

# The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Narcissist

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Narcissism in America is all the rage these days — even more so than usual, and that really says something — not in the least because of the popular GOP presidential candidate who is the center of media’s attention, a subject of dinner talks, friendly chats at the post office, local KKK meetings, neo-Nazi blogs, and your cat Fluffy’s worst nightmares (it may be the hair — imagine a hairball it would make).

But the said candidate is not the only one whose tremendous self-regard has recently mesmerized the public (as it always does). There is Pharma Bro whose loudly self-proclaimed humanitarianism stands in stark contrast with his decidedly non-humanitarian actions, and an award winning musician who thinks he is more influential than God. And why not! Go big or go home, as any narcissist would tell you.

Ridiculing the cases of such grotesquely overinflated self-regard can be entertaining, but there is a dark side to it, of the kind that real nightmares, and not just Fluffy’s, are made of. This is what this paper is about.

## **Yes, It is a Pathology**

Narcissism is a pathological condition with far reaching consequences in a person’s life. It influences every aspect of his (or her; although most narcissists are male) functioning in profound ways, often making it difficult to understand and relate to him on a personal level.

We do not know exactly how one becomes a narcissist — the causes of this condition are complex, involving nature and nurture in varying proportions. Our culture, with its competitiveness, preoccupation with status and image, and the cult of high self-esteem and positive thinking, helps foster narcissism in our private and public lives to everyone’s detriment, not in the least because we tend to reward some very unsavory narcissistic characters with the power and adulation they believe they deserve.

There are varieties of narcissistic disturbance and they have individual flavors that depend on the specifics of a person’s character and life; but they share overall patterns of thinking, emotionality, motivations, behavior, and interactions with the world that help us recognize its kind and level. Those general patterns apply to all people affected with the particular type of the disorder in varying degrees.

In its extreme form, which is what we'll talk about here, narcissism acquires antisocial (psychopathic) features. This is because one of the most important aspects affected by narcissism is a conscience, that inner organ of right and wrong. The main components of our conscience are empathy, guilt, shame, critical self-reflection, and awareness of higher values (love, compassion, care, altruism, honesty, beauty, truth, justice). We must focus on the narcissist's defective conscience, as this is the facet of narcissism that's most problematic, for him but even more so for others.

### **Narcissism as a Deficit of Conscience**

While normally our conscience may not always work as we might wish, when one's conscience suffers a severe deficit or complete absence, the consequences are devastating, even though the one so affected will likely not see it this way. Without a functioning conscience, a person's experiences are dramatically different from those whose conscience is normally and functionally endowed, which is most of us. That lack of a conscience affects not only one's emotional, moral, and social functioning capacity, but also one's ability to think properly and acquire knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and the senses (what is referred to as "cognition"), distorting it and limiting its depth and scope, even if he has a high intelligence.

Our conscience grows from empathy (the ability to understand and share the feelings of another), based primarily on our attachments with others and what we learn from those relationships. The capacity for empathy is low to non-existent in narcissists, for reasons we don't fully understand.

Without empathy, an individual cannot relate emotionally to other people. This excludes the possibility of forming deep, meaningful bonds with them. Unable to understand and appreciate that other people are sovereign individuals with rich and complex inner lives, a narcissist sees them essentially as objects that can be used for his need- and wish-fulfillment, without any consideration given to their needs, wishes, humanity, or dignity.

His empathy deficit, combined with his grandiosity, also makes him blind to how his behavior affects others. He has no idea what people think of him, nor any wish to find out. Why, he is great and everyone knows it, and there is no need to question that; although confirming it, loudly and often, is desired and expected. It is the least that others can and should do.

Narcissists sometimes understand, intellectually at least, what makes people tick; but that understanding does not translate into empathy. And anyway, they do not care about other people's experiences, only their own. These are frequently tied to multiple lies and fabrications about their education, pedigree, accomplishments, war duty, business exploits, name dropping and the influence they claim they have with important people, and the love and respect everyone has for them, all designed to bolster their own ego in the eyes of

others. They may use the language of higher values, especially when it serves their needs; but a closer examination reveals that their understanding of values is severely truncated and shallow.

They can talk, for example, even forcefully and convincingly, about the needs of humanity and other noble-sounding topics; but that talk is rarely, if ever, followed by any meaningful actions, particularly if such actions do not result in a gain for themselves. Often their grandiose 'speechifying' about human ideals is in direct contrast with their private behavior — cold, callous, and/or brutal — toward people in their lives.

