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The Fear of Death and Narcissism

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The idea of death is a universally repressed fear that lies at the root of so much of what we create, define, imagine, hypothesize, believe and dream. The fear of death is always present to us in its manifestations, which have been influenced by the forces of narcissism, heroism, and repression-all of which have creatively shifted throughout culture and history. Without the answer to the purpose of our biological existence, we have created symbolic surrogates, the purpose of which is an attempt to avoid death. Culture provides us with the images and symbols of immortality aiding us in repressing the fear of death by providing us with ways of building a sense of self. Afraid of the unknown, we crave for meaning and a sense of specialness in order to help us forget that we all die.

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Death and Spirits

To be a god or food for the worms: this is the question that underlies the paradoxical nature of humanity. For Freud (1930), if there is an instinct to live, then there must be an instinct to die or to return to an inorganic state. Life is the result of the mutually opposing action of these two instincts (p. 77). However, for Freud, it is not easy to see the activity of the death instinct at work. Freud believed that the death instinct's energy or 'libido' is diverted toward the external world in the form of an aggressive and destructive instinct. Otherwise, the restricted energy would contribute towards self-destructive tendencies (p. 78). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud says, "the aim of all life is death" (p. 46). However, Freud is not clear on whether this drive is registered in the unconscious. He does place it in the ego, the seat of all anxiety. However, there seems to be only a vague unconscious correlative. Rheingold (1967) describes this dilemma as, "Freud's conception of a death instinct presents us with a paradox: we are impelled to extinction by an elemental drive, yet the unconscious seems to contain nothing that would lend substance to the concept of the annihilation of life" (p. 64). If there is a death instinct, then there could be an unconscious response to it in the form of the fear of death.

Contra Freud, the idea of death can be a universally repressed fear that not only lies at the root of aggressive and destructive actions, but also at so much of what we create, define, imagine, hypothesize, believe and dream. Though this fear is held in abeyance by narcissistic foci on self, tales of heroism, innumerable defensive processes, and the structure of society itself, it is nevertheless present. The symbolism of death and immortality has taken many shapes and forms throughout the process of human history. The fear of death and the failures of our belief systems rarely reveal their troublesome faces, but fuel much of what we do.

Beliefs and images of death are fantasies, sprung from fear of the unknown. Has the fear of death existed across cultures throughout history? Our fear of death has been, is, and always will be present. Its manifestations have creatively shifted and morphed throughout culture and history. The fear of the unknown is omnipresent; the symptom is what changes.

It is human nature to ask why and to search for meaning. The quest for truth and knowledge has somehow become a defense, however, a compulsive flight from the fear of unknowing (Fenichal, 1945), and has aided in the human denial of our limited time and mortality (Schiffer, 1978; Ovid, 8 C.E.). Death is our destiny; it cannot be avoided. In the face of fear with no answers to a biological reality, humans have created spiritual meanings and realms of life that transcend the physical body and its demise. How do humans defend themselves against the end of their natural existence? They have to believe they are special by creating a civilization filled with rich and deep symbolic rituals, religions, and myths. They serve as a distraction from the physical fate that awaits and terrifies them. As Freud (1927) wrote, "Man's self-regard, seriously menaced, calls for consolation; life and the universe must be robbed of their terrors; moreover his curiosity, moved it is true, by the strongest practical interest, demands an answer" (p. 20).

Otto Rank (1941), in *Beyond Psychology*, saw that civilization had emerged not only from the rational intellect of the human ego and the 'elemental forces of his instinctual self,' but from a combination of rational and irrational that forms the supernatural. Humans have never lived solely in the biological realm. "The most primitive people known to us show strange and complicated modes of living which become intelligible only from their supernatural meaning" (p. 62). The supernatural, the equivalent to what we call culture, is "made up of things non-existent in

nature" (p. 63).

Rank explains how we imagine that we have a spiritual self, in common with our ancestors. It is, according to Rank, this supernatural non-physical self that is the true human element, instead of the biological. It is the biological self that is denied, for its acceptance comes with the awareness of one's death. "Primitive man," in the earliest magical world-view, sought the eternal survival of the self. Rank says, "This man-made supernatural world-view forms the basis of culture, since man had to support himself increasingly with more and more concrete symbols of his need for immortalization" (p. 64).

The Double

Magic, ritual, religion, art, and literature, according to Rank's argument, are created to deny death, decay, and insignificance. Religion, partly emerging from a need for immortalization, was the most powerful tool for the creation of the cultural world (Rank p.3). As Freud (1927) said, "Religious ideas have arisen from the same need as have all the other achievements of civilization: from the necessity of defending oneself against the crushingly superior force of nature" (p. 26). Rank saw that the roots of psychology lay in primitive magic, which aimed at protecting humans from the unknown by pretending to be able to control it somehow (p. 66).

Rank describes the division of self into biological and spiritual aspects: the double, a theme that far antedates Greek drama and mythology. Rank further shows the shift in attitude toward the role of one's shadow. The first conception of the soul may be its depiction as a shadow, "his mysterious double, a spiritual yet real being" (p. 71), as seen by primitive tribes. The primitive concept of the double represented both the living and the dead person. The shadow had an independent life from the body, which was

considered the most vital, for it survived the body's demise. Rank says, "In the original duality of the soul concept, I am inclined to see the root of man's two endeavors to preserve his self and to maintain the belief in immortality: religion and psychology. From the belief in a soul of the dead in one form or another sprung all religion; from the belief in the soul of the living, psychology eventually developed" (p. 74). From the religious idea of soul sprung the first rational psychology. Psychology is the study of the soul. If there is no distinct soul separate from the body, psychology still pursues hidden thought and invisible activity that exist in another realm, another nonbiological self to be brought to light.

