

The Narcissistic Personality of Our Time

Narcissism as a Metaphor of the Human Condition

Recent

critics of the new narcissism not only confuse cause and effect, attributing to a cult of privatism developments that derive from the disintegration of public life; they use the term narcissism so loosely that it retains little of its psychological content. Erich Fromm, in *The Heart of Man*, drains the idea of its clinical meaning and expands it to cover all forms of "vanity," "self-admiration," "self-satisfaction," and "self-glorification" in individuals and all forms of parochialism, ethnic or racial prejudice, and "fanaticism" in groups. In other words, Fromm uses the term as a synonym for the "asocial" individualism which, in his version of progressive and "humanistic" dogma, undermines cooperation, brotherly love, and the search for wider loyalties. Narcissism thus appears simply as the antithesis of that watery love for humanity (disinterested "love for the stranger") advocated by Fromm under the name of socialism.

Fromm's discussion of "individual and social narcissism," appropriately published in a series of books devoted to "Religious Perspectives," provides an excellent example of the inclination, in our therapeutic age, to dress up moralistic platitudes in psychiatric garb. ("We live in a historical period characterized by a sharp discrepancy between the intellectual development of man . . . and his mental-emotional development, which has left him still in a state of marked narcissism with all its pathological symptoms.") Whereas Sennett reminds us that narcissism has more in common with self-hatred than with-self-admiration, Fromm loses sight even of this well-known clinical fact in his eagerness to sermonize about-the blessings of brotherly love.

As always in Fromm's work, the trouble originates in his

misguided and unnecessary attempt to rescue Freud's thought from its "mechanistic" nineteenth-century basis and to press it into the service of "humanistic realism." In practice, this means that theoretical rigor gives way to ethically uplifting slogans and sentiments. Fromm notes in passing that Freud's original concept of narcissism assumed that libido begins in the ego, as a "great reservoir" of undifferentiated self-love, whereas in 1922 he decided, on the contrary, that "we must recognize the id as the great reservoir of the libido." Fromm slides over this issue, however, by remarking, "The theoretical question whether the libido starts originally in the ego or in the id is of no substantial importance for the meaning of the concept [of narcissism] itself." In fact, the structural theory of the mind, set forth by Freud in *Group Psychology* and in *The Ego and the Id*, required modifications of his earlier ideas that have a great deal of bearing on the theory of narcissism. Structural theory made Freud abandon the simple dichotomy between instinct and consciousness and recognize the unconscious elements of the ego and superego, the importance of nonsexual impulses (aggression or the "death instinct"), and the alliance between superego and id, superego and aggression. These discoveries in turn made possible an understanding of the role of object relations in the development of narcissism, thereby revealing narcissism as essentially a defense against aggressive impulses rather than self-love.

Theoretical precision about narcissism is important not only because the idea is so readily susceptible to moralistic inflation but because the practice of equating narcissism with everything selfish and disagreeable militates against historical specificity. Men have always been selfish, groups have always been ethnocentric; nothing is gained by giving these qualities a psychiatric label. The emergence of character disorders as the most prominent form of psychiatric pathology, however, together with the change in personality structure this development reflects, derives from quite specific changes in our society and culture – from bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis from changes in family life and from changing patterns of socialization. All this disappears from sight if narcis-

sism becomes simply "the metaphor of the human condition," as in another existential, humanistic interpretation, Shirley Sugerma's *Sin and Madness: Studies in Narcissism*.

The refusal of recent critics of narcissism to discuss the etiology of narcissism or to pay much attention to the growing body of clinical writing on the subject probably represents a deliberate decision, stemming from the fear that emphasis on the clinical aspects of the narcissistic syndrome would detract from the concept's usefulness in social analysis. This decision, however, has proved to be a mistake. In ignoring the psychological dimension, these authors also miss the social. They fail to explore any of the character traits associated with pathological narcissism, which in less extreme form appear in such profusion in the everyday life of our age: dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings. Nor do they discuss what might be called the secondary characteristics of narcissism: pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor. Thus they deprive themselves of any basis on which to make connections between the narcissistic personality type and certain characteristic patterns of contemporary culture, such as the intense fear of old age and death, altered sense of time, fascination with celebrity, fear of competition, decline of the play spirit, deteriorating relations between men and women. For these critics, narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym for selfishness and at its most precise a metaphor, and nothing more, that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self.

