

Narcissism: Fragile Bodies in a Fragile World

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ABSTRACT *In this two-part paper we explore how, in Western society, intensified consumer culture, playing on feelings of shame and inadequacy, can be seen as reactivating the 'narcissistic wound' while the recent growth of information technology increasingly provides access to a global spectacle and a virtual world that offer an escape from reality. This fuels the illusion of immortality and invulnerability to physical/emotional needs. We ask who benefits from this culture of unrelatedness and disembodiment, and what the repercussions are in terms of participation in social life and organized response to global issues.*

Using material from our practices and from social life, we seek to identify the collective cost of maintaining a disassociation that can permeate not only the therapeutic process but also work, personal relationships and events on the political stage. We consider a view of former president Bush as a narcissistic leader in a narcissistic culture with the Iraq war as a narcissistic misadventure and we present vignettes from the consulting room, Dance Movement Therapy work in Holloway Prison and the academic world of prehistoric archaeology to show how narcissistic behaviours are embedded in many diverse situations in Western society. We ask how the concept of narcissism in our media age can help us understand phenomena such as the rise of fundamentalism, celebrity cults, insatiable aspirations to 'self-improvement', obsessions with 'success' and consumer goods, the denial of ageing, the upsurge in cosmetic surgery, body modification and self-harm as well as growing addiction to alcohol and hard drugs. Finally, we ask how the narcissistic fantasy of self-sufficiency, the disavowal of loss and the denial of the ultimate non-discursive reality of death affect our ability to respond appropriately to human injustice and the fragility of our planet. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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In the first part of this article we discussed narcissism as it is writ large on the public stage of our society – as it is reflected in prominent figures, our political leaders and celebrities, as well as in broader movements such as nationalism and religion. We have suggested some ways in which these societal phenomena can impact on the issues that an individual presents in the consulting room.

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Here we will be looking below the tip of the iceberg, at the economic forces that may be fuelling these phenomena in our society. We will also consider some of the manifestations of narcissism that may never present in the consulting room, but which are endemic in our culture. And, finally, we will return to the question of how these issues relate to the future of our society and the urgent problems it faces, especially the crisis of the environment.

One factor that has impacted strongly is consumerism. Many commentators have charted the development of capitalism from exploiting its populace as workers to also exploiting them as consumers. This can be closely linked to the fostering of narcissistic impulses and fantasies in order to persuade people to buy.

In his landmark 1979 book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, Christopher Lasch pointed out the unique role of narcissism in our culture. He described how advertising has developed from praising a product to promoting consumption as a way of life, fuelling dreams and creating an unappeasable appetite not only for goods but for new experiences and personal fulfilment.

The powerful pressure to purchase can be seen as a replay of the narcissistic wound. The message fed to consumers is: 'You are not good enough as you are. To be good enough you need to own this product. You need to behave in this way, i.e. purchase this object.' If we buy we are good, successful children. If we don't buy we are left out, failures. As Johann Hari (2003) said of the fashion industry, it 'is calculated to locate the gap in our self-esteem and crowbar it wide open.'

In a TV interview (*The South Bank Show*, ITV, London, 23 November 1988), David Puttnam said of his work in advertising 'We were trained to create a sense of inadequacy in the consumer...' That inadequacy fuels the impulse to buy. Advertising promises that the act of consumption can expunge the inadequacy that it has itself exacerbated. A recent study in the UK and USA suggested that the average 12-year-old girl will already have been exposed to more than 77,000 advertisements (Shields, 2007). It has been estimated (Lasn, 2007) that 3,000 marketing messages a day flow through the adult North American brain – and we in the UK are probably close behind. Some of us may be more susceptible than others, but something will be getting through. The message is that the product can lift you out of pain and loss. By making the required purchase, you can join an imaginary, idealized world of thin, wrinkle-free people who sit on stylish sofas, cut a dash at the steering wheel, have laddish or glamorous encounters, or smile at their perfect children over cornflakes.

Another book of the 1970s, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, phrases the same process rather differently. Going beyond Marx's account of alienation, he describes contemporary Western society as one where everything that was directly lived has moved away into a realm of spectacle, or representation, where authentic human needs and relationships are abandoned. Instead individuals buy into a world of aspiration for objects, the uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs, the marketing of beauty, the infiltration of human desires by the consumer ethic, and the adulation of celebrity. The spectacle is the pool into which we gaze, like Narcissus, oblivious to the world of the senses inside and around us.