Homer's *Iliad* preserves an archaic view of dualistic existence, a visible and invisible soul. The double, being the psyche, a second self, and existing in the realm of dreams, denotes the soul of the dead (Hillman, 1979). Initially, the double is a second self that will live on after death, but there is a subsequent shift in attitude towards the double. Rank says, "Originally conceived of as a guardian angel, assuring immortal survival to the self, the double eventually appears as precisely the opposite, a reminder of the individual's mortality, indeed, the announcer of death itself. Thus, from a symbol of eternal life in the primitive, the double developed into an omen of death in the self-conscious individual of modern civilization" (p. 76).

Rank notes a shift in the early Middle Ages from community to individual. From where does this shift emerge? Rank stresses not only that death could no longer be denied as the termination of the individual self, but also stresses that immortality became associated with *evil*. The double is no longer a mirror image or guardian angel, but the dark opposite. It is a harbinger of one's own mortality, depicted as a bad and threatening aspect of the self. Christian doctrine emphasized the battle between good and evil and also developed the images of the Last Judgment scene.

In the Middle-Ages, the "fear of being doomed on Judgment Day--that is, of not participating in the eternal life of the good--became epidemic in the cult of the Devil, who in essence is nothing but a personification of the moralized double" (p. 76). The fear of death through the development of Christian thought changed the original view of the double. It changed from an identical self, a reflection, a protector, promising personal survival in the future, into the representation of an opposing self viewed as evil, like the *good God and bad Devil*. A reversal of beliefs caused a core change in attitude toward life, as Rank says, from a "naïve belief in supernatural forces, which he was certain could be influenced by magic to a neurotic fear of them, which he had to rationalize psychologically" (p. 66).

According to this line of thought, if the double represents sin, then it must somehow be purified. The resurrection purifies the soul of evil. The fantasy is that through death the self is reborn in an uncontaminated perfected, ideal body. This is a surprisingly pervasive fantasy that continues to this day in different belief systems and in suicidal ideation as well. If we look at cases as divergent as individual suicides, or even cults that extol or actually commit group suicide, for example Aum Shinrikyo or Heaven's Gate, we often find the fantasy of being purified and reborn into a higher realm of existence. And of course we are familiar most recently with extreme cases of suicide bombers and other terrorists who believe they will be purified by death and reborn in paradise if they martyr themselves for God (Beit-Hallahmi, 2004; Lifton, 1999).

Ancient Greece set the stage for the development of psychology out of religion. Rank describes how prehistoric burial rites clearly indicate that the most primitive idea of a tomb for the dead was to house the soul.[1] The primitive conception of the soul was that

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1: See Burkert (1972) for funerary rituals as an attempt at controlling death. "…death is mastered when the mourner becomes a killer" (p. 53).

it belonged to the dead. Eventually, the soul was embodied in the living, making the body the house of the spirit. This was a step towards self-realization, "impelling the individual to immortalize himself increasingly in personal creation of his own" (p. 91). What happens to the immortal double in the minds of humans? It lives on in the myth of the hero through the development of culture. There is a fusion of the two separate selves, mortal and immortal, into the same personality. Rank says, "The development from the immortal double, which might be called the magic self-to the independent creative self immortalized in the hero" (p. 102).

The myth of the hero can be found cross-culturally over time. Despite the disparate aspects and varieties of hero myths, such figures as Gilgamesh, Aeneas, Lancelot, Luke Skywalker, or Neo of The Matrix, share a sense of duality in overcoming evil and death. Campbell (1949, 1988) says on this, "There is a certain typical hero sequence of actions which can be detected in stories from all over the world and from many periods of history. Essentially, it might even be said there is but one archetypal mythic hero whose life has been replicated in many levels by many, many people" (*The Power of Myth* p. 66).[2] The myth of the hero is a familiar one to many cultures. The drive to control, define and explain the unknown is a creative force underlying the basis of civilization.

Heroism as Narcissism

In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker (1973) sees that our main calling in this world is heroism. Becker defines heroism, first and foremost, as “a reflex against the terror of death” (p. 11). This

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2: However, one does not have to rely on Campbell's universal monomyth of the hero to argue that hero myths often focus on life, death and transcendence. See Doty(1986) and O'Flaherty (1983, 1988).

system allows us to participate in a hero system, the purpose of which is to defend ourselves against death and to believe that we have transcended it by participating in something of lasting worth (p. 4).

The key to understanding "man's urge to heroism," is fear and narcissism. Heroism is defined here not as a courageous action, but rather, a compliant one: the urge to attain approval from society by doing what other people deem important, successful, or valuable. People vary in degrees of narcissism their levels of existential anxiety. Our striving toward social approval and feelings of self-worth is a crucial means of defending against the death anxiety that is an inherent aspect of our emotional lives.

According to this view, the problem of heroics is central to human life, and narcissism feeds this heroism. When using the term narcissism, however, different definitions come to mind. The field of psychology has struggled with the meaning of narcissism, as the intended meaning isn't always clear, and it is used to refer to different aspects and levels of the self. We need to clarify the meaning of narcissism before returning to its impact on heroism.

Freud's (1914) drive theory of narcissism is divided into what he terms primary and secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism is the hypothetical state of the infant in which all pain and discomfort are allocated to the outside world so that the self maintains the illusion of embodying all that is pleasurable. Freud describes it as the original libidinal investment that focuses entirely on the infant's own comfort and negates the outer world. Secondary narcissism occurs after the child begins to recognize the external object as a separate being. After the experience of frustration with the object, the libido is withdrawn from the object and it turns back onto the self.