Psychology and Sociology Psychoanalysis deals with individuals, not with groups. Efforts to generalize clinical findings to collective behavior always encounter the difficulty that groups have a life of their own. The collective mind, if there is such a thing, reflects the needs of the group as a whole, not the psychic needs of the individual, which in fact have to be subordinated to the demands of collective living. Indeed it is precisely the subjection

of individuals to the group that psychoanalytic theory, through a study of its psychic repercussions, promises to clarify. By conducting an intensive analysis of individual cases that rests on clinical evidence rather than common-sense impressions, psycho-analysis tells us something about the inner workings of society itself, in the very act of turning its back on society and immersing itself in the individual unconscious.

Every society reproduces its culture—its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience—in the individual, in the form of personality. As Durkheim said, personality is the individual socialized. The process of socialization, carried out by the family and secondarily by the school and other agencies of character formation, modifies human nature to conform to the prevailing social norms. Each society tries to solve the universal crises of childhood—the trauma of separation from the mother, the fear of abandonment, the pain of competing with others for the mother's love—in its own way, and the manner in which it deals with these psychic events produces a characteristic form of personality, a characteristic form of psychological deformation, by means of which the individual reconciles himself to instinctual deprivation and submits to the requirements of social existence. Freud's insistence on the continuity between psychic health and psychic sickness makes it possible to see neuroses and psychoses as in some sense the characteristic expression of a given culture. "Psychosis," Jules Henry has written, "is the final outcome of all that is wrong with a culture."

Psychoanalysis best clarifies the connection between society and the individual, culture and personality, precisely when it confines itself to careful examination of individuals. It tells us most about society when it is least determined to do so. Freud's extrapolation of psychoanalytic principles into anthropology, history, and biography can be safely ignored by the student of society, but his clinical investigations constitute a storehouse of indispensable ideas, once it is understood that the unconscious mind represents the modification of nature by culture, the imposition of civilization on instinct.

Freud should not be reproached [wrote T. W. Adorno] for having neglected the concrete social dimension, but for being all too untroubled by

the social origin of ... the rigidity of the unconscious, which he registers with the undeviating objectivity of the natural scientist. ... In making the leap from psychological images to historical reality, he forgets what he himself discovered—that all reality undergoes modification upon entering the unconscious—and is thus misled into positing such factual events as the murder of the father by the primal horde.*

Those who wish to understand contemporary narcissism as a social and cultural phenomenon must turn first to the growing body of clinical writing on the subject, which makes no claim to social or cultural significance and deliberately repudiates the proposition that "changes in contemporary culture," as Otto Kernberg writes, "have effects on patterns of object relations."+ In the clinical literature, narcissism serves as more than a metaphoric term for self-absorption. As a psychic formation in which "love rejected turns back to the self as hatred," narcissism has come to be recognized as an important element in the so-called character disorders that have absorbed much of the clinical attention once given to hysteria and obsessional neuroses. A new

*"On ... its home ground," Adorno added, "psychoanalysis carries specific conviction; the further it removes itself from that sphere, the more its theses are threatened alternately with shallowness or wild over-systematization. If someone makes a slip of the tongue and a sexually loaded word comes out, if someone suffers from agoraphobia or if a girl walks in her sleep, psychoanalysis not merely has its best chances of therapeutic success but also its proper province, the relatively autonomous, monadological individual as arena of the unconscious conflict between instinctual drive and prohibition. The further it departs from this area, the more tyrannically it has to proceed and the more it has to drag what belongs to the dimension of outer reality into the shades of psychic immanence. Its delusion in so doing is not dissimilar from that 'omnipotence of thought' which it itself criticized as infantile."

+ Those who argue, in opposition to the thesis of the present study, that there has been no underlying change in the structure of personality, cite this passage to support the contention that although "we do see certain symptom constellations and personality disorders more or less frequently than in Freud's day, . . . this shift in attention has occurred primarily because of a shift in our clinical emphasis due to tremendous advances in our understanding of personality structure."

In light of this controversy, it is important to note that Kernberg adds to his observation a qualification: "This is not to say that such changes in the patterns of intimacy [and of object relations in general] could not occur over a period of several generations, if and when changes in cultural patterns affect family structure to such an extent that the earliest development in childhood would be influenced." This is exactly what I will argue in chapter VII.

theory of narcissism has developed, grounded in Freud's well-known essay on the subject (which treats narcissism—libidinal investment of the self—as a necessary precondition of object love) but devoted not to primary narcissism but to secondary or pathological narcissism: the incorporation of grandiose object images as a defense against anxiety and guilt. Both types of narcissism blur the boundaries between the self and the world of objects, but there is an important difference between them. The newborn infant—the primary narcissist—does not yet perceive his mother as having an existence separate from his own, and he therefore mistakes dependence on the mother, who satisfies his needs as soon as they arise, with his own omnipotence. "It takes several weeks of postnatal development . . . before the infant perceives that the source of his need . . . is within and the source of gratification is outside the self."

