

The Temptations of Narcissism

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Narcissism: A Critical Reader Ed. Anastasios Gaitanidis with Polona Curk, London: Karnac 231pp. £19.99 ISBN-13: 978-1-85575-453-9

This is a stylishly presented and well-edited collection of papers about one of the most notoriously difficult topics in psychoanalysis. The concept of narcissism cannot be understood without differentiating and disentangling it from other key concepts in the Freudian vocabulary, the id and the ego in particular.

Anastasios Gaitanidis, the main editor and author of the first paper does not duck the theoretical difficulties but rather seems to relish the challenge. He quickly moves from a brief account of the theorising of the ego, the unification of the auto-erotic drives in primary narcissism and the constantly shifting pseudopodia-like mechanism of investment and withdrawal characterised by Freud as 'secondary narcissism' to the nub of his discussion.

This is the dilemma of distinguishing subject and object in Freud's theory of narcissism. Gaitanidis discusses the following quotation:

Why ... is there any necessity for further distinguishing a sexual libido from a nonsexual energy of the ego-instincts? Would not the postulation of a single kind of psychical energy save us