Narcissism is generally referred to as the libidinal investment of self. This can range from healthy to pathological. Pulver (1970) classifies narcissism in four different ways. First he describes narcissism as a sexual perversion, which is the taking of one's own body as a sexual object. Kohut (1971) and Reich (1960) have both observed that many acts deemed sexual perversions serve the function of defending the person against self-depletion and fragmentation, and they may restore a precarious self-esteem. Secondly, Pulver describes narcissism in terms of object relationships. This can be either a lack of relations with a person in the external world or a type of object choice in which the self plays a more important part than the actual other. Thirdly, he describes narcissism in terms of a developmental stage, thus characterizing the phase as a libidinal narcissistic state. Fourthly, he uses narcissism in terms of self-esteem, which includes various aspects of a complex ego state (pp. 97-107).

Bursten (1973), Kernberg (1975) and Reich (1960) describe different character types and varying degrees of pathology within the narcissistic spectrum. Bursten defines a narcissist as "one whose relationships are characterized by a sense of identity with himself, does not relate to the other and sees himself in the other person" (p. 288). Bursten classifies four different character types in the narcissistic style. A character type is defined as a mode of style that reaches such a "consistency that it dominates the ego's repertoire of defenses and adaptations" (p. 288). The ‘craving narcissistic’ is described as dependent, passive-aggressive, clingy and demanding. His or her interpersonal relationships are based on receiving support. The ‘manipulative individual’ is an anti-social liar, who is not afflicted with guilt. He or she maintains superficial relationships and holds considerable contempt for people. The ‘phallic narcissist,’ who parades masculinity in one form or another, is also a passive-aggressive, exhibitionist while also engaging in reckless behavior. The ‘paranoid narcissist’ is hypersensitive, rigid, unwarrantly suspicious, jealous, envious,

and argumentative. He or she has excessive self-importance and a tendency to blame others (pp 290-291).

Annie Reich (1960) generally defines narcissists as "people whose libido is concentrated on themselves at the expense of object love" (p. 217). Reich describes various narcissistic patterns: the grandiose kind, the body kind and the infantile kind, as attempts to repair damage done by early traumatic experiences to the self-representation. In the grandiose individual he or she has fantasies that aim at his or her own aggrandizement, which has become life's main purpose. Reich's infantile style is similar to Bursten's craving type; the body type is the same as his 'phallic narcissist.' Kernberg (1975) outlined three varying degrees of pathology in the narcissistic spectrum. He differentiates between healthy and pathological narcissism. Healthy narcissism in an individual is a sense of self-love, of self-acceptance, and of confidence without conceit, self-obsessiveness or grandiosity. This person has the capacity to feel for the needs of others, is pleased with him or herself, but is not preoccupied with his or her own superiority. In pathological narcissism the person is preoccupied by exceptional vulnerability and is subsequently consumed with protecting and defending oneself (p 322). The first type is a mild form, in which there is a regression to an infantile, compared to a mature, libidinal investment of self and object. Here there is still an object relationship. In a severe type, there is a profound deterioration of object relations. The relation is no longer between self and object, but between self and a primitive, grandiose and projected self. The most severe narcissistic disturbance is what is known as a narcissistic personality disorder, in which there is a relation of a grandiose self to a temporarily projected grandiose self in another (pp. 324-325).

The narcissistic personality, described by Freud (1931), Kohut (1971), and Kernberg (1975) is the most extreme in the spectrum. According to Kernberg, the main characteristics of these individ-

uals are excessive self-absorption, grandiosity, and an absence of empathy for others, even though they need admiration and approval from others combined with a superficially smooth and effective social adaptation. They lack positive feelings about their own activities and become easily bored and restless once the newness of a situation or person wears off. Behind their charming pretense, there are deep feelings of destructive rage, envy and distrust of those upon whom they depend. The surface shows a lack of object relations, but at a deeper level one can see very intense internalized object relations with primitive defensive mechanisms of projective identification, denial and splitting (pp. 227-228).

In accordance with Kernberg, Kohut also describes a lack of genuine emotion, the sense of restlessness and boredom and many other commonalities. Kohut stresses that the narcissistic individual has developed a cohesive self-organization, compared to borderline and psychotic individuals, but they are vulnerable to fragmentation under stress. Their functioning, though defective, is still cohesive. For a more recent but similar definition there is the DSM-IV-TR, which says (p. 717):

> A pervasive patter of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contents, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:
>
> 1) has a grandiose sense of self-importance
> 2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love
> 3) believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
> 4) requires excessive admiration
> 5) has a sense of entitlement

6) is interpersonally exploitative
7) lacks empathy
8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes

This definition is similar to those of Kernberg and Kohut, but tends to focus more on the grandiose qualities of the self in the criteria. Kernberg and Kohut would also include individuals who may seem to function socially well on the surface.

The vast literature on narcissism further looks at differing conflicts, defects, and defensive structures developed in an individual as a result of problematic object-relations between mother and child. Winnicott (1965) emphasizes the early failure of the "holding environment" on the development of the self. While the True Self is the result of a healthy development, the False Self develops from the failure of the not-good-enough mother to respond to the infant.

Kohut (1977) describes the first object relations of the developing child as recognizing the mother as part of the self. This 'self-object' is not yet autonomous, but part of the self and its needs. Under healthy development, when the self can provide its own gratifications, it then regards the object as separate and autonomous. For healthy development to occur, the mother must be empathically responsive to the infant's need for admiration, which Kohut terms mirroring. Pathological forms of narcissism develop when the mother fails to respond empathically to the infant's needs, resulting in a developmental fixation at primitive levels of grandiosity and idealization, all of which in turn leads to defensive rage among other things.

Kohut (1971) sees that the central disturbance in narcissistic disorders is the absence or defect in internal structures that maintain

self-cohesiveness and self-esteem. In narcissistic object relationships, another person functions as a substitute for defective self-esteem, fulfilling basic functions that the individual's own psyche cannot. The other is narcissistically cathected when he or she is experienced not as the center of his or her own independent activity, but as a part of oneself. If the other then does not act as expected, the narcissistic individual experiences a sudden loss of control, which can also lead to narcissistic rage.