Secondary narcissism, on the other hand, "attempts to annul the pain of disappointed [object] love" and to nullify the child's rage against those who do not respond immediately to his needs; against those who are now seen to respond to others beside the child and who therefore appear to have abandoned him. Pathological narcissism, "which cannot be considered simply a fixation at the level of normal primitive narcissism," arises only when the ego has developed to the point of distinguishing itself from surrounding objects. If the child for some reason experiences this separation trauma with special intensity, he may attempt to reestablish earlier relationships by creating in his fantasies an omnipotent mother or father who merges with images of his own self. "Through internalization the patient seeks to recreate a wished-for love relationship which may once have existed and simultaneously to annul the anxiety and guilt aroused by aggressive drives directed against the frustrating and disappointing object."

Narcissism in Recent Clinical Literature The shifting emphasis in clinical studies from primary to secondary narcissism reflects both the shift in psychoanalytic theory from study of the id to study of the ego and a change in the type of patients seeking

psychiatric treatment. Indeed the shift from a psychology of instincts to ego psychology itself grew partly out of a recognition that the patients who began to present themselves for treatment in the 1940s and 1950s "very seldom resembled the classical neuroses Freud described so thoroughly." In the last twenty-five years, the borderline patient, who confronts the psychiatrist not with well-defined symptoms but with diffuse dissatisfactions, has become increasingly common. He does not suffer from debilitating fixations or phobias or from the conversion of repressed sexual energy into nervous ailments; instead he complains "of vague, diffuse dissatisfactions with life" and feels his "amorphous existence to be futile and purposeless." He describes "subtly experienced yet pervasive feelings of emptiness and depression," "violent oscillations of self-esteem," and "a general inability to get along." He gains "a sense of heightened self-esteem only by attaching himself to strong, admired figures whose acceptance he craves and by whom he needs to feel supported." Although he carries out his daily responsibilities and even achieves distinction, happiness eludes him, and life frequently strikes him as not worth living.

Psychoanalysis, a therapy that grew out of experience with severely repressed and morally rigid individuals who needed to come to terms with a rigorous inner "censor," today finds itself confronted more and more often with a "chaotic and impulse-ridden character." It must deal with patients who "act out" their conflicts instead of repressing or sublimating them. These patients, though often ingratiating, tend to cultivate a protective shallowness in emotional relations. They lack the capacity to mourn, because the intensity of their rage against lost love objects, in particular against their parents, prevents their reliving happy experiences or treasuring them in memory. Sexually promiscuous rather than repressed, they nevertheless find it difficult to "elaborate the sexual impulse" or to approach sex in the spirit of play. They avoid close involvements, which might release intense feelings of rage. Their personalities consist largely of defenses against this rage and against feelings of oral deprivation that originate in the pre-Oedipal stage of psychic development.

Often these patients suffer from hypochondria and complain

of a sense of inner emptiness. At the same time they entertain fantasies of omnipotence and a strong belief in their right to exploit others and be gratified. Archaic, punitive, and sadistic elements predominate in the superegos of these patients, and they conform to social rules more out of fear of punishment than from a sense of guilt. They experience their own needs and appetites, suffused with rage, as deeply dangerous, and they throw up defenses that are as primitive as the desires they seek to stifle.

On the principle that pathology represents a heightened version of normality, the "pathological narcissism" found in character disorders of this type should tell us something about narcissism as a social phenomenon. Studies of personality disorders that occupy the border line between neurosis and psychosis, though written for clinicians and making no claims to shed light on social or cultural issues, depict a type of personality that ought to be immediately recognizable, in a more subdued form, to observers of the contemporary cultural scene: facile at managing the impressions he gives to others, ravenous for admiration but contemptuous of those he manipulates into providing it; unappeasably hungry for emotional experiences with which to fill an inner void; terrified of aging and death.

The most convincing explanations of the psychic origins of this borderline syndrome draw on the theoretical tradition established by Melanie Klein. In her psychoanalytic investigations of children, Klein discovered that early feelings of overpowering rage, directed especially against the mother and secondarily against the internalized image of the mother as a ravenous monster, make it impossible for the child to synthesize "good" and "bad" parental images. In his fear of aggression from the bad parents—projections of his own rage—he idealizes the good parents who will come to the rescue.