While a narcissist can mimic empathy and some semblance of concern over human ideals, he cannot mimic guilt, an emotion that is completely beyond his ability, even if only intellectual, to comprehend. It is partly a function of his grandiosity: he's never guilty of or responsible for anything wrong because he has placed himself above humanity with its constraining social mores and silly emotional concerns. But it also stems, and predominantly so, from his empathy deficit that makes him unable to experience the pain of others. And, as he is always justified in everything he does in his own eyes, the sheer notion of responsibility, much less its affective and more unsettling component of guilt (when responsibility is broken), is alien to him.

We can see this inability to experience guilt in the narcissist's 'non-apology' apologies in those unfortunate situations when he is forced to issue a statement of contrition for public consumption. He may do so through the use of the impersonal "mistakes were made," or that classic maneuver of responsibility disavowal via "If anyone was hurt by my words or actions I have committed, I would like to take this opportunity to apologize," or some version thereof.

He may sometimes express superficial remorse for something ("Yeah, I shouldn't have done it"), but the sentiment is shallow, fleeting, and upon closer inspection related to his regret over causing harm to himself (his reputation, etc.) and not to the harm he inflicted on another person.

The narcissist tends to be very sensitive to shame, which he perceives as humiliation: a blow to his ego (sense of self) and/or a threat to what he sees as his important status compared to others. This sensitivity is the reason why he tends to lash out at those who shame or appear to shame him in any way. His reactions to shame are grossly disproportionate to the "offense;" he will hold grudges and seek revenge sometimes till death, his own or his "offender's," whichever comes first. Hell hath no fury like a narcissist scorned.

Shame is so difficult for a narcissist to tolerate because it arises from an exposure of some flaw of his to others. He has many serious shortcomings; but in his own eyes he is perfect and surpasses everyone else, as he will let you know time and again, directly and not. He must retain this grandiose delusion of superiority and perfection at all costs because this is

all he has. His bigger than life persona hides an empty inner core, devoid of meaningful values and attachments. A prick of shame exposing any flaws in the narcissist's façade has a potential of deflating it and effectively destroying him since there is nothing of substance to fall back on within his inner world.

The rage with which a narcissist reacts to shame or humiliation thus deflects attention from his inner emptiness. That rage is often a predominant emotion, particularly in a narcissist who feels chronically deprived of the admiration and perks he believes he deserves (and as his need for admiration and perks is bottomless, so then is his sense of deprivation). It does not take much to provoke it: a simple, neutral observation or a request can suddenly unleash it on an unsuspecting victim.

The vehement defense against shame is also another reason why a narcissist never takes responsibility for his behavior. Why should he anyway, when he's perfect and does no wrong? Nothing is ever his fault, no matter how great a mess he creates. Responsibility is always projected outwards, onto others, as blame. Admitting his culpability in anything could lead to shame and cracks in the false façade that defines his character — and his ego won't allow that. It is a matter of life and death, 'psychically' speaking.

The flip side of his shame intolerance is his desire to humiliate others. It comes as naturally to him as breathing. He derives pleasure from inflicting on others the kind of pain he himself wants to avoid at all costs. Humiliating other people is almost as satisfying as winning. It helps that the two often go together in the narcissist's life. In fact, humiliating others is itself a win. And he likes to win.

### **The Narcissist and Other People (a.k.a easy marks)**

Since a narcissist lives in his own reality in which he is unique and special, he also believes that can get away with anything, including murder that can stem from an uncontrollable rage attack. Sadly, that belief is not entirely unfounded: he has conned, used, and abused so many people so many times that this fact is an indication of his own superiority and invincibility to him. He sees himself above moral concerns and often above the law. The rules of decent and even legal conduct may not apply to him.

Life for a narcissist is a game of one-upmanship, a contest to be won by amassing more power than others, more money, more dehumanized sex with interchangeable — but always the best — bodies / "trophies," and more fame and glory than anyone else, in his eyes at least. Other people are either pawns to use on his unstoppable power trip, trophies, and /or mirrors to his uniqueness and greatness, parts of his narcissistic ego supply. When they stop serving their function of feeding his insatiable ego, he will discard or destroy them.