For Kernberg (1971) all early experiences in infancy contribute to the integration and differentiation of internalized self and object representations. In the narcissistic personality disorder, stable ego boundaries are established, but there is a refusion of previously internalized self and object representations. Here there is a fusion of the ideal self, ideal object and actual self images as a defense against anxiety arising from difficult interpersonal relationships. Normal individuals maintain structural tensions between idealized self and object (superego) and actual self and object (ego). The narcissistic personality disorder fuses ideal self and object with actual self to destroy the actual object. One absorbs the desired aspects of the other, while unacceptable self-images are repressed and projected onto the other, who becomes a hated surrogate for the unacceptable self. Idealized people, on whom such narcissists depend, can be seen as projections of their own aggrandized self-concepts. The entire defensive effort is to maintain self-admiration, to depreciate others and to avoid dependency.

From this brief glimpse at the complexities of object relationships, it is obvious how different individuals react, are influenced, and develop in different ways to varying degrees of parenting. Some may develop healthy personality structures and defensive operations in dealing with their external and internal worlds, while others may not. A theory that claims a universal fear at the root of all human anxieties should explore a bit deep-

er into the complexities and valances of innate dispositions and external influences on the human psyche. The theory of innate existential death anxiety advanced by Becker (1973), as well as the findings of object relations and self psychology, exemplify how the experience of helplessness in the infant leads to the development of defensive behaviors, whether one derives self-esteem from one's parents and culture or develops pathological narcissistic structures.

Kohut (1972) sees how narcissistic rage is a reaction not only to feelings of helplessness, but loss of control as well. Experiences during the development of the self become the prototype for later vulnerabilities and securities within the narcissistic realm. Examples of these tendencies are fluctuations in self-esteem, the amount of praise needed, merger into idealized figures, and the cohesion of self-structures during periods of transition (p. 368). "The narcissistically vulnerable individual responds to actual (or anticipated) narcissistic injury either with shame faced withdrawal (flight) or with narcissistic rage (flight)" (p. 379). Even though narcissistic rage can occur in many forms, there are certain qualities that distinguish it from other types of aggression. The distinct qualities are: the need for revenge, for righting a wrong by any means, and an unrelenting compulsion to carry out these aims on the part of the individual, who has experienced narcissistic injury.

Kohut sees that a shame-prone individual will respond to a shame-provoking situation by inflicting upon others that which they are most afraid of suffering themselves. This is often carried out in an anticipatory fashion, motivated by the desire to turn a passive experience into an active one, identification with one's aggressor, and the sadistic tendencies absorbed from one's parents. This shame-prone individual is motivated by an archaic grandiose-self, which does not recognize his or her opponent autonomously, but as a "flaw in a narcissistically perceived real-

ity" (p. 386). The healthy individual experiences the aggressive object as separate from the self. For the narcissistic personality disorder, the object is experienced as the part of the self over which control has been lost. Kohut then sees that narcissistic rage "arises when self or object fail to live up to the absolutarian expectations which are directed at their function. Although everybody tends to react to narcissistic injuries with embarrassment and anger, the most intense experiences of shame and the most violent forms of narcissistic rage arise in those individuals for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable because the maintenance of self-esteem- and indeed of the self- depends on the unconditional availability of the approving-mirroring functions of an admiring self-object, or on the ever-present opportunity for a merger with an idealized one" (p. 386). Such rage exemplifies an extreme type of defensive behavior coming out of a narcissistic structuring in response to a variety of external influences ranging from a minor slight to a perceived battle. All narcissistic rage results from an archaic mode of helplessness. The lack of empathy for the object, the desire to wipe out the offense, and the vengeful fury can all be understood as a rage that reacts to experienced helplessness and loss of control.

Now, let us consider Pulver's (1970) problem of equating narcissism and self-esteem. Freud (1914) often used self-regard, an affective concept, and narcissistic libido, a drive concept, interchangeably. This has led to a widespread synonymous use of the two concepts. Pulver's (1970) problem with this is that a theoretical drive concept is identified with the phenomenon of self-esteem, which is more complex. Self-representations, which may or may not be linked with affective states of pleasure or displeasure, consist of memory traces of inner experiences, sensations, and thought processes and later of indirect self-perceptions. If there is a definite link with affect, then the term the term “self-image” is used. Once these self-images become organized into a

cohesive affective one, this is self-esteem. Self-esteem can be high, a predominance of pleasurable affects, or low, a predominance of unpleasurable ones. These can be conscious, preconscious, or unconscious, having complex origins, and many defensive adaptive functions (pp. 104-105). This exemplifies that the understanding of self-esteem as the libidinal investment of self will not do, but that a more in-depth one is needed.

An example of how narcissism and self-esteem are not interchangeable can be found in an article by Joffe and Sandler (1967). If self-esteem is the libidinal investment of the self, then it should decrease as libido is invested in others and vice versa. However, this is not the case, for it is known that those high in self-esteem are the most capable of being interested in others. Pulver (1970) points out another problem, which becomes apparent as two very different types of self-regard are identified. Freud's original concept of self-regard and narcissism consisted of secondary narcissism. The pathological defenses, the withdrawing of interest to protect against anxiety brought on by an object and the inflating of self-regard, came to be termed as narcissism. However, high self-esteem without defensive anxiety was also termed narcissism, thus making it difficult to know which state was being referred to by just using the word narcissism. This led to the development of good and bad narcissism, good being non-defensive and secure self-esteem with pleasurable affect, and bad being defensive pride and high regard for the self as a defense against unpleasurable affect (Pulver, p. 106).