Internalized images of others, buried in the unconscious mind at an early age, become self-images as well. If later experience fails to qualify or to introduce elements of reality into the child's archaic fantasies about his parents, he finds it difficult to distinguish between images of the self and of the objects outside the self. These images fuse to form a defense against the bad representations of the self and of objects, similarly fused in the form of

a harsh, punishing superego. Melanie Klein analyzed a ten-year-old boy who unconsciously thought of his mother as a "vampire" or "horrid bird" and internalized this fear as hypochondria. He was afraid that the bad presences inside him would devour the good ones. The rigid separation of good and bad images of the self and of objects, on the one hand, and the fusion of self- and object images on the other, arose from the boy's inability to tolerate ambivalence or anxiety. Because his anger was so intense, he could not admit that he harbored aggressive feelings toward those he loved. "Fear and guilt relating to his destructive phantasies moulded his whole emotional life."

A child who feels so gravely threatened by his own aggressive feelings (projected onto others and then internalized again as inner "monsters") attempts to compensate himself for his experiences of rage and envy with fantasies of wealth, beauty, and omnipotence. These fantasies, together with the internalized images of the good parents with which he attempts to defend himself, become the core of a "grandiose conception of the self." A kind of "blind optimism," according to Otto Kernberg, protects the narcissistic child from the dangers around and within him—particularly from dependence on others, who are perceived as without exception undependable. "Constant projection of 'all bad' self and object images perpetuates a world of dangerous, threatening objects, against which the 'all good' self images are used defensively, and megalomaniac ideal self images are built up." The splitting of images determined by aggressive feelings from images that derive from libidinal impulses makes it impossible for the child to acknowledge his own aggression, to experience guilt or concern for objects invested simultaneously with aggression and libido, or to mourn for lost objects. Depression in narcissistic patients takes the form not of mourning with its admixture of guilt, described by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia," but of impotent rage and "feelings of defeat by external forces."

Because the intrapsychic world of these patients is so thinly populated—consisting only of the "grandiose self," in Kernberg's words, "the devalued, shadowy images of self and others, and potential persecutors"—they experience intense feelings of emptiness and inauthenticity. Although the narcissist can function in

the everyday world and often charms other people (not least with his "pseudo-insight into his personality"), his devaluation of others, together with his lack of curiosity about them, impoverishes his personal life and reinforces the "subjective experience of emptiness." Lacking any real intellectual engagement with the world— notwithstanding a frequently inflated estimate of his own intellectual abilities—he has little capacity for sublimation. He therefore depends on others for constant infusions of approval and admiration. He "must attach [himself] to someone, living an almost parasitic" existence. At the same time, his fear of emotional dependence, together with his manipulative, exploitive approach to personal relations, makes these relations bland, superficial, and deeply unsatisfying. "The ideal relationship to me would be a two month relationship," said a borderline patient. "That way there'd be no commitment. At the end of the two months I'd just break it off."

Chronically bored, restlessly in search of instantaneous intimacy—of emotional titillation without involvement and dependence—the narcissist is promiscuous and often pansexual as well, since the fusion of pregenital and Oedipal impulses in the service of aggression encourages polymorphous perversity. The bad images he has internalized also make him chronically uneasy about his health, and hypochondria in turn gives him a special affinity for therapy and for therapeutic groups and movements.

As a psychiatric patient, the narcissist is a prime candidate for interminable analysis. He seeks in analysis a religion or way of life and hopes to find in the therapeutic relationship external support for his fantasies of omnipotence and eternal youth. The strength of his defenses, however, makes him resistant to successful analysis. The shallowness of his emotional life often prevents him from developing a close connection to the analyst, even though he "often uses his intellectual insight to agree verbally with the analyst and recapitulates in his own words what has been analysed in previous sessions." He uses intellect in the service of evasion rather than self-discovery, resorting to some of the same strategies of obfuscation that appear in the confessional writing of recent decades. "The patient uses the analytic interpretations but deprives them quickly of life and meaning, so that

only meaningless words are left. The words are then felt to be the patient's own possession, which he idealizes and which give him a sense of superiority." Although psychiatrists no longer consider narcissistic disorders inherently unanalyzable, few of them take an optimistic view of the prospects for success.

According to Kernberg, the great argument for making the attempt at all, in the face of the many difficulties presented by narcissistic patients, is the devastating effect of narcissism on the second half of their lives—the certainty of the terrible suffering that lies in store. In a society that dreads old age and death, aging holds a special terror for those who fear dependence and whose self-esteem requires the admiration usually reserved for youth, beauty, celebrity, or charm. The usual defenses against the ravages of age—identification with ethical or artistic values beyond one's immediate interests, intellectual curiosity, the consoling emotional warmth derived from happy relationships in the past— can do nothing for the narcissist. Unable to derive whatever comfort comes from identification with historical continuity, he finds it impossible, on the contrary, "to accept the fact that a younger generation now possesses many of the previously cherished gratifications of beauty, wealth, power and, particularly, creativity. To be able to enjoy life in a process involving a growing identification with other people's happiness and achievements is tragically beyond the capacity of narcissistic personalities."