Living in a reality of his own making, a narcissist is unconcerned with truth or objectivity. Honesty and consistency are for mere mortals or losers; he is not bound by them in any way. What is more, he will glibly manage to convince you that he is correct in whatever opinion he is voicing at the moment. Those who live with a narcissist are prone to fall for his reality distortions and may have difficulties after a while telling truth from fiction, even as it pertains to their own perceptions, feelings, and thoughts.

Part of a narcissist's persuasiveness comes from his skill in telling people what they want to hear. He is flexible this way. As values do not matter, neither do facts; the only thing that counts is 'winning' in whatever game he is playing at the moment, so he will bend reality to suit that purpose. His tools of persuasion include flattery, empty promises, cajoling, faking shared concerns, covertly aggressive maneuvers like insinuations ("I don't know if 'A' is really a thief or liar, but that's what I've heard; I'm just saying") and emotional (and not only) blackmail; as well as threats, followed by physical harm if he is also a violent type.

The early stages of contact with a narcissist can be exhilarating. He often exudes considerable charm that blinds people to his real intentions and deeds. When zeroing on his targets, a narcissist spares no tricks to extract whatever it is that he is after (money, sex, submission, attention). And, because he lacks inhibitions, his behavior appears refreshingly "spontaneous," "honest" and/or "courageous." Confident and decisive, he inspires hope as a leader, and/or a romantic or business partner. Not until his victims are fully invested in a relationship with him does the disconcerting truth about his character — selfish, callous, and cruel — become apparent to them.

As a narcissist does not understand what other people feel and experience, he must rely on projection (a self-defense mechanism where he denies the existence of his faults while attributing them to others) during those rare occasions when he may try to grasp what others feel and think (of him and his winning schemes, of course — the most fascinating and the only, really, subject that interests him). And what he projects onto others is fairly consistent: fear, jealousy, contempt, rage, hatred, and a desire for revenge.

This inability to understand the inner worlds of other people, and his reliance on projection, is one of the reasons why a narcissist usually ends up plagued by paranoia.

Because he sees interactions with people as a game based on manipulation and domination, he imagines that those who interact with him are trying to manipulate, dominate, and harm him as well. If he happens to be a grand tyrant responsible for the suffering of legions of people, then of course he has many enemies trying to get rid of him, so his belief that others are out to get him is at least partly justified and reality-based.

But even if the scale of his activities is smaller, and his victims fewer and not as severely harmed, he will develop a belief that people, including his intimates, are trying to hurt him in some way. Granted, his misdeeds and crimes have earned him many enemies, but he is

projecting on others his view of the world where psychopathic dealings apply to everybody, without exception. Even if faced with an expression of kindness and trust, he would not recognize it as such. That is the sort of inner devastation that the absence of conscience brings about.

Ultimately, there is no escape from the ruthless, paranoia-infected world in which a narcissist finds himself immersed over time, other than through a total destruction of it and/or himself.

### **The Narcissist's Inner Life (such as it is)**

The narcissist's emotional life is as shallow as his relationships with others. His most common emotional states are chronic empty discontent — his baseline; excitement when engaged in his game, and boredom when not; pride when winning and/or receiving the adulation to which he is entitled; contempt for "the weak" (i.e., non-winning people); jealousy when he sees others succeeding; and rage when he is losing, feels neglected/rejected or opposed, or when his weaknesses are exposed.

The insatiability of a narcissist's ego is one of the reasons for his discontent. There is never enough power or adulation. Either the game is on and he is winning, or he may as well not exist. When not at the center of attention and adoration, he withers and sulks. If not pursuing his next object of gratification, he's bored and restless.

He does not tolerate aloneness well and, even if talented, has no significant interests or a desire to grow his talents beyond chasing power and adulation. But for this, he needs other people willing to admire him and relinquish their possessions, willpower, dreams, or whatever else he needs to further his self-centered goals. He learns to extract those resources by any psychological and physical means at his disposal early on in life. He believes he is entitled to them, and other people exist as their providers; in fact, other people are the resources to exploit.

Even if a narcissist has a high IQ, he sounds — and is — unintelligent because his emotional stuntedness makes him incapable of grasping essential facts of human life, particularly higher level feelings and values, as well as different perspectives on life's issues. When his IQ is average or below, his obvious limitations will be all the more apparent. While narcissists will actively espouse on many occasions how "smart" they are, they totally lack the capacity to be "bright," the elements of which include the capacity for intellectual and emotional reasoning and debate necessary for forming rational ideas and predicting outcomes.

