the seeds of scepticism were always there. This is because he began from the place of doubt. Descartes said, 'let us doubt that anything exists'. He then went on to conclude that this act of doubt was a thought. This thought was then extrapolated as a proof of existence - hence 'I think therefore I am'. The order of Descartes method shows that the foundation of doubt always lurked beneath the surface of the modern philosophical project. This is why it surfaced again so quickly. By the 18th century the philosophical streams within modernism began to succumb to the pressures of scepticism. From Hume onwards there were constant challenges to the idea of self-certainty - the fact that the mind could comprehend truth.

Descartes contemporary, Blaise Pascal, had the foresight to see exactly where it would all end. He said that Descartes 'had done everything, except secure the position of God, and thereby the meaning of man. Our knowledge allows us to do so much - and yet it exposes us as small, accidental and ignorant. Man alone is but a feeble foundation for the truth.'

There were different responses to the philosophical scepticism that followed. One of the most influential was romanticism (late 18th and 19th century). Here was a movement that was very much self-focused - often to the exclusion of the objective world. Romanticism provided a way for the self to be set free to interpret reality in its own way. The new epistemology centred on intuition, emotion, stream of consciousness and imagination. Since the Romantic period philosophy has never escaped from its inward pre-occupation.

This is reflected in an extreme way in post-modern philosophical trends. With no hope of discovering the truth there is nothing left but the self who constructs reality in order to fulfil its own agendas and desires.

So, Descartes chickens finally come home to roost in the worldview of self.

B. Trends in Modern science

The success of modern science gave an early sense of confidence. There was little doubt that given enough time all the secrets of the universe could be unlocked. If you asked an educated person in 19th century Europe, 'what is truth?', they would have answered, 'Science is truth'. While philosophy may have led to scepticism, science was alive and well. Everyone believed that we were close to a unified theory of knowledge.

Into the 20th century this confidence was badly dented. This was due to the 'new science' uncovering whole new dimensions of reality. Relativity and quantum theory revealed parts of reality that were unpredictable. This highlighted limitations to the old perspectives.

Alongside this development was the uncovering of the unconscious in the field of psychology. A murky, mysterious side to the subject was brought to light. This was also instrumental in the 'humbling of science'. For all the progress science had made it could not explain what was most important to humanity - ourselves. Although Freud tried hard to explain the self in a scientific manner psychology had not succeeded in producing theories and predictions that were anywhere near as effective as those in the physical realm. Science seemed frail when it came to crossing the inner frontier of the self.

This was another factor that caused a retreat from the objective world into the subjective world of self. Science was an inadequate source of giving self-knowledge so again we retreated inwards in order to create our own.

In his book 'Understanding the Present' Bryan Appleyard put it like this; 'in a world where scientific knowledge works to colonize the entire universe, the self becomes a safe refuge. In here we are safe from invasion. We found an escape from the eternal wanderings offered by science. So, the refuge of the self is something we employ as a defense at every passing moment. The self deprived of a cohesive religious meaning and lost in a vast and technological system retreats into self-cultivation as the way of attaining an identity.'

2. The CONSEQUENCES of Narcissism

The narcissistic tendency is reflected across the whole of modernity. It has become the new worldview - the worldview of self. In the following section I am highlighting some key areas of our cultural life where this is evidenced.

(i) The loss of history

The modern self has little sense of historical connection. History has no meaning, it is just there. We no longer feel a deep affinity with our ancestors. Our sense of participating in a vast story has vaporized. This is a natural outcome of Narcissism. If we lose touch with the world outside and judge the real by what impacts the self, only the present can meaningfully exist. This leaves history as something 'unreal'.

There is a vicious cycle at work here. The more we lose our sense of connection with history, the more we become locked into a Narcissistic perspective. This is because history itself provides a story that gives a sense of the world that is bigger than the self. When a living connection with the past disappears we lose the power of history to point us to a bigger reality.

It should be noted here that this loss of history has big implications for the Christian community. If we stand within a Narcissistic consciousness (which we do) we lose the context of our faith, which is historical. The death, resurrection and ascension of Christ have little meaning for the Narcissist.

(ii) Consumerist society

A Culture of Narcissism is perfectly suited for a consumerist society. This is because the consumerist society puts the self in the centre of reality. It makes our choices, our preferences and our desires ultimate. The whole society is constructed to this reality. The self is firmly in the middle.

Consumerism is linked to the industrial revolution and the power of mass production. In the early days of the industrial revolution employers saw the workingman only as a producer. They cared little for what they did in their free time. Few could see ahead, that a society based on mass production required the organization of mass consumption. In order

for this to happen you needed to create consumer demand. This happened by creating a relationship between commodities and identity. Consumer items must be able to confer status and prestige. The perfect device for this was advertising. This did not so much give information about the virtues of a product as promote consumption as a way of life. Advertising actually manufactured a product of its own - the consumer.

In the modern period consumerism is a key part of how the modern self constructs an identity. This is a move from Descartes 'I think therefore I am' to 'I shop therefore I am.'