Social Influences on Narcissism Every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure. In Freud's time, hysteria and obsessional neurosis carried to extremes the personality traits associated with the capitalist order at an earlier stage in its development—acquisitiveness, fanatical devotion to work, and a fierce repression of sexuality. In our time, the preschizophrenic, borderline, or personality disorders have attracted increasing attention, along with schizophrenia itself. This "change in the form of neuroses has been observed and described since World War II by an ever-increasing number of psychiatrists." According to Peter

L. Giovacchini, "Clinicians are constantly faced with the seemingly increasing number of patients who do not fit current diagnostic categories" and who suffer not from "definitive symptoms" but from "vague, ill-defined complaints." "When I refer to 'this type of patient,' " he writes, "practically everyone knows to whom I am referring." The growing prominence of "character disorders" seems to signify an underlying change in the organization of personality, from what has been called inner-direction to narcissism.

Allen Wheelis argued in 1958 that the change in "the patterns of neuroses" fell "within the personal experience of older psychoanalysts," while younger ones "become aware of it from the discrepancy between the older descriptions of neuroses and the problems presented by the patients who come daily to their offices. The change is from symptom neuroses to character disorders." Heinz Lichtenstein, who questioned the additional assertion that it reflected a change in personality structure, nevertheless wrote in 1963 that the "change in neurotic patterns" already constituted a "well-known fact." In the seventies, such reports have become increasingly common. "It is no accident," Herbert Hendin notes, "that at the present time the dominant events in psychoanalysis are the rediscovery of narcissism and the new emphasis on the psychological significance of death." "What hysteria and the obsessive neuroses were to Freud and his early colleagues ... at the beginning of this century," writes Michael Beldoch, "the narcissistic disorders are to the workaday analyst in these last few decades before the next millennium. Today's patients by and large do not suffer from hysterical paralyses of the legs or hand-washing compulsions; instead it is their very psychic selves that have gone numb or that they must scrub and rescrub in an exhausting and unending effort to come clean." These patients suffer from "pervasive feelings of emptiness and a deep disturbance of self-esteem." Burness E. Moore notes that narcissistic disorders have become more and more common. According to Sheldon Bach, "You used to see people coming in with hand-washing compulsions, phobias, and familiar neuroses. Now you see mostly narcissists." Gilbert J. Rose maintains that the psychoanalytic outlook, "inappropriately transplanted from analytic

practice" to everyday life, has contributed to "global permissiveness" and the "over-domestication of instinct," which in turn contributes to the proliferation of "narcissistic identity disorders." According to Joel Kovel, the stimulation of infantile cravings by advertising, the usurpation of parental authority by the media and the school, and the rationalization of inner life accompanied by the false promise of personal fulfillment, have created a new type of "social individual." "The result is not the classical neuroses where an infantile impulse is suppressed by patriarchal authority, but a modern version in which impulse is stimulated, perverted and given neither an adequate object upon which to satisfy itself nor coherent forms of control... The entire complex, played out in a setting of alienation rather than direct control, loses the classical form of symptom—and the classical therapeutic opportunity of simply restoring an impulse to consciousness."

The reported increase in the number of narcissistic patients does not necessarily indicate that narcissistic disorders are more common than they used to be, in the population as a whole, or that they have become more common than the classical conversion neuroses. Perhaps they simply come more quickly to psychiatric attention. Ilza Veith contends that "with the increasing awareness of conversion reactions and the popularization of psychiatric literature, the 'old-fashioned' somatic expressions of hysteria have become suspect among the more sophisticated classes, and hence most physicians observe that obvious conversion symptoms are now rarely encountered and, if at all, only among the uneducated." The attention given to character disorders in recent clinical literature probably makes psychiatrists more alert to their presence. But this possibility by no means diminishes the importance of psychiatric testimony about the prevalence of narcissism, especially when this testimony appears at the same time that journalists begin to speculate about the new narcissism and the unhealthy trend toward self-absorption. The narcissist comes to the attention of psychiatrists for some of the same reasons that he rises to positions of prominence not only in awareness movements and other cults but in business corporations, political organizations, and government bureaucracies. For all his inner suffering, the narcissist has many traits that make for success in

bureaucratic institutions, which put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep personal attachments, and at the same time provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem. Although he may resort to therapies that promise to give meaning to life and to overcome his sense of emptiness, in his professional career the narcissist often enjoys considerable success. The management of personal impressions comes naturally to him, and his mastery of its intricacies serves him well in political and business organisations where performance now counts for less than "visibility," "momentum," and a winning record. As the "organization man" gives way to the bureaucratic "gamesman"—the "loyalty era" of American business to the age of the "executive success game"—the narcissist comes into his own.