The idea of a 'real' or 'true' self, acceptable in 1985 when Lowen wrote his influential book *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self*, has increasingly been challenged, and the definition of authentic human needs has always been problematic – issues discussed recently by Daniel Burston (2006) and, in the context of narcissism, by Phil Mollon (2007). In a post-

Lacanian world it becomes harder to claim any 'self' or 'needs' as more real, more spontaneous, deeper, or more authentic. However, we are not referring here to a notion of absolute or essentialized human needs but rather to a range of needs, bearing in mind Raymond Williams' sense of 'that extraordinary range of variations, both practised and imagined, of which human beings are and have shown themselves to be capable' (Williams, 1980, 43). This range will include needs that cannot be satisfied by any act of purchase. Williams suggests that modes of domination – states and economic systems – select from the full spectrum of actual and possible human practice only those that suit their purposes. Other human faculties, activities and behaviours are neglected and excluded. Advertising represents an 'organized fantasy' that projects the production decisions of the major corporations as 'your' choice, the consumer's choice. It pretends a linkage between quite mundane products and 'the now generally unattached values of love, respect, significance or fulfilment' (Williams, 1980, 193).

Lasch, Debord and Williams were ahead of their time, capturing a process that has become increasingly powerful and socially defining in the last 25 years. In *Cool Rules*, Dick Pountain and David Robins (2000) give a definition of 'Cool' as composed of a blend of narcissism with ironic detachment and hedonism (Pountain and Robins, 2000, 26). They trace how this attitude or style developed from a rebellious defensive strategy used by the socially powerless into a posture implicated in the marketing of all kinds of businesses, from soft drinks and snacks to clothes, cars and computers. They suggest that 'Cool' has been enlisted as a major driving force in the runaway escalation of competitive consumerism.

It is not only that the act of purchase re-enacts the childhood experience of 'buying in' to a proffered world of approval or success on others' terms; it is also that the images used to sell are often in themselves narcissistic. We see people who display themselves, touch themselves, groom themselves, who are 'cool', people who toss glossy hair, who attract attention by behaving outrageously, who are admired, or adulated.

Particularly relevant today are Lasch's comments on the effect of consumer culture on the young, noting how it glorifies youth so as to elevate young people to the status of fully fledged consumers in their own right. Mass culture invades the family, weakening parental authority over young people and seeming to offer them autonomy – only to subject them to the new paternalism of advertising, the corporations and the state (Lasch, 1991, 74 [1979]). The message is 'Be who you want to be, buy what you like, do what you like, drink as much as you fancy.' The system works through alienation rather than direct control: impulses are not repressed but perverted and redirected. Advertisements restimulate infantile cravings. The impression of freedom and limitless possibility disguises what Henderson (2007) has described as bullying by unstoppable commercial forces to get people to consume indiscriminately. If consumption and narcissistic self-aggrandisement rule, then relationships with others are denigrated, and the quality of felt life is diminished. If nobody else matters, then feelings of compassion, grief and loss can be denied. The effect of this brutalization can perhaps be seen in current levels of violent behaviour among the young.

Into this paradise of narcissistic consumption have come two major new developments, whose impact was perhaps unimaginable 25 years ago: the massive escalation of information technology and of the cult of celebrity. We will explore how these are related to the growth of narcissism and specifically to attitudes towards our bodies.

With the colonization of previously private physical areas as fair game for high-profile marketing (vaginal deodorants, hair colouring, uplift bras, anti-ageing creams), the sense described by David Puttnam of being not good enough has extended from our general being to – specifically – our flesh. People need to be told ‘you’re worth it’ and have to buy the right product to show that they are. Advertisements take away our sense of adequacy and sell it back to us at a price, playing on the vanity and greed popularized through the ‘me generation’.

We have commented on how the intensification of our society’s celebrity-worship provides inescapable and ruthless comparisons with ‘perfect’ physical specimens. And how the promotion of advanced techniques in cosmetic surgery foster the notion that the normal process of ageing is not acceptable. Following the nip-and-tuck route is presented as a choice for freedom and individuality. But women who do so are, as Hari (2003) points out, ‘responding to extremely powerful cultural forces which...bring them into line with a rigidly policed cultural norm. Far from being “empowered” and expressing the self, they are being battered into line.’ This ‘battering’ has gained momentum: there has never been more pressure for us to look into the pool for a more acceptable idealized narcissistic persona.

VIRTUAL WORLDS

This is where it seems that the impact of information technology has played a major role. Almost every home now contains a window into a world where we can leave our tiresome and imperfect flesh behind. Computer users can sit for hours without moving their bodies while they gaze into the screen. They can pursue research, play games, gamble and act out violent conflicts. While casual sex is now paraded as a commonplace of drink culture and youth package holidays, the online world offers the possibility of even further distancing gratification from emotion and from physical intimacy. In chat rooms individuals can flirt with strangers they will never meet in the flesh. Without leaving their home they can watch filmed pornography and masturbate in front of the keyboard instead of making love with a partner. If narcissistic tendencies make us feel out of touch with our bodies and displaced from ourselves, these virtual worlds provide a tailor made avenue for this deportation out of our own lives.

The narcissistic quality of unrelatedness is exacerbated in these worlds. A recent study from Sheffield found that on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, people collect disembodied and barely known ‘friends’ like trophies, action figures or stamps (Derbyshire, 2007).