A narcissist's cognitive style as well as his behavior can be best described as impulsive. He is averse to sustained effort and this makes him a lousy worker; but then he is not cut out for something as boring and unglamorous as work — his destiny is far grander than that. Work

is for losers. He has people doing it for him, and then stamps his name on the finished product, taking credit for their accomplishments.

An exception to the impulsivity that characterizes his cognition and behavior may be his long(er)-term schemes of domination. When he is engaged in devising his next power grab or plotting revenge, he can maintain his focus and plan his actions in ways that are not typical for his day-to-day behavior; but even then he has difficulties with the follow through in the absence of instant and/or spectacular gratification.

A narcissist's speech is vague, impressionistic, light on facts, and often contradictory. No matter the subject, however, his words are almost always seasoned with grandiosity, resentment, and sometimes sadism. He makes up his arguments, such as they are, as he goes, without any regard for truth or consistency, but it is not really that he lies. Just as he is not constrained by values, he is not hampered by facts and figures, so he creates his own to suit his needs at the moment.

It is not, however, as though his understanding of himself and the world is entirely fact-free. There are three major facts around which his whole reality is organized:

1. I am great.
2. People unfairly malign me.
3. I will show them (they will pay).

Those are not just beliefs — they are facts etched deep in his psyche, and they evoke corresponding emotional states of 1. grandiose pride, 2. sense of victimhood and resentment, 3. desire for revenge, all of which form the core of his sense of self and motivate his actions.

That desire for revenge is as much a payback for his real and imagined humiliations, as it is a yearning to assert his ultimate domination over others. Before it manifests itself on a grand scale (should he be allowed to wield so much power), it may be observed in his everyday actions. A narcissist creates discord wherever he goes by inflaming the worst impulses in others and watching the results of such manipulation, while he gloats and revels in his power evidenced in having others do his bidding. He cannot help being destructive, as there are no brakes, imposed by conscience, on his rapacious primitive drives.

This lack of brakes endows him with a kind of perverse Midas touch: he destroys everything he comes in contact with — relationships, projects, organizations, countries. He does not create anything of value; he is either indifferent or hostile to expressions of values in the material world. He may annihilate such expressions — books, works of art, or cherished public spaces — out of spite. Like the Wilde's cynic, he knows the price of everything, and

the value of nothing — and he is proud of it. His compulsion to dazzle and to erect ever greater monuments to his own glory, whether in the form of bombastic poetry or shiny palaces, satisfies his grandiosity; but it is also a way to divert attention, his own and others, from the destruction he sows around him.

Since reality as we know it does not matter to a narcissist and his main preoccupations are his own desires, his assessment of any situation, no matter how trivial or grave, will reflect that egocentric focus on his own feelings and needs, particularly his need for self-aggrandizement. And so, for example, an objectively dangerous tyrant will be, in the narcissist's eyes, a flawless "great man," if he flatters his ego and/or is someone he can identify with and wants to emulate. A narcissist's own multiple failures in life are successes in his own eyes, because that is how he feels about them, truth be damned. Remember, facts do not matter and values do not exist in the narcissist's peculiar universe. What does matter is accumulation of power and adulation by any and all means, without any responsibility for the outcome of his pursuit and its effect on others.

### **Not Just Fluffy's Greatest Nightmare**

Narcissism is evident in a wide range of professions, not infrequently in business and politics. The most alarming for their antisocial and psychopathic actions come from the likes of business tycoons like Madoff on Wall Street to world despots like Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, Pol Pot and Radovan Karadzic, to name but a few. All were able to meet their obsessive power objectives that began in early life and like Qaddafi and Saddam claimed to the end that "the people loved them." They too, at one critical time in history, were sadly admired, respected and believed by the masses.

As you can see, the consequences of the character defect known as narcissism on the affected individual and his world are profound, and most of all because of the impairment of conscience. The size of the façade of his overblown ego and the need to protect it from injury at all costs, no matter how detrimental to others, are proportional to the shallowness of his existence caused by this impairment.

One hopes knowing this will help in understanding the unbearable lightness of being a narcissist — unbearable mostly for others, although sometimes for him too; a task that seems especially important during this election season.

And now please go check on Fluffy. He's shivering, poor thing. It's probably another nightmare — or maybe a dream of glory. With cats, one never knows.

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