In a study of 250 managers from twelve major companies, Michael Maccoby describes the new corporate leader, not altogether unsympathetically, as a person who works with people rather than with materials and who seeks not to build an empire or accumulate wealth but to experience "the exhilaration of running his team and of gaining victories." He wants to "be known as a winner, and his deepest fear is to be labeled a loser." Instead of pitting himself against a material task or a problem demanding solution, he pits himself against others, out of a "need to be in control." As a recent textbook for managers puts it, success today means "not simply getting ahead" but "getting ahead of others." The new executive, boyish, playful, and "seductive," wants in Maccoby's words "to maintain an illusion of limitless options." He has little capacity for "personal intimacy and social commitment." He feels little loyalty even to the company for which he works. One executive says he experiences power "as not being pushed around by the company." In his upward climb, this man cultivates powerful customers and attempts to use them against his own company. "You need a very big customer," according to his calculations, "who is always in trouble and demands changes from the company. That way you automatically have power in the company, and with the customer too. I like to keep my options open." A professor of management endorses this strategy.

"Over-identification" with the company, in his view, "produces a corporation with enormous power over the careers and destinies of its true believers." The bigger the company, the more important he thinks it is for executives "to manage their careers in terms of their own . . . free choices" and to "maintain the widest set of options possible."*

According to Maccoby, the gamesman "is open to new ideas, but he lacks convictions." He will do business with any regime, even if he disapproves of its principles. More independent and resourceful than the company man, he tries to use the company for his own ends, fearing that otherwise he will be "totally emasculated by the corporation." He avoids intimacy as a trap, preferring the "exciting, sexy atmosphere" with which the modern executive surrounds himself at work, "where adoring, mini-skirted secretaries constantly flirt with him." In all his personal relations, the gamesman depends on the admiration or fear he inspires in others to certify his credentials as a "winner." As he gets older, he finds it more and more difficult to command the kind of attention on which he thrives. He reaches a plateau beyond which he does not advance in his job, perhaps because the very highest positions, as Maccoby notes, still go to "those able to renounce adolescent rebelliousness and become at least to some extent believers in the organization." The job begins to lose its savor. Having little interest in craftsmanship, the new-style executive takes no pleasure in his achievements once he begins to lose the adolescent charm on which they rest. Middle age hits him with the force of a

*It is not only the gamesman who "fears feeling trapped." Seymour B. Sarason finds this feeling prevalent among professionals and students training for professional careers. He too suggests a connection between the fear of entrapment and the cultural value set on career mobility and its psychic equivalent, "personal growth." " 'Stay loose,' 'keep your options open,' 'play it cool'—these cautions emerge from the feeling that society sets all kinds of booby traps that rob you of the freedom without which growth is impossible."

This fear of entrapment or stagnation is closely connected in turn with the fear of aging and death. The mobility mania and the cult of "growth" can themselves be seen, in part, as an expression of the fear of aging that has become so intense in American society. Mobility and growth assure the individual that he has not yet settled into the living death of old age.

disaster: "Once his youth, vigor, and even the thrill in winning are lost, he becomes depressed and goalless, questioning the purpose of his life. No longer energized by the team struggle and unable to dedicate himself to something he believes in beyond himself, ...he finds himself starkly alone." It is not surprising, given the prevalence of this career pattern, that popular psychology returns so often to the "midlife crisis" and to ways of combating it.