The determined can even enter entire fabricated virtual worlds, recreating an idealized physical version of themselves with a perfect body shape in the consummate symbolic representation of an unreal narcissistic persona, the ‘avatar’. This animated 3D avatar can explore fantasy worlds, fly, buy virtual cars and houses and make virtual friends.

The avatar can also have virtual sexual encounters with other similar fabrications on screen. Biever (2006) considers the implications of new online games Naughty America and Red Light Center, which are devoted entirely to cybersex.

Tim Guest, in *Second Lives*, describes his journey ‘through the electronic looking glass’: ‘I was on the run from my own body, eager to flee the absences of the past and the sorrows

of now.' His description of entering the virtual world Second Life would also serve as a description of what the narcissist does, as he writes about 'leaving my body and the real world behind, to inhabit an entirely virtual self.' He points out that not only limitation, pain and loss but also death are avoided – you can be reborn with a click of the mouse (Guest, 2007, 9, 82–3, 22–3, 34–5).

We would not deny that the virtual world offers many creative and positive possibilities. We are pointing out that it also offers a seductive avenue for escape, in what can be seen as an epidemic of 'digital narcissism' (Alibhai-Brown, 2007). Guest states that, worldwide, up to 30 million people regularly log on to virtual worlds (Guest, 2007, 22). At a recent count, one of the games, EverQuest, had over 430,000 residents averaging over 20 hours a week in its make-believe landscape. Afficionados dubbed it 'EverCrack' because it was so addictive (Guest, 2007, 65, 11).

There is perhaps little harm in grown-ups playing and showing off in a glorified electronic dolls house. But one man's harmless fun in a fantasy world is another man's financial profit. You can use a 'real world' credit card to buy virtual clothes for your avatar, which are delivered online. No delivery charge. Turnover in purchasing of virtual property, clothes and accessories for use in the games is worth £400 million every year in 'real' money. In 2005, the combined revenue from such virtual worlds was \$3.7 billion. (Guest, 2007, 74, Preface, 24). Again, the word 'freedom' masks a money-making exercise as marketers and media capitalists benefit from what has been described as an 'orgy of self-expression' (Alibhai-Brown, 2007). Debord predicted that in the endless pursuit of attainment 'the real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions' (Debord, 1970, 47). Pountain and Robins (2000, 132) write of a new 'virtualized aristocracy' who own, not the land we live on, but 'the landscape of our imaginations'.

The web also offers new outlets for our culture's obsession with fame. We watch with fascination the dramas of the lives of the stars – for Debord the 'agents of the spectacle' who specialize in the 'seemingly lived' (Debord, 1970, 60). But the Internet can also be used, for example via blogging and web-casting, for anyone to project their life onto a global screen, to make themselves a star. An extension of so-called 'reality' TV, the new technology allows people, as Terence Blacker (2002) has it, to 'present their lives as high drama in which they are the producers, writers, directors and stars... attending to their own internal film director rather than behaving normally' in a context that gives full scope for narcissistic grandiosity.

The exploitation of desires for consumer hardware and its development into the exploitation of leisure has reached its apogee in the current manipulation of human fantasies. And all the while the bodies of the participants sit in isolation.

This withdrawal from the physical world, and indeed from the worlds of community and value, history and action, was noted early on by Peter Marin as a feature of the 'new narcissism' in an article bearing the sub-heading 'So many mystagogues abroad in the land and so many of them proclaiming the joys of self-love' (Marin, 1975). For us his choice of words raises two key points.

Firstly, the association with 'self-love'. Jeremy Holmes regards narcissism as a 'universal psychological phenomenon', which can be healthy or unhealthy. A number of commentators (see De Zengotita, 2003) identify narcissism with some form of self-love. We, however, find it clearer to follow a distinction between narcissism on the one hand, and on the other a

realistic affection for the self, based on self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-respect. Rather than aligning narcissism with self-love, psychoanalytic writings seem to have highlighted how it is quintessentially based on denial of the self, and on 'an addictive devotion to self-enobling, idealizing, or symbiotic fictions' (Mitchell, 1986, 120). Far from self-love, it appears rather to be based on self-hatred and self-rejection in favour of a fantasy.

NEW AND OLD NARCISSISM

The term 'new narcissism' can also be problematized. With many others, we have suggested that there has been a narcissistic explosion over the last few decades. But there are questions about how we write about this in relation to the past. Accounts of the myth of Narcissus date from the Roman period and it has held currency since. A sociological history of narcissism could no doubt be traced parallel to that which Pountain and Robins (2000) trace in their history of 'Cool'. However, if narcissism is now more ubiquitous than ever before, how do we write about the causes of it? Marin (1975) associated it with the rise of psychotherapy and cults. Imogen Tyler (2007) has suggested that in the 1970s Christopher Lasch and Tom Wolfe brought the term into prominence as a derogatory tool to discredit radicals and feminists as infantile and self-indulgent. Space does not allow a full discussion of her arguments but we feel that, leaving aside her undue emphasis on the writings of one right-wing journalist (Wolfe), she makes a very selective reading of Lasch. He describes contemporary trends and resultant narcissistic behaviours not only in radical movements (1991 23–4, 81–3 [1979]) but also in establishment politics (74–81), the world of mainstream work and business (44–7, 52–70), as well as in education (125–53), sport (100–24) and a number of other arenas. Nor would we disclaim the existence of some narcissistic tendencies in the liberation movements of the 1970s both in the USA and in the UK; it could be argued that a narcissistic society will inevitably breed narcissistic rebels.