Horney (1939) also distinguishes between self-esteem and self-inflation, the latter being her term for narcissism. For her, self-esteem is based upon the genuine capacities that an individual possesses, which may be high or low, while self-inflation is an attempt to cover a lack of qualities by the false presentation of capacities that do not exist. Stolorow (1975) also makes such a distinction. He sees that self-esteem is a complex affective state

determined by many factors. Narcissism functions to maintain and regulate the cohesiveness and stability of the self-representations. Self-esteem is vulnerable to both internal and external influences. Narcissistic activities protect, restore, and repair self-esteem when it is threatened or destroyed (p. 183). Bursten, who gave us four types of narcissistic character types, sees that their task is to maintain and restore their self-esteem. Each type has a different way of doing this by narcissistic repair. The craving personality pouts and sulks. The paranoid seeks repair through argumentativeness, jealousy, and suspiciousness. For the manipulative, it is 'getting over on someone.' For the phallic narcissist, it is arrogance, self-glorification, aggressive competitiveness and pseudo-masculinity (pp. 292-296). One can see that individuals with narcissistic personality disorder are constantly working at maintaining their self-esteem. Threats to such structures, real or imagined, would only lead to more defensive behaviors.

We must be careful then when we see these terms and ask what is really meant by the authors. Even though we have seen how self-esteem and narcissism are not synonymous, we can also see how they work together in varying degrees to help the individual grow, derive meaning from their world, and defend against anxiety. Hence, narcissism and self-esteem become intertwined by external cues of approval and survival.

This is where Becker's (1973) contribution is especially profound. For Becker, narcissism is the ineradicable yearning for self-esteem, the basic sense of self-worth that all human beings require. It does not disappear even when children are loved well. We cannot live without affirmation and social acceptance. While Becker briefly discusses parental influence, he dismisses the idea that narcissism is related to love, neglect, or abuse.[3] Narcissism is not pathological but the natural human sense of self-absorption, self-importance, and expansiveness. It accounts for our callousness, competitiveness, and cruelty, as we vie for supremacy

and disdain the importance of others, and compete for "cosmic significance." "[I]t is too all-absorbing to be an aberration, it expresses the heart of the creature: the desire to stand out, to be the one in creation" (p. 3). From an adaptive point of view, it is biologically and evolutionarily advantageous for infants to be selfish and needy. Narcissism is the natal means of survival by demanding care and protection. The consequence of that need for protection is that children learn what gets them love, approval, neglect, and punishment: "we know that basic narcissism is increased when one's childhood experiences have been securely life-supporting and warmly enhancing to the sense of self, to the feeling of being really special, truly Number One in creation" (p. 22). This unremitting need for narcissistic affirmation yields a "creature who has to feel himself an object of primary value: first in the universe representing in himself all of life" (p. 3). Further, Becker says that the human "sense of self-worth is constituted symbolically, his cherished narcissism feeds on symbols" (p. 3). We invest ourselves in appearances, ostensible accomplishments, possessions, and competition for superiority.

Narcissism has a further aspect for Becker, for it defends us against the terror of death. Becker states, "…his repression of the idea of his own death is made easy for him because he is fortified against it in his very narcissistic vitality" (p. 22). We all enjoy a bit of narcissism. Basic narcissism is cultivated through a healthy development, allowing the individual to pass through crises and adjust to developmental changes. However, death is more than the termination of life. It is a complex symbol with vast valences,

3. Becker discusses how a healthy upbringing better equips the child to repress the fear of death, but he avoids the implications of an unhealthy upbringing on a child's ability to repress this fear and to develop defenses. Becker states that environmental and innate positions are a part of the same picture, but he only includes the part that ideally supports his theory. Looking at parental influences would not contradict Becker's theory, but such scrutiny would actually deepen and expand it by including the differences in style and ability, or lack thereof, to defend against existential anxiety.

varying in intensity. Becker believes that death is such a determinative force that even a healthy upbringing can only equip the child with firmer defenses against death anxiety (pp. 22-23). It certainly cannot eradicate death anxiety, which still seethes beneath repression and denial, compelling so much of our manic activity. To be neurotic is the normal way of coping with reality. If we are fortunate enough to acquire a surfeit of ego strength, social approval, and even some "inner sustainment," we are defended against the terror of death ever lurking beneath our denial.

Narcissism has yet one final connotation for Becker. More than a mere biological striving for self-expansion, and beyond the capacity of organismic vitality to repress death, narcissism is also a reaction to the unavoidable terror of separation and death. Here narcissism is an inflated sense of self, importance, power, and control that is inextricably bound to the causa sui project of self-creation, the wish to father and master oneself (cf. Brown, 1959). This involves self-repression, the urgent attempt by the child to dominate its own body, impulses, vulnerability, and needs. Through "primary narcissism," the child subjugates its world by trying to subjugate the mother. During what Freud terms the "anal phase," the child turns to subordinating its body as a narcissistic project of mastery and possession of the world. During each phase of development, the child tries to domineer its body as a way of not being helpless against an overwhelming and frightening environment. The child is not just toilet-trained; he trains himself to conquer his shameful incontinence, to get away from the helpless, frail, excreting body. For Becker parenting is essentially irrelevant because children will always reject their own weakness and inflate their sense of narcissistic power (p. 37). This is both actual control of the body and the fantasy of narcissistic transcendence of bodily fragility.

Thus narcissism is simultaneously an adaptive way of surviving

within society, and a psychological feeling of importance that defends against the terror of death. Humanity's tragic dilemma is summed by the plight of the hero: the desire to overcome adversity and death along with the yearning for renown and love. How does one attain love and admiration from a society that demands conformity and obedience while maintaining a sense of individuality by looking into the fear of the unknown with transcendental courage?