In Wilfrid Sheed's novel *Office Politics*, a wife asks, "There are real issues, aren't there, between Mr. Fine and Mr. Tyler?" Her husband answers that the issues are trivial; "the jockeying of ego is the real story." Eugene Emerson Jennings's study of management, which celebrates the demise of the organization man and the advent of the new "era of mobility," insists that corporate "mobility is more than mere job performance." What counts is "style . . . panache . . . the ability to say and do almost anything without antagonizing others." The upwardly mobile executive, according to Jennings, knows how to handle the people around him—the "shelf-sitter" who suffers from "arrested mobility" and envies success; the "fast learner"; the "mobile superior." The "mobility-bright executive" has learned to "read" the power relations in his office and "to see the less visible and less audible side of his superiors, chiefly their standing with their peers and superiors." He "can infer from a minimum of cues who are the centers of power, and he seeks to have high visibility and exposure with them. He will assiduously cultivate his standing and opportunities with them and seize every opportunity to learn from them. He will utilize his opportunities in the social world to size up the men who are centers of sponsorship in the corporate world." Constantly comparing the "executive success game" to an athletic contest or a game of chess, Jennings treats the substance of executive life as if it were just as arbitrary and irrelevant to success as the task of kicking a ball through a net or of moving pieces over a chessboard. He never mentions the social and economic repercussions of managerial decisions or the power that managers exercise over society as a whole. For the corporate manager on the make, power consists not of money and influence but of "momen-

tum," a "winning image," a reputation as a winner. Power lies in the eye of the beholder and thus has no objective reference at all.*

The manager's view of the world, as described by Jennings, Maccoby, and by the managers themselves, is that of the narcissist, who sees the world as a mirror of himself and has no interest in external events except as they throw back a reflection of his own image. The dense interpersonal environment of modern bureaucracy, in which work assumes an abstract quality almost wholly divorced from performance, by its very nature elicits and often rewards a narcissistic response. Bureaucracy, however, is only one of a number of social influences that are bringing a narcissistic type of personality organization into greater and greater prominence. Another such influence is the mechanical reproduction of culture, the proliferation of visual and audial images in the "society of the spectacle." We live in a swirl of images and echoes that arrest experience and play it back in slow motion. Cameras and recording machines not only transcribe experience but alter its quality, giving to much of modern life the character of an enormous echo chamber, a hall of mirrors. Life presents itself as a succession of images or electronic signals, of impressions recorded and reproduced by means of photography, motion pictures, television, and sophisticated recording devices. Modern life is so thoroughly mediated by electronic images that we cannot help responding to others as if their actions—and our own—were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time. "Smile, you're on candid camera!" The intrusion into everyday life of this all-seeing eye no longer takes us by surprise or catches us with our defenses down. We need no reminder to smile. A smile is permanently graven on our features, and we already know from which of several angles it photographs to best advantage.

* Indeed it has no reference to anything outside the self. The new ideal of success has no content. "Performance means to arrive," says Jennings. Success equals success. Note the convergence between success in business and celebrity in politics or the world of entertainment, which also depends on "visibility" and "charisma" and can only be defined as itself. The only important attribute of celebrity is that it is celebrated; no one can say why.

The proliferation of recorded images undermines our sense of reality. As Susan Sontag observes in her study of photography, "Reality has come to seem more and more like what we are shown by cameras." We distrust our perceptions until the camera verifies them. Photographic images provide us with the proof of our existence, without which we would find it difficult even to reconstruct a personal history. Bourgeois families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Sontag points out, posed for portraits in order to proclaim the family's status, whereas today the family album of photographs verifies the individual's existence: its documentary record of his development from infancy onward provides him with the only evidence of his life that he recognizes as altogether valid. Among the "many narcissistic uses" that Sontag attributes to the camera, "self-surveillance" ranks among the most important, not only because it provides the technical means of ceaseless self-scrutiny but because it renders the sense of selfhood dependent on the consumption of images of the self, at the same time calling into question the reality of the external world.

By preserving images of the self at various stages of development, the camera helps to weaken the older idea of development as moral education and to promote a more passive idea according to which development consists of passing through the stages of life at the right time and in the right order. Current fascination with the life cycle embodies an awareness that success in politics or business depends on reaching certain goals on schedule; but it also reflects the ease with which development can be electronically recorded. This brings us to another cultural change that elicits a widespread narcissistic response and, in this case, gives it a philosophical sanction: the emergence of a therapeutic ideology that upholds a normative schedule of psychosocial development and thus gives further encouragement to anxious self-scrutiny. The ideal of normative development creates the fear that any deviation from the norm has a pathological source. Doctors have made a cult of the periodic checkup—an investigation carried out once again by means of cameras and other recording instruments—and have implanted in their clients the notion that health depends on eternal watchfulness and the early detection of symptoms, as verified by medical technology. The client no

longer feels physically or psychologically secure until his X-rays confirm a "clean bill of health."

Medicine and psychiatry—more generally, the therapeutic outlook and sensibility that pervade modern society—reinforce the pattern created by other cultural influences, in which the individual endlessly examines himself for signs of aging and ill health, for tell-tale symptoms of psychic stress, for blemishes and flaws that might diminish his attractiveness, or on the other hand for reassuring indications that his life is proceeding according to schedule. Modern medicine has conquered the plagues and epidemics that once made life so precarious, only to create new forms of insecurity. In the same way, bureaucracy has made life predictable and even boring while reviving, in a new form, the war of all against all. Our overorganized society, in which large-scale organizations predominate but have lost the capacity to command allegiance, in some respects more nearly approximates a condition of universal animosity than did the primitive capitalism on which Hobbes modeled his state of nature. Social conditions today encourage a survival mentality, expressed in its crudest form in disaster movies or in fantasies of space travel, which allow vicarious escape from a doomed planet. People no longer dream of overcoming difficulties but merely of surviving them. In business, according to Jennings, "The struggle is to survive emotionally"—to "preserve or enhance one's identity or ego." The normative concept of developmental stages promotes a view of life as an obstacle course: the aim is simply to get through the course with a minimum of trouble and pain. The ability to manipulate what Gail Sheehy refers to, using a medical metaphor, as "life-support systems" now appears to represent the highest form of wisdom: the knowledge that gets us through, as she puts it, without panic. Those who master Sheehy's "no-panic approach to aging" and to the traumas of the life cycle will be able to say, in the words of one of her subjects, "I know I can survive ... I don't panic any more." This is hardly an exalted form of satisfaction, however. "The current ideology," Sheehy writes,

"seems a mix of personal survivalism, revivalism, and cynicism"; yet her enormously popular guide to the "predictable crises of adult life," with its superficially optimistic hymn to growth, development, and "self-actualization," <51> does not challenge this ideology, merely restates it in more "humanistic" form. "Growth" has become a euphemism for survival.

The World View of the Resigned New social forms require new forms of personality, new modes of socialization, new ways of organizing experience. The concept of narcissism provides us not with a ready-made psychological determinism but with a way of understanding the psychological impact of recent social changes—assuming that we bear in mind not only its clinical origins but the continuum between pathology and normality. It provides us, in other words, with a tolerably accurate portrait of the "liberated" personality of our time, with his charm, his pseudo-awareness of his own condition, his promiscuous pansexuality, his fascination with oral sex, his fear of the castrating mother (Mrs. Portnoy), his hypochondria, his protective shallowness, his avoidance of dependence, his inability to mourn, his dread of old age and death.

Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone. These conditions have also transformed the family, which in turn shapes the underlying structure of personality. A society that fears it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation, and the ever-present sense of historical discontinuity—the blight of our society—falls with particularly devastating effect on the family. The modern parent's attempt to make children feel loved and wanted does not conceal an underlying coolness—the remoteness of those who have little to pass on to the next generation and who in any case give priority to their own right to self-fulfillment. The combination of emotional detachment with attempts to convince a child of his favored position in the family is a good prescription for a narcissistic personality structure.

Through the intermediary of the family, social patterns <50>repro-

duce themselves in personality. Social arrangements live on in the individual, buried in the mind below the level of consciousness, even after they have become objectively undesirable and unnecessary—as many of our present arrangements are now widely acknowledged to have become. The perception of the world as a dangerous and forbidding place, though it originates in a realistic awareness of the insecurity of contemporary social life, receives reinforcement from the narcissistic projection of aggressive impulses outward. The belief that society has no future, while it rests on a certain realism about the dangers ahead, also incorporates a narcissistic inability to identify with posterity or to feel oneself part of a historical stream.

The weakening of social ties, which originates in the prevailing state of social warfare, at the same time reflects a narcissistic defense against dependence. A warlike society tends to produce men and women who are at heart antisocial. It should therefore not surprise us to find that although the narcissist conforms to social norms for fear of external retribution, he often thinks of himself as an outlaw and sees others in the same way, "as basically dishonest and unreliable, or only reliable because of external pressures." "The value systems of narcissistic personalities are generally corruptible," writes Kernberg, "in contrast to the rigid morality of the obsessive personality." The ethic of self-preservation and psychic survival is rooted, then, not merely in objective conditions of economic warfare, rising rates of crime, and social chaos but in the subjective experience of emptiness and isolation. It reflects the conviction—as much a projection of inner anxieties as a perception of the way things are—that envy and exploitation dominate even the most intimate relations. The cult of personal relations, which becomes increasingly intense, as the hope of political solutions recedes, conceals a thoroughgoing disenchantment with personal relations, just as the cult of sensuality implies a repudiation of sensuality in all but its most primitive forms. The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.<51>

Lasch, Ch. (1979): *The Narcistic Personality of Our Time*. In: *The Culture of Narcisism*. W. W. Norton, pp. 31-51.