Narcissism is not exclusive to our culture and it is not new: *pace* Lasch, it will have existed in different forms in the old paternalistic US society to which he somewhat nostalgically alludes. However, we have argued that never before have an economic system and its related infrastructure operated so powerfully together to promote narcissistic feelings and behaviour. We are suggesting that what is new is the *level* of addiction to compensatory behaviours stimulated by pressures in our culture which reactivate the narcissistic wound. Thus it may be on a new scale that we find individuals propelled into a narcissistic identity with its characteristics of low self-esteem, unrealistic aspiration, inability to listen to others, and objectification of the body. But, we would not reduce narcissism to the circumstances that have prompted this particular epidemic. Nor would we limit the impact of this phenomenon to the pathology witnessed in the consulting room.

So we will close with two examples of how we see this issue manifesting in society at large. The first example is from an area where there is a current and growing problem of major proportions: addiction to heavy drugs. The second is from a sphere of life where time moves slowly, where consumerism has not made great inroads, and patterns of behaviour established over a hundred years ago may not have changed very much: the world of academia. Lucy Goodison is recalling a day when she spent the morning working in Holloway Prison, and the afternoon attending an archaeological seminar:

In the Detox Unit at Holloway Prison, my colleague Helen Schafer-Cohen and I were running hour-long Dance Movement Therapy sessions with groups of up to twelve women, who changed from week to week. We worked there for four years, in my case, and seven years in her case. In this hospital unit, the women were experiencing withdrawal from heavy drug use before moving to the main body of the prison to complete their remand or sentence. They had just arrived, were often in shock, and sometimes still wearing the clothes they were arrested in. They were mainly young, mainly white and mainly heroin users although there were a number of exceptions.

In our session that day, our interaction with the women took place within the framework of an established pattern: a gentle physical warm-up and some therapeutic movement sequences followed by the learning of a simple dance routine, then a period of relaxation and meditation, followed by a space which might be filled – variously – with massage, group discussion, singing or free movement.

For these women, self-esteem was often at rock bottom. One young woman who was dying of liver cancer told us that she had refused the transplant of a healthy liver because she had been a bad girl and it should go to someone who deserved it. The women felt keenly our culture's demonization of the drug addict or 'junkie', banished to the category of outcast from civilized society.

It has occurred to me that the heavy drug user could be seen as the ultimate model of a person who has bought (literally) into an illusory and idealized world, in this case created by substance abuse. The user's 'fix' is like the template of all narcissistic purchases. Most people buy the product, lured by the promise of happiness associated with the object. The heavy drug user is buying the promise of happiness, or rather of the eradication of pain, direct and undisguised without any intervening transitional object. Forget the new sofa – you can inject the sensation direct into your veins. Junk could be seen as the ultimate commodity.

The profits go to peasant farmers far away, to their local middlemen who may use the funds for wars the West disapproves of, to international gangsters and to small time offenders who sell on our streets. The drug deal is a shadow image of the purchases we make in bright malls and chain stores – the black sheep of consumer transactions, cast into the netherworld of criminality.

It is perhaps onto the 'junkie' then that we project all the shame about the compulsive behaviours endemic in our culture and about our own more or less legal addictions: not only alcohol, caffeine and nicotine but the so-called 'process' or 'behavioural' addictions such as compulsive shopping, gambling, workaholism, compulsive eating/anorexia/bulimia, as well as addictive behaviours around money-making and success, celebrity and promiscuous sex. It is perhaps because these process addictions do not fit the consensual medical model of addiction that it has been fashionable to express scepticism about them, to deny that they are 'real' addictions. But they too can ruin lives and take lives. They can be as out of control as substance addictions, and all of them serve to muffle the cries of grief and rage inside.

In sessions the women in Detox generally presented as sassy, devil-may-care, sometimes aggressive, experienced transgressors. But because of their extreme situation, there were chinks in the image they projected. They were aware that through drugs they were buying into a make believe world where pain, anger and loss could be denied. One young woman said of the withdrawal she was going through: 'It gets worse. Your feelings come back.'