Society is the vehicle and structural system for this striving toward heroism. It provides us with rules, customs, and modes for behavior, the ideas and prescriptions from which we can attain validation. Each culture is unique, and its hero system can be magical, religious, secular, primitive, scientific or civilized. Nevertheless, it "is still a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning" (p. 5). Some individuals will even die for their culture as long as they feel that they serve a heroic, timeless, and meaningful purpose.

Becker sees a crisis of modern day society, where the youth no longer feel a sense of heroic purpose in the system.[4] Religion is no longer a hero system and the youth scorn it. There is an absence of narratives of the dramatic apotheosis of human kind. In fact vast numbers of people do still believe in God. But in an increasingly secular society, without afterlives or viable forms of heroism other forms of denial are more pronounced. One conspicuous solution is even more narcissistic preoccupation with the self, obsession with beauty, youth, and celebrity. The denial of decay is seen today in airbrushed images of beauty, and the pervasiveness of botox and plastic surgery, which are now standards of beauty-maintenance in Hollywood. When God and hero-

4. For further discussion see Rollo May (1991).

ism are absent the fear of death runs rampant, and narcissism wars against death even more vaingloriously. We become a culture of narcissism.

Humans have a paradoxical nature, both a biological body and a symbolic sense of self. We have an aging body from birth and a mind that strives toward physical and symbolic immortality. Becker calls us “gods with anuses” (p. 51). We can conceive an infinite cosmos, dream of the Sistine Chapel, polyphonic harmony, and nuclear fission. We can think of past and future, our very conception before birth, and we can have awareness that we will die and decompose. This ejects us from the Garden of Eden. The preternatural gifts no longer hold. Consciousness and personal identity bring us sharply out of nature, while leaving us with the constant awareness of a morbid end. Becker describes this paradox; "he is out of nature and hopelessly in it… Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever" (p. 26). The inevitability of our death haunts our dreams throughout our lives. As Becker says, no wonder we are mad, for it is a necessary defense against our paradoxical nature. According to this view, all that we do in the symbolic world is an attempt to avoid our grotesque fate. Culture opposes and transcends nature, for it is a heroic denial of our creatureliness. Culture provides us with the images and symbols o immortality that aid us in repressing the fear of death, and further supplies directions for attaining self-esteem, the fantasy of being heroic.

Terror Management Theory and Self-Esteem

There is even scientific support for these speculations. Building on the works of Becker (1973), Rank(1941) and Brown (1959), terror management theory has produced empirical evidence for

the idea that the underlying terror of death influences our everyday thoughts, behaviors, and beliefs. Terror management theory attempts to uncover why people need both self-esteem and faith in their conceptions of reality. These psychological structures influence a wide range of human thought and behavior. Up to now Terror management theory has done extensive research on uncovering the functions of self-esteem in relation to existential threat. However, as we have seen from the literature on narcissism and self-esteem, the two are not synonymous. A simple definition of self-esteem is not sufficient.

For terror management theory there are two basic human tendencies: a desire to maintain a favorable self-image, in short a need for self-esteem, and a desire to promote the beliefs and values of one's culture. In accord with Becker, terror management theory sees that the same cognitive capabilities that create terror are also used to bring this fear under control by creating culture. One of the most important functions of cultural worldviews is to suppress the anxiety engendered by the awareness of death. Such views do this by giving the universe order and meaning, providing standards of value, and promising protection and death transcendence to those who meet these standards.

These conceptions of reality make it possible to have self-esteem, through the adoption of social roles. The two components necessary for terror management through the cultural anxiety buffer are faith in a cultural worldview and conforming to the programs that allot self-esteem. Because these structures offer protection from the terror of death, people are motivated to preserve faith in their cultural worldviews and self-esteem to defend these structures against threat.

The empirical assessment of terror management theory is guided by two general hypotheses. The anxiety-buffer hypothesis assumes that strengthening either self-esteem or faith in the cul-

tural worldview results in reducing anxiety and anxiety-related behavior in response to threats. The mortality salience hypothesis states that if a psychological structure protects against terror of mortality, then reminding people of their mortality should increase the need for protection from this structure. In short, reminding people of their own death should activate the need for validation of their self-esteem and should activate belief in the cultural worldview.

Terror management theory proposes that self-esteem and cultural worldviews work together to protect the individual from the threat of existential terror. From this point of view, self-esteem is the perception that one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe, Becker's hero. The need for self-esteem as an existential anxiety buffer is universal, but the specific manner in which self-esteem is acquired and maintained is culturally determined (Pyszczynski, et al., 2004; Greenberg, et al., 1997; Solomon, et al., 1991). Terror management theory has produced copious evidence for the functional role of self-esteem, as defined this way. However, researchers only measure it superficially. There is no consideration of the differences among individual defensive styles. The conclusions drawn on the concepts of self-esteem as an anxiety buffer should be therefore examined.

Previous assessments of terror management theory's analysis of self-esteem have tested the anxiety buffer hypothesis, which states that increasing an individual's self-esteem should lead to less anxiety when exposed to threats. They found the following: 1) that threats to self-esteem will lead to anxiety, 2) when self-esteem is threatened individuals will be highly motivated to minimize the effects of the threat on their self-esteem, 3) when threats are minimized so is anxiety (Solomon et al., 1991, p. 26).

Greenberg et al. (1992) demonstrated that giving subjects a boost to self-esteem, measured by Rosenberg's self-esteem scale

(RSES, 1965), by giving them positive feedback on a personality test led to lower levels of self-reported anxiety in response to viewing a graphic video depicting death. Another study showed that asking subjects an open ended question about their own death led to intensified positive reactions to worldview validators and also lead to negative reactions to those who threaten the worldview (Greenberg et al., 1990). Harmon- Jones et al. (1997) showed that both experimentally enhanced, as well as dispositionally high, self-esteem, which are both measured by the RSES, leads to lower levels of worldview defense and death-thought accessibility in response to reminders of death.

