Narcissism, Spiritual Pride, and Original Sin

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ABSTRACT: Narcissism has roots in childhood and a broad impact on society. Parental abuse, neglect, or exploitation result in unmet emotional needs that leave low self-esteem and patterns of longing for affirmation. When these needs are not gratified, interpersonal conflict ensues. At the extreme, torture, wars, and other conflagrations can be seen to have roots in narcissism, which is thus construed as the psychological explanation for what religion defines as original sin. The cold, dark pain of narcissistic woundedness comprises an abyss in the soul. Spiritual resources, including mysticism and surrender to divine love, may offer deep healing for these wounds.

There is an ancient prayer that says:

I adore thee, Divine One
    and I offer thee my affections,
         my thoughts and my actions.
May I be a pure nothing
That Thy adorable will be fulfilled
Now and always.

May I be a pure nothing: What can that mean? Surrender is an important aspect of most spiritual paths, but it tends to fly in the face of what we know about current Western culture.

Cultural narcissism

We are often taught from early childhood onward that we should be a somebody, that we should make our parents and teachers proud of us. What Christopher Lasch wrote in 1978 is even more true today: narcissism is a social phenomenon. He describes the narcissist as a type of personality easily recognized by observers of the contemporary cultural scene: "facile at managing the impression he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous

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of those he manipulates into providing it; unappealingly hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death” (Lasch, 1978, p. 38). Terror at the idea of death; terror in brief encounters with the inner void—contrast that to the welcoming surrender: “May I be a pure nothing”! What does that mean for us today? Is it possible that the spiritual quest provides the only true healing for our narcissistic terrors?

Many social scientists have observed and written about the narcissistic phenomena in our Western culture. Ernest Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his book The Denial of Death, tells us that human beings fear death, not so much because we fear extinction per se, but because we are terrified at the thought of “extinction without significance.” Humanity’s age-old dilemma in the face of death is really, at the root, a question of meaning (Becker, 1973). It seems to me, for that reason, that death offers us a perspective on the ultimate issues of narcissistic wounding, the fear of abandonment, and the yearning to matter, to have impact on the world. Becker writes in Escape from Evil about this narcissistic phenomenon as being deeply rooted in the human condition. He describes what anthropologists call “the moiety organization,” which he says is “a stroke of primitive genius” in setting up a society that provides “ready-made props for self-aggrandizement.” Of the dynamics of “status forcing,” Becker writes:

people try to come out of social encounters a little bigger than they went in, by playing intricate games of one-upmanship . . . . There are rules for status . . . for coming out of social groups with increased self-inflation. Society almost everywhere provides codes for such self-aggrandizement, for the ability to boast, to humiliate, or just simply to outshine in quiet ways—like displaying one’s superior achievements (Becker, 1975, p. 13).

The “grandiose conception of self” and the “blind optimism” that Lasch describes are, for Becker, simply an aspect of “the burning desire of the creature to count, to make a difference on the planet because he has lived, has emerged on it, and has worked, suffered and died” (Becker, 1975, p. 3).

So narcissism is endemic to the human condition, says Becker. Humans need a sense of meaning and purpose, but must get that sense of “self” from others. Often, it is at the expense of others:

Man needs to work his magic with the material of the world, and human beings are the primary materials for the image wrought by social life. . . . Man can expand his self-feeling . . . by any kind of triumph or demonstration of his own excellence. He expands his organization in complexity . . . by mental tricks of all types; by boasting about his achievements, taunting and humiliating his adversaries, or torturing and killing them. Anything that reduces the other . . . and adds to one’s own size and importance is a direct way to gain self-feeling; it is a natural development out of the simple incorporation and fighting behavior of lower organisms.