(iii) New levels of subjectivity in art

A Culture of Narcissism loses a sense of beauty beyond the self. This is because of the withdrawal from the objective world and the slid into subjectivity. This is reflected in so much modern art where the focus tends towards the subjectivity of the artist.

This actually makes art the perfect medium for the expression of the Narcissism. Art no longer exists for the sake of external meaning - for something beyond the work of art. As one art commentator put it; 'no longer does art throw open a window to a reality beyond ourselves and our world. Now the emphasis is on the internal reality of the artist rather than a reality beyond'.

This does not mean that subjective art has no meaning. Neither am I inferring that its subjectivity makes it bad art. I am simply reflecting that because of the tendency of art to reflect on the subject to the exclusion of the object the focus of the arts has changed in the direction of a narcissistic culture. It has taken this turn because there is a loss of hope that meaning and truth can be found in any source beyond the self.

Once again a vicious cycle is at work here because modern art communicates and re-enforces a worldview of self.

(iv) Therapeutic Culture

A Culture of Narcissism has produced the 'psychological man and women'. Our whole consciousness is much more internalized. The feeling of well-being becomes more important than dealing with more external factors (paying off debt, getting a job, etc).

The Narcissist hungers for the momentary illusion of personal well being and security. This is especially true in more affluent societies where basic human needs (food, clothing and housing) are readily available. So, finding your identity is more important than maintaining your marriage.

This need for personal well being creates a huge market for therapy - a profession designed to help the self feel better. The therapist is one of the fastest growing professional categories in the world. This reflects a new trend.

This is not to decry the contemporary need for therapy. It is a necessary service, which the Christian community should be at the forefront of. However, we should also see the danger as Christianity becomes more therapeutically packaged and the truth becomes compromised.

3 The CURE for Narcissism

Because the culture of Narcissism defines a new state of consciousness there is no quick cure. It has become part of the fabric of how the modern self deals with reality - a new ontological state. However, a theology of redemption does not allow us to be fatalistic.

There are measures whereby we can lean against the self ward trend and deal with reality as God intended.

The greatest weapon against Narcissism is reality. This is because Narcissism is built on a giant illusion - one that eclipses the subject/object relationship. So, in order to lean against Narcissism we must move from illusions to the real. I will now highlight four areas for the recovery of the real;

(i) *The reality of GOD*

Only the glory of the Creator is strong enough to lift us out of our extreme self-consciousness. The God who has revealed Himself in the Bible is first of all 'other' in the essence of His being. He disturbs all our categories and is utterly unmanageable. Where the Narcissist calls all of reality to submit to its agenda, the encounter with the true and living God reverses this. God as 'other' forces us to see - that He is the one 'whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere'. To know this God is to move from self-centeredness to other-centeredness.

(ii) *The reality of humanness*

Because of extreme self-consciousness the modern dilemma is an anthropological one. We are confused about 'what is man?' There are two words in the creation account that answers this question;

creature

This shows where our life is derived from. To ratify our condition as creatures is to move from Narcissism. This is because the Narcissist believes they can create their own life. To be a creature is to be delivered from this lie. We are not self-constructed - we are derived from 'other'. To be the created one is to acknowledge the reality of the Uncreated one. It is the acknowledgement of our source.

image

The human is a representation of its Creator. The thing about this is that the image is nothing in itself. When we stand in front of the mirror in the morning, what are we looking at? Nothing more than a representation of ourselves. That image in the mirror only exists because of the real that it reflects. The moment you walk away from the mirror the representation disappears. It is the same when we turn away from God - we turn from the one whom we image. This reminds us that we become real not by constructing our own identity but by connecting with the ultimately real one whom we image. The Dutch theologian Herman Dooyeweerd expresses this so well - 'humans cannot find themselves except from the standpoint outside of ourselves - in a relationship to our origin'.

This is the reality of what it means to be human. It is why self-knowledge comes when we look away from the self to the One whom we image. This is how we become more real.

(iii) *The reality of Community.*

Part of bearing the image of the Trinitarian God is that we were made for community. As He exists in community, so too do we. When we move away from community we become less than what we were made for. The value of community is the constant reminder of other. It forces us beyond the self. There can be no community with a self-centered existence. Community only functions when each member acknowledges that there is 'more than oneness' – that the other exists. Modernity has created a sociological context that has been destructive of community. We must move towards more intentional forms of community in order to overcome the Narcissistic trend.

(iv) *The reality of Beauty*

In Dostoevsky's famous novel, the Idiot keeps telling us 'that beauty will save the world'. Encounters with beauty go a long way to saving the narcissist. This is because true beauty in all its forms has a transcendent quality that pulls us beyond the self. It takes us into the realm beyond the manageable and transfixes our gaze. It is a profound experience of 'other'. Without trying to understand how and why, we need to open ourselves to the beauty that surrounds us. The modern has grown weary and cynical about beauty. However, beauty has a power to pierce through to the centre of entrapped self and lead us back to the real. We must never underestimate its power. In the modern context beauty must be central to the apologetic enterprise because Truth without beauty cannot reach the Narcissist.