The Failure to See the Other:
Narcissism in Contemporary Society as Illuminated by the Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas

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Levinas' ethics is barely recognizable to late 20thCentury Western culture. His idea that the other is primary is very foreign to Western--and particularly American-notions of independence and individual rights. Since Levinas wrote Totality and Infinity, we have traveled even further from his metaphysics. The proud "self-made man" has degenerated into a fiercely competitive and self-interested individual trying to survive in the impersonal system that is our social life.

Christopher Lasch extensively documents the ways we fall short of our possibilities in The Culture of Narcissism: America in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. We have no common life, he argues, but also no genuine privacy. We are dependent on bureaucracies.

Narcissism represents the psychological dimension of this dependence. Notwithstanding his occasional illusions of omnipotence, the narcissist depends on others to validate his self (p. 10). The narcissist is a manager of personal impressions, an expert manipulator in a world "where performance . . . counts for less than 'visibility' . and a winning record"(p. 44). Rhetoric, flattery and seduction, forms of communication which Levinas terms "violence" (p. 180), are part of our everyday intercourse: we buy and sell goods, ideas, loyalties. Lasch points out the irony that "[t]he collapse of personal life originates in the war of all against all. . ." (p. 26). The fiercely aggressive and defensive person has ever less to promote and defend.

THE AMBIGUITY OF SEPARATION

In part, this phenomenon arises out of our philosophical underpinnings. When ontology is considered the first philosophy, Being--individual existence--is of the utmost importance. Levinas criticizes this premise, for it means that individual existents have no choice but to attempt to dominate others, and such a power struggle can only lead to war. Within such a system, not only does the self diminish, but the person diminishes, I think Levinas would argue. He or she cannot be fully human.

Although he claims that ontology cannot be the first philosophy, Levinas acknowledges the importance of the individual self. "To be I is ... to have identity as one's content." (p. 36). We must live within the illusion of psychism.

> . . . it is necessary that a being, though it be a part of a whole, derive its being from itself and not from his audience. He cannot live without an admiring audience. For the Nacississt the world is from its frontiers (not from its definition), exist independently, depend neither on relations that designate its place within Being nor on the recognition that the Other would bring it. (p. 61).

Gyges, who could make himself invisible, embodies the illusion of interiority necessary for separation. In striking contrast is the childhood experience of one of Alice Miller's patients, quoted in The Drama of the Gifted Child. The patient describes a kind of reversal of the Gyges myth, a result of narcissistic wounding. “I lived in a glass house into which my mother could look at any time. In a glass house, however, you cannot conceal anything without giving yourself away, except by hiding it under the ground. And then you cannot see it yourself either” (p. 21). In his willed invisibility, Gyges possessed himself. In her coerced visibility, this patient lost herself.

The idea of radical separateness is of course terrifying to a narcissist. Narcissists are needy, and are unable to be separate because of this neediness. "To conceive separation as a fall or privation or provisional rupture of the totality is to know no other separation than that evinced by need." In its "dependence on the exterior," "the needy [one] does not entirely possess its being and consequently is not

strictly speaking separate." (p. 102). As the self-psychologists would put it, separation is not isolation, but the potential to be intimate. You can draw close to someone only if you are not fused with them. "Separation is ... a relationship within independence." (Levinas, p. 104). "Self-possession" (p. 103) is precisely what narcissists lack--and thus also genuine relationship.

Narcissus is said to have fallen in love with his own reflection. But this was not true self-love, which is only possible if one is called out of oneself by the presence of another human being. Narcissus pined away by the pool because he had no face to gaze at besides his own. What he lacked was " the face td face. This is not a play of mirrors but . . . an existence already obligated. It places the center of gravitation of a being outside that being." (Levinas, p. 183). Self-love, in a sense, is desire. It is the joyful living out of one's humanness in going toward the other, in responding to the other's uniqueness and the other's neediness.

By contrast, the narcissist lives in a perpetually self-referencing world, without the possibility of truth. "Truth presupposes a being autonomous in separation; the quest for truth is precisely a relation that does not rest on the privation of need." (p. 61). A world without truth is, I think, a world without meaning; one who lacks the inner resources to seek truth lacks the ability to create meaning. Hence the widespread phenomenon of "quiet desperation," meaningless lives.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF NARCISSISM

Object relations theorists distinguish between healthy and unhealthy narcissism. Ideally, parents of young children do two things: they meet the basic needs for attention, respect and affection, and they let the child individuate. Both involve "regard[ing] and respect[ing] the child "as the person he really is at any given time," that is, his "emotions, sensations and their expression . . .. 'The infant's inner sensations form the core of the self. They appear to remain the central, the crystallization point of the "feeling of self" around which a "sense of identity" will become established.'" (Miller, p. 7, quoting Mahler). Gradually, the child internalizes the positive images of himself and develops self-esteem. "In an atmosphere of respect and tolerance for his feelings, the child, in the phase of separation, will be able to give up symbiosis with the mother and accomplish the steps toward individuation**."** (Miller, p. 7).