For many of those we saw, the narcissistic wound was not just about rejection of who they were as children in favour of a different identity. It was also about dissociating from shame relating to early experiences of abuse compounded by later experiences of domestic violence, prostitution, sometimes rape, and the loss of their children. One woman said to us, 'They never ask you why they take the stuff.' At Brockhill Prison in Worcester, a study suggested that 95% of the women had suffered some form of abuse, from domestic violence to child abuse (Bright, 2004). Often a lifetime of extreme pain was masked by the image of 'cool' that the women in Detox projected. What started early in life as a working defence against 'an intolerable reality' (Kernberg, 1975, 231) ended up with heroin. And in the intolerable reality of prison they continued to protect that image keenly. As one woman said to the others as she joined in the dance: 'If our dealers could see us now...'

Drastic experiences call for drastic remedies. For the heavy drug user, the stakes are high. We can see the self-absorption of the consumer ratcheted up to the nth degree. The obsession with obtaining the next fix subsumes all other physical needs or the needs of other people. The habit recreates a

self-preoccupied primal world of symbiosis: me and my next fix; me and my habit. Like the infant with the breast, there is a monofocus: the relationship is with the drug, and beyond a certain point there is no other.

The rejection and denial of the body characteristic of our culture is again, in the heavy drug user, expressed in a more extreme form. The habit itself constitutes an assault on the body through taking in substances which harm it both in terms of general health and in local ways, such as the damage to arms and legs – which can lead to amputation.

But there can be more explicit attacks. Jeremy Holmes (2001, 51) describes how in narcissistic splitting a person's body can become the hated 'Other'. Drug use may be compounded by self-harming, often – in Holloway as elsewhere – by women cutting their arms with sharp instruments. In New Hall, a 400-bed prison near Wakefield, in 2003 there were more than 1,500 self-harm incidents, a 200% rise on the year before (Bright, 2004).

Holmes (2001, 36) includes such attacks on the body as a 'self-soothing' narcissistic behaviour. It could be seen on a continuum with operations where a sterilized knife nips and tucks the body because it is not right. We could see the prison inmates' overt cuts to the body as a kind of poor woman's cosmetic surgery. And of course self-harm is not confined to prison. A recent report published by the Mental Health Foundation showed that 1 in 10 teenagers self-injures, taking things out on themselves and gaining temporary relief from emotional pain, self-hatred and anger (Goodchild, 2004).

Such self-harming is also on a continuum with trends towards body modification and self mutilation in fashion and in avant-garde art in our culture. Alexander Lowen has described the narcissist as being dead. Dead of feelings. There is a part that is killed, silenced and denied (Lowen, 1997, 3, 47 [1985]). What we seem to see now in our culture is an overt narcissistic investment – an exhibitionism – about this killing of the self, through acts of self-harm and self-destruction. The binge drinker boasts about how many pints have been downed. A 1988 British Health Council educational poster graphically warning about the devastating effects of heroin – so far from being a deterrent – became a pin-up within drug culture. Again the heavy drug user's voice is speaking for us all, but louder and clearer: 'Look how I suffer. Look at me, I'm hurting my body. Look at me, I'm destroying myself.' We seem to find a glamour or martyrdom in the self-destruction of the stars in the glare of publicity. There is even a web site where teenagers show and compare their self injuries in a competitive way. As long as there is a narcissistic investment in presenting the salacious spectacle of self-destruction, it remains difficult to reach feelings of vulnerability, anger and grief; and it remains difficult to see any prospect of healing.

The cost of heavy drug use and self-harm in terms of the suffering of women like those in the prison will be obvious. And when we consider Home Office research showing that 38% of arrestees in England and Wales have taken heroin, crack or cocaine, we can appreciate the extent of the cost of these behaviours to society at large.

It is precisely because heavy drug use constitutes an assault on the body that in Holloway dance and movement seemed to be particularly relevant, offering as they do the opportunity to work directly with the part of these women's beings that was most directly damaged. For many of the women whom we saw, their body, a site of multiple abuse, had also become an instrument to get money. Often we noticed that their bodies were sexualized but disassociated, for example in sharp, seductive hip movements isolated from the top half of the body.

The movements we taught and the structure of the session aimed to help the women find awareness instead of deadness, and to encourage fluidity and integrated movement instead of disjointedness. Movement worked because many of them liked dancing, some even wearing the clubbing clothes they were arrested in. Despite being in extreme physical and emotional pain, they were game and gave it a try.

In an area of much debate, Stephen Johnson (1994, 184) found that a good starting point for therapy with narcissistic clients is empathetic regard for their pain, providing a model and beginning the creation of a safe place from which painful experiences could be confronted. Despite the short-term nature of our work, and the total lack of safety of the women's situation, we were able to do this to a limited degree, offering a model of empathy and respect in a place where both were lacking, and trying to help them locate resources inside and outside themselves to make their time in Holloway a safer experience

than it would otherwise be. Our collaboration as co-leaders of the sessions combined with collaboration in movement and voice work to offer a model of mutual support.