Having high self-esteem results in having less anxiety when faced with death, compared to control groups. However, Baldwin and Wesley (1996) found contradictory results. Their study found that death manipulations led individuals with high self-esteem, assessed by the RSES, to give more polarized judgments of positive and negative worldview validators. Those with high self-esteem, in response to reminders of death, acted more defensively than those with low self-esteem. Baldwin and Wesley (1996) interpret these results in such a way that individuals with high self-esteem would be more affected by mortality salience. Because they base their sense of self on their cultural worldview, threats to that structure would lead them to react more defensively by rejecting those who oppose it. Pyszczynski et al. (2004) claim these contradictory findings as being unclear as high self-esteem individuals may be more generally defensive than low self-esteem individuals, as Harmon-Jones explained.

These discrepancies may be due to an inadequacy in the measurement of self-esteem. Perhaps Baldwin and Wesley (1996) found contradictory results because they had an unusual amount of narcissists in their sample. Because the scale that they used only measures one aspect of self-esteem, they might have failed to identify these individuals. Each study cited relies on

Rosenberg's scale of self-esteem as its measure. While Rosenberg's scale is a good measure of one's conscious thoughts about the self, it does not capture the potential for multiple affective states involved in self-esteem. For example, while individuals with narcissistic personality disorder-to choose the extreme-have high levels of conscious self-esteem, they also have an insecure base, a character structure organized around injuries to self-regard and powerful attempts to repair self-esteem. Their issues are never far from the surface and are most likely to be accentuated in times of anxiety, perceived or real.

Terror management theory follows the ideas of Becker and does not include the different array of healthy and defensive structures developed in an individual as a result of the object-relations between mother and child. As stated earlier when surveying the theories on narcissism, there are many different styles of dealing with anxiety. Some may be an infantile way of relating to and perceiving reality, while others may be even more pathological. Kohut's (1972) description of narcissistic rage is an extreme example of someone's reacting to feelings of helplessness, humiliation and anxiety. Therefore if a study is priming esteem or anxiety in individuals, there will be many forms in which defensiveness and aggression will occur. Only looking to see how someone judges another harshly or how they self-report their self-esteem will not capture the continuum of varying defensive structures. As listed earlier, these personality structures can become defensive in the form of rage, grandiosity or contempt, and interact with others in ways that are manipulative, argumentative, passive-aggressive, anti-social and emotionally dependent. Some of these behaviors may be slipping under the radar. Looking into environmental influences may be helpful in understanding more fully defensive behaviors in the face of existential anxiety.

As stated earlier, there is a continuum between healthy and pathological narcissism. Health narcissism is translated into high self-

esteem in terror management theory. However, narcissism and self-esteem are not interchangeable concepts, as self-esteem is a complex affective state. Terror management theory has been based in part on a surface level measure of self-esteem. Humans are not that simple. A more in-depth measure of self-esteem is needed to capture potential dual attitudes that are held about the self. A study by Goldenberg et al. (2000) was tangentially headed in this direction. It has been shown by terror management theory that mortality salience has the most effect after a delay. Studies use different ways to create this delay such as a word puzzle or a game. To create a delay, this study had participants fill out the following scales: the RSES, a measure of neuroticism (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1967), and a measure of self-objectification. Why not use multiple questionnaires as a true measure of the individual, not merely as a distraction? One would then wonder why the terror management studies have not tried to measure for both conscious and unconscious inndicators of self-esteem by using several types of questionnaires, i.e. the RSES plus the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Hall, 1988). The NPI is also insufficient, for it too measure only one aspect of personality. Therefore, it would not be easy to measure unconscious attitudes about the self.

Research in the field of explicit versus implicit self-esteem, however, has made some progress. A study by Jordan et al. (2003) looked at the difference between secure and defensive high self-esteem. They also investigated the relationship between explicit and implicit self-esteem in relation to defensive behaviors. Explicit self-esteem is defined as "the conscious and deliberately reasoned evaluations of self that are elicited by self-report scales." Implicit self-esteem is defined as "highly efficient evaluations of self that occur unintentionally and outside of awareness" (p 971). Knowing a person's explicit self-esteem, which terror management theory has been measuring, tells us nothing about a person's implicit self-esteem.

An individual with secure high self-esteem has stable, confidently-held positive self-views. An individual with defensive high self-esteem has fragile self-views due to the existence of contradictory attitudes about the self. At an explicit level they feel good, but at an implicit level they feel negative about themselves; in other words, a narcissistic type (Jordan, p. 970). To measure explicit self-esteem, they used the RSES and to measure narcissism they used the NPI. To measure implicit self-esteem, they used the Implicit Association Test (IAT, Greewald, McGhee and Schwartz, 1998), which has shown the highest reliability in implicit studies. The first study hypothesized that the correlation between explicit and implicit self-esteem is related to narcissism, which is a high explicit with a low implicit self-esteem. The RSES and IAT scores were not related to each other with r = .01. As RSES scores increase, the relation between narcissism and IAT becomes increasingly negative. This means that participants with high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem showed the highest levels of narcissism.

The second study looked at defensiveness based on minimal group paradigm, which is using the most insignificant thing, i.e. color preference, to create separate groups. Favoring one's ingroup enhances self-esteem and leads to defensive behavior towards outgroup members. At high levels of explicit self-esteem, individuals with low implicit self-esteem favored their ingroup members more than the participants with high explicit and implicit self-esteem (p. 974). Individuals with high explicit self-esteem and low implicit self-esteem showed higher levels of narcissism and also showed more self-enhancement by favoring their own group (p. 976).