Lacking this atmosphere, the child will learn to do whatever she can to please her parents, to respond to their needs, to hide her feelings. She will grow up feeling somewhat unreal. Depression may result. Alternatively, she may develop the more familiar pattern of narcissism: overidealization of others and/or grandiosity, both of which are normal for toddlers but are normally outgrown. Either way, she will continue to remain dependent on others for recognition. Most likely, upon becoming a parent she will turn to her children to give her the attention, admiration, and following she so craves--thus perpetuating the cycle.

In our narcissistic society, we are so used to this kind of relationship between parent and child, we barely notice it. By contrast, imagine if a parent spoke thus of his child: "Over him I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site." (p. 39, emphasis in original). If only parents regularly embodied the "disinterestedness of goodness" (p. 35) toward their offspring! Levinas points out that the same and the other, together, do not form a system, a totality. Yet we commonly think of families as systems. It is the way we routinely treat one another.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING

Although Levinas writes of separation and desire as experiences innately human, available to everyone, he recognizes that "the Desire for the other, above happiness, requires this happiness . **..''** (p. 62). The basis for separation, which Levinas calls variously psychism, ipseity, enjoyment and interiority, is I think what Alice Miller refers to as "healthy self-feeling." "I understand a healthy self-feeling to mean the unquestioned certainty that the feelings and wishes one experiences are a part of one's self." (p. 33). "Enjoyment," for Levinas, seems to mean not only the specific emotion of joy, but the joyful I-ness that comes with feeling any emotion, with experiencing oneself as oneself. "Only in enjoyment does the I crystallize." (p. 144).

The inability to feel results in a kind of deadness, which is the inability to desire: "Twentieth-century peoples have erected so many psychological barriers against strong emotion, and have invested those defenses with so much of the energy derived from forbidden impulse, that they can no longer remember what it feels like to be inundated by desire." (Lasch, p. 11). "Desire," for Levinas, of course, means more than intense longing, but I think Levinas would agree with Lasch that the narcissistic personality is unable to enjoy the "luxurious need" (Levinas, p. 62) of desire. He would also agree with Miller, who equates the ability to feel with the ability to be responsible (p. xi).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPY

The growing prominence of "character disorders," including narcissistic disturbance, has been well documented. (Lasch, pp. 41-43). More and more people seek professional help complaining of vague discontents, anxiety, and inner emptiness. Many lead outwardly successful lives. Obviously our standards for "success" and "health" are abysmal. Short of a cultural overhaul, however, what can be done? What can a therapist offer? Lasch articulates well what isn't called for. Not surprisingly, a society "tortured ... by self-consciousness" (p. 99) and dependent on experts in general is turning increasingly to mental health professionals for help. But that help often suffers from the same myopia that creates our ills. For example, psychotherapies emphasize the importance of acquiring "social skills." "Social skills" are exactly what the narcissist excels in, to his detriment; they keep him desperately trying to win others' approval. On the other hand, and perhaps in reaction to the pressure to please, there has also arisen a "cult of authenticity" (Lasch, p. 166), which elevates emotions to the highest rank. without a meaningful moral and social structure within which these emotions are experienced and expressed, they amount to little more than self-indulgence.

The trouble with the consciousness movement is not that it addresses trivial or unreal issues but that it provides self-defeating solutions. Arising out of a pervasive dissatisfaction with the quality of personal relations, it advises people not to make too large an investment in love and friendship, to avoid excessive dependence on others, and to live for the moment--the very conditions that created the crisis of personal relations in the first place. (p. 26).

Psychotherapy has been perverted, Lasch claims, into a kind of antireligion. "People today hunger not for personal salvation... but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security." (p. 7) Therapy constitutes an antireligion . . . because modern society "has no future" and therefore gives no thought to anything beyond its immediate needs. Even when therapists speak of the need for "meaning" and "love," they define love and meaning simply as the fulfillment of the patient's emotional requirements. It hardly occurs to them --nor is there any reason why it should, given the nature of the therapeutic enterprise--to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself (p. 13). Clearly, Lasch is calling for an ethics, religion in the etymological sense: a binding together of person to person. This is precisely the ethics of Totality and Infinity.

Alice Miller outlines specific ways the ethical therapeutic relationship takes shape for the narcissistic client. She has found that the therapist must act as "enlightened witness" (p. ix) to the experiences of the (now adult) child. In doing so, the therapist honors the other as unique, important, and deserving of her attention and assistance. The narcissistic client has likely had little of this honoring in her life. Deep mourning is then possible, and necessary: a reclaiming of all that was experienced. The individual is able to move past the nostalgia ("the longing for return") which Levinas (p. 33) identifies as characteristic of need, as opposed to desire.

It is as if the self must emerge before the metaphysical person can be born. The client must move beyond the "struggle for recognition" (Levinas, p. 64) which constitutes much of therapy for the narcissist, and experience desire. On the other hand, this dichotomy does
not really exist. For the self cannot exist without the person; psychological healing must take place within the context of an ethics or it will never be anything more than self-indulgence. Likewise, need arises from a ground of desire; even the most wounded narcissist is capable of transcendence.

In a culture where "conversation [often] takes on the quality of confession," (Lasch, p. 28), therapy must engage both therapist and client more profoundly. It must itself be true to Levinas' metaphysics, in working to heal the heartache we suffer as a people: our failure to see each other. Therapy must be fundamentally an ethical, not a psychological, activity.

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