I could perhaps summarize the work we did with the body as aiming to help the women have a physical experience that was pleasurable, even self-expressive, that was not drug induced, not image-focused, and not geared towards the response of others. In other words, an experience of the body that was as far as possible non-narcissistic.

The same day in the afternoon I went from Holloway prison to a meeting of the Mycenaean Seminar, an academic gathering of Aegean Bronze Age archaeologists held at London University. The Seminar was started in the 1950s after the decipherment of the Bronze Age script Linear B by Michael Ventris in collaboration with other scholars. It continues to meet several times a term, with speakers offering papers on religion, technology, recent field work and so on, followed by discussion. It is attended by mostly graduate and post-graduate researchers, lecturers and professors. The topic that day concerned examples of the as yet undeciphered Minoan script, Linear A.

I have attended the Seminar intermittently over thirty years. I must stress that there was nothing particular about the speaker on that day to prompt the remarks I am going to make. Rather, certain general characteristics of this academic world were thrown into sharp relief because I had come straight from the prison.

The world of the narcissist has been characterized as a world without feeling, where other people are objects who can be hurt without remorse. The women in Detox presented as hard and tough, and we were alerted to the danger of physical attack. In fact, we got some lip there, but were never physically attacked. I noticed that the Mycenaean Seminar was also a world without feeling. The cut and thrust of its academic discourse features mockery of vulnerable or unconvincing participants, and can include verbal cruelty and humiliation worse than anything I witnessed in our sessions in the prison. I asked myself why that should be, in a group of largely middle-class people, not in the grip of substance addiction, well educated and well fed? I concluded that perhaps the individuals present had bought into a world featuring as much denial as the drug-induced worlds of the women in Detox: a narcissistic world of the intellect.

Here I do not want to over-generalize. I certainly cannot speak about academics in other fields; I can comment only on certain behaviours I have witnessed within the arena familiar to me. Moreover, I do know Aegean archaeologists who are generous, supportive to others and open-minded. All I can do is describe the culture which dominates that field of study – which affects everyone within it to a greater or lesser degree – and try to understand its aetiology.

When a child has promise, parental pride becomes invested in that promise. Johnson (1994, 160) has described the narcissistically injured classic ‘stage mothers’ – there are fathers, too – who use a child to fill their own disappointed artistic aspirations. The combination of childhood promise with exaggerated parental expectation is a lethal cocktail. The child feels truly ‘special’, but at a price. Is this so very different from what happens with very intelligent children? Most academics were picked out early because they came top of the class. They are trained to perform on a different stage. And again there is a price. What becomes unacceptable in that child is their imperfections, conflicts and vulnerabilities: the self that makes mistakes, that suffers under the pressure, that is angry about jumping through hoops. These feelings that don’t fit have to be denied.

What is also denied is the body. Banished to sites of intellectual stimulation but sensory deprivation, the poor body has to sit in classrooms and libraries, immobile at the desk studying while the sun is shining outside. It gets towed into examination halls. On a personal note, I still remember with grief Thursday evenings when I stayed in doing homework when I wanted to be dancing at the Jazz Club.

This whole dynamic has been well described by Alice Miller (1987). When the child abandons other needs to achieve academically, we see a precocious pupil whose emotional development lags far behind. Frozen in the role of the bright child hooked on knowing best and permanently looking for approval. Johnson (1994, 184, 191) describes the cure of the narcissist as involving the beginnings of ‘growing up’ from a quite immature little boy or girl, and this can apply no less to narcissistic professors. Reviewing the biography of the scholar C. S. Lewis, Jonathan Sale (2006) commented that it showed that he was ‘no more emotionally developed than the kids in his yarns’.

We have then an explanation for the cruel mocking of vulnerable or misguided questioners in the archaeological seminar. Where there has been intellectual but not emotional maturation, specialists can be as spiteful as children. Fickleness, point-scoring, ganging up and lack of compassion reflect childlike insecurities about place in the world and what is experienced as a crucial need to protect the fragile status of their 'perfect' academic self-image. Many academics show a typical self-absorption in their immersion in their world of expertise. We noted in Part 1 that this can also happen in the field of psychotherapy. With Aegean Bronze Age archaeologists, issues relating to the second millennium BC may seem as real and pressing as anything happening in the contemporary world. They have entered a virtual world of the intellect; entrance is not through drugs but through hours of obsessive and competitive study. Not illegal, but arguably also addictive. The narcissistic wound has been inflicted differently but can be very insidious.

Objects and technology are often preferred areas of study in Aegean archaeology. They are of course much of what is available for study, and pottery plays a crucial role in determining dating frameworks; however, it could also be pointed out that such material is controllable and 'knowable.' Much has been written about the narcissist's need to maintain a sense of perfection in their chosen persona. For an academic this can seem to involve knowing everything and always being right. Holmes (2001, 44) has written about 'epistemic narcissism' – an unshakeable belief in the rightness of one's own ideas. In the narcissist's world, other people can be reduced to objects and this can apply to other academics with conflicting or new theories. Cutting these down these perceived threats can feel like a matter of survival for the narcissistic scholar.