These studies by Jordan et al. (2003) show that high self-esteem can be either secure or defensive, depending on the individual's subconscious feelings about the self. This approach can be used

by the terror management theory to have a better understanding of its subjects. Right now it is unclear whether individuals with ostensibly high self-esteem, recorded explicitly by terror management theory, are secure or defensive. This question is related to the individual's implicitly held self-attitudes. Therefore using both measures of explicit and implicit self-esteem would be helpful in uncovering more of the multiple self-representations and their behaviors. A deeper, more comprehensive approach to measuring some of the parameters and intricacies of self-esteem would shed more light.

While terror management theory demonstrates that self-esteem absorbs death anxiety, are we to believe that as long as people feel good about themselves death will be an insignificant issue? We still require further elucidation of the complexities of the self, how it relates to death, how we explain the universe to ourselves, how we create meaning and purpose. The self requires more than mere esteem to sustain it in the face of death and nonexistence.

Narcissism and Symbolic Immortality

Lifton (1979), along with Becker and Rank, sees that the denial of death is universal, but never total, for we are never fully ignorant of the fact that we die. Lifton emphasizes that the symbolizing processes of death and immortality constitute a core area of self. In agreement with Becker, Lifton believes that the vehicle for symbolic immortality is offered through one's culture. Images of death and continuity, embedded in culture and history, are the map of our hunger for symbolic meaning.

The resistance to images of death can actually interfere with the symbolizing process. Symbolization of continuity is necessary in confronting the fact that we die. A sense of immortality then, Lifton says, "reflects a compelling and universal inner quest for continuous symbolic relationship to what has gone before and

what will continue after our finite individual lives" (p. 17). This quest is central in the creation of culture and history in our biological and historical connectedness.

Lifton believes that this struggle for an experience of symbolic immortality is a core area of self. There are five modes through which we seek the experience of immortality: biological, theological, creative, natural, and experientially transcendent. The biological mode is epitomized through perpetuating the self in family, tribe, organizations, subculture, people-nation, or species continuity. However, a human is a cultural being; therefore, he or she perceives him or herself no longer as a mere biological organism. We require symbolic extensions of self, spiritual survival, perpetuation of our own memory, ideas, and identity. The theological mode provides a sense of immortality through faith in an afterlife, a spiritual principle of life and rebirth, and power over death. As intimated before, a common thread in theology is the spiritual quest of the hero-founder, who confronts and transcends death. The creative mode provides symbolic immortality through art, poetry, literature and science--all of which show how creative work enables one to survive death through works and memory. The natural mode entails the perception that life exists beyond the space of an individual; that one can survive through the survival and continuity of nature. Experiential transcendence is a psychic state so intense that both time and death disappear. Examples of this are ecstatic moments of sexual climax, aesthetic arrest, and bliss with music, nature, art or love. This mode is dependent on cultural images (p. 20).

Lifton stresses the importance of the "inchoate image," which is psychic representation. The image is integral to human life. Lifton says, "Indeed human existence itself can be understood as a quest for vitalizing images and image-constellations" (p. 39). Maintaining the life of the inner self becomes the central motivating principle for psychic action. The absence of such images

threatens life. The symbolized image of death reflects the end of biological and psychological life. According to Lifton, images of death begin to form at birth, but also contain images of life counterparts: connection and separation, integrity and disintegration, movement and stasis. Humans have created both images of death and continuity. Death is embedded in cultural symbolization and is only overcome through the experience of symbolic immortality.

The history of human experience can then be seen as the hunger for symbolic images of immortality under constantly changing conditions. Humankind's imaginative efforts absorb the fear of death and create lasting images of the continuity of life. For modes of immortality to resonate symbolically, they must connect with direct experience and provide a pattern of continuity.

Lifton describes the progression of images of immortality as moving from magical and supernatural to natural and artificial. He describes the modern hunger for immortality as really a "symbol-hunger." This hunger for images defines parts of history as well as the human condition. "Man as we know him emerged with the struggle toward images beyond himself…. In his constant construction of images, man is as much the historical as the cultural animal. At every stage of history and within every culture, he has formed these images into a cosmology, which both absorbs and gives dignity to his ever-present death anxiety" (p. 284).

Conclusions

While the myth of the hero and the need for immortality are universal, these desires have also driven history in myriad ways. Each society has had its own myths of heroes that distinctively confront or evade death, teach us how to conceive death, and consequently find life. The heroic life act is transforming the nega-

tive death imagery into patterns of collective rebirth. Death must be symbolized to be confronted, and through such images it can be transcended and symbolic immortality can be experienced. As Lifton says, "Man, the 'historical animal,' must eternally construct, alter, and replace those cosmologies--must create and recreate his ultimate imagery" (p. 284). Humans live on through this ultimate imagery and the anxiety of death is slightly appeased.

Unknowing is extremely threatening to human beings. From this it can be discerned how certain forms of "mental illness" are failures of the heroic system and the breakdown of death transcendence. The human condition cannot be avoided. Neurosis is normal, and psychosis is not far away. Repression makes life livable. Humans settle for a comfortable level of neurosis instead of the constant awareness of reality. The fear of death is far more prevalent and influential than we tend to believe. This fear rarely leaves us, and due to its repression individually, culturally, and historically, it is a very powerful force. In the face of the fear of the unknown, we cry and crave for meaning and a sense of specialness, and war against those whose immortality systems threaten our own. Who can live with the ever-present awareness that we are food for the worms? We transcend this physical doom into the realm of symbolic immortality. One's society, culture, religion, any meaning system of ultimate value, provide one with a heroic structure through which one achieves, creates, and reproduces with a feeling of purpose. Without such narcissistic illusions, we would be aware that we do not know where we come from, why we are here and what our purpose is. How many people could truly continue existing with such primal anxiety based on the possibility of no purpose or meaning? How fortunate than that we can transcend death symbolically and continue in our daily existence, or as some would see it, how unfortunate are we to be conscious of our paradoxical nature: gods with anuses!

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