The priority becomes: 'me being right', 'my career', 'my success', rather than the search for understanding of a prehistoric culture. Procedures in Aegean archaeology are in general careful, and conclusions tentative, but once a theoretical position is adopted it is often defended aggressively against all comers. Studying a prehistoric culture effectively would seem to call for an attitude of humility, flexibility, and a willingness to reassess theories in the light of new finds. Doubt should perhaps be a constant companion; but doubt, as we have seen, is not welcomed by the narcissist.

Appearance becomes all and – as on the world stage of international politics discussed in Part 1 – what cannot be allowed is visible failure. The criterion of visible success is individual brilliance performing triumphantly at the expense of competing scholars and theories. This appearance is of course a cultural construct. It is a representation, and a partial one, just as the projected self-image of the narcissistic hides so much more of the person that lies unacknowledged behind. The academic process could, equally, be seen as a deeply co-operative and mutually dependent process, where any writing starts from a litany of what has been written before, each scholar adding a brick to build up a structure of knowledge. The collaborative development of ideas has often proved very productive – famously in the decipherment of Linear B, which was the starting point of the Mycenaean Seminars. However, these aspects of the work often become invisible, masked by the narcissistic acting out that can dominate academic discourse.

The aspects of prehistoric Aegean culture that cannot be so easily 'known', such as those concerned with experience and the body, are also often invisible. I have already raised the issue of the body in academe. In the prison the women's objectification of their bodies was dramatic and obviously painful. In the world of Aegean archaeologists I noticed that the rejection was more subtle but also often noticeable. Since Descartes we picture the body as divorced from, even antithetical to, reason. For an academic child, the denial of physicality starts early, and I would argue that the body can take the role of signifying everything that has to be eliminated from 'good' academic practice. A young postgraduate commented to me that when she said something 'incorrect' in a seminar, it was as if she had farted. As opposed to the 'right' path of clean, straight, well-organized cerebral activity, the body can seem to symbolize everything that is messy, chaotic and uncontrollable. After giving an unsuccessful or unorthodox paper, a speaker may find a gap of several feet left around their physical body, which other archaeologists will not enter. It is almost as if that speaker's ideas could infect others with the magical contagion of failure.

This narcissistic investment in a world of perfection that excludes the body is dysfunctional. I would not necessarily challenge Ernest Becker's position (1973) that there is a working level of denial that protects us from our mortality. However, the average level of narcissistic denial in our society is

perhaps not 'working'. Perhaps not in the Detox unit. Perhaps not in the Aegean archaeological world.

The adversarial model – one thinks also of the House of Commons – and the need to have a 'correct' and defensible position before uttering a word can stifle healthy debate and inhibit the collective development of useful ideas. But there is an additional problem: the denial of the body in the archaeologist leads to the denial of the body in archaeological work. If you are not in touch with your own body, you cannot respond appropriately to the body of another whether it is lying next to you in bed or dancing on an engraved gold ring of the second millennium BC. And dance they do: representations of human bodies feature prominently in the Aegean archaeological record. They are frequently shown in religious scenes, gesturing, bending, touching trees, kicking, reaching and leaping, sometimes semi-naked and sometimes apparently in extreme states of experience. But these bodies have never received full consideration. As the archaeologist Christine Morris (2004, 31) has observed: 'If we... have tended to relegate the information gathered by our senses to a dark corner of the interpretative process, then it is unsurprising that scholarship has been equally slow to attribute importance to the physical sensations of being-in-the-world as experienced by past peoples.'

Prehistoric Aegean archaeology may be expert at sorting, listing and labelling finds, debating dates and analysing techniques of pottery manufacture. But it has been less effective about understanding whole lives as lived. Less effective about grappling – for example – with the meaning of the curious recurring scenes of ritual I have described. These have been set aside, lumped together under the catch-all phrase 'ecstatic religion', and there has been little attempt to grapple with the meaning, symbolism and experience underlying them. There has been no generation of theories attempting to understand the evident importance of the body in ritual and its very different cultural construction from ours.

Such points may not seem to matter. But even within this archaeological backwater, with narcissistic brains at work there is a cost to society at large. The investment in certainty has particular ramifications in studies of ancient Greece since it is seen as a template for Western civilization. Freud used classical myths – Oedipus, Narcissus – to suggest timeless, universal human patterns. In fact, those myths originated at a specific time and need to be historicized; they offer no proof of anything universal.

Similarly in relation to the Bronze Age, particularly the cultures centred on Knossos and Mycenae, there have been investments in certain myths made within the last 100 years. Scholars of the Bronze Age have needed to recreate a past that serves them in the present – what Yannis Hamilakis and others have termed a 'useable past' (Brown and Hamilakis, 2003). But academic work should strive to be about rigorous study without a personal agenda. If we look into the past only to see our own reflections, we will not learn anything new.

Apart from what society at large loses through such narcissistic history writing, there is also a cost to the academic individuals involved, less obvious because often theirs is a superficially moderate narcissism – Johnson's 'narcissism without grandiosity', which uses accomplishment to earn worth. He comments: 'That that worth is a substitute for the love that is really wanted, that he has sacrificed himself for the booby prize, and that he is missing life in his struggle are too painful to realize' (Johnson, 1994, 165).

Both the different worlds I visited that day – the world of drug use and of academia – show how a culture of narcissism in society at large prevents engagement with the feelings that are needed for our individual and collective health.

To sum up, our discussion and vignettes may seem to paint a gloomy picture in terms of the possibility of our society dealing effectively with its many challenges, including the current environmental crisis. Fortunately narcissism does not wholly encompass our lives and it is often deeply impressive to see the extent to which people manage to hold on to their humanity despite the pressures under which we live; but here we are considering narcissistic tendencies, and these lend a gloomy prognosis.

With the denial of vulnerability, how can it be possible to see the fragility of our bodies and the crucial fragility of our planet?

With the displacement out of our own bodies and lives, where is the motivation to act on their behalf? Lasch wrote about narcissism creating an 'ironic detachment' which dulls pain but also cripples the will to change social conditions, make modest improvements or attempt to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life (Lasch, 1991, 96 [1979]).

With the sense of unrelatedness, how can it be possible to find enough concern and caring about the fate of other people and humanity as a whole? To face problems that have to be tackled collectively? A narcissist cannot make sacrifices for a future in which s/he will not be a part. The lack of connection to others has political implications: a people divided is politically passive.

The spectacle emphasizes our apparently limitless possibilities for personal 'choice'. But the choice is between washing machines, not whether or not to participate in this culture. Despite the spin, our society has the inflexibility of the narcissistic personality; so how can it and we find the flexibility needed to adapt to the implications of climate change?

The narcissist looks up, seeking a parental figure to seduce or be seduced by, for approval, to make things all right. But the ecological problems of our planet are not going to be solved by God or by any more immediate authority figure, whether president or prime minister. And we cannot be children waiting for someone to take charge and deal with it.

Moreover, in a culture mesmerized with the world of the spectacle, it can be hard to address work that needs to be done in the physical world. Twenty years ago the Internet was hailed as a potential revolution in political organizing. The press of a key, and hundreds or thousands of activists could be mobilized. True, but there have to be activists and they have to be ready to move: without human bodies the computer is impotent. The web, as well as offering outlets for escape and creativity, is a dazzling new tool for communicating and spreading information, but the world was never changed by information alone. What makes political change is action in the physical world.

Then there is addiction, in its broadest sense. Johnson has written about the 'hollow joys' of success and of manipulating or impressing others: 'One is always craving more of what may taste good but is never filling or lasting' (Johnson, 1994, 170). We always need more goodies, more of the fix to numb the pain of the loss of self. As Victor Seidler (1987, 101) has put it, 'The delusionary need to deny the existence of a part of ourselves has a reality which is in principle insatiable.' How can we stem this insatiability, using less? How can we stop multiplying our wants and find greater pleasure in what we already have'?

Such changes are not easy to make on a voluntaristic basis, or in the consulting room. Our lifestyle and its co-dependent neuroses support corporate capitalism whose interests target the quick buck not the protection of future life on earth. Capitalism itself is built on that insatiability, predicated on the notion of limitless growth. Overwhelming economic forces have been set in motion and nobody knows where the brakes are.

This may sound more pessimistic than we feel. However seductive or impressive the narcissist's 'false self' may be, it hides a lot more than it shows. Behind the mask the fullness of a whole human being is there to be found. Similarly in our society, outside the glare of the spectacle, beyond the bonanza of manipulation, display and organized fantasy, there is the richness of felt, lived and embodied lives: myriad activities, relationships and possibilities that are largely invisible to the public eye.

We feel that any solution to the problem of our fragile world will come – if it comes – from that fabric of lived lives and from the mindfulness that can experience and appreciate them. Alain de Botton has written of Dutch interiors as celebrating the pleasure that lies in neglected aspects of our everyday world – the beauty of brickwork, of light reflecting off a polished door, of the folds of a dress – and the worth of ordinary routines – the evening meal, the housework, a drink with friends. He writes of ‘the adequacy of ordinary lives’ (de Botton, 2005, 46). The tackling of current global problems needs collaboration between ordinary people. For ‘clever’ people who write and read articles in journals, it can be a challenge to realize that our greatest strength in this context is to be ordinary. Not ‘special’, successful, perfect people who think only they matter, not ‘special’ people who feel they have a unique passport to immortality, but ordinary people who recognize the fragility of everything we value and who care about other ordinary people, their children and their grandchildren. It is a profound challenge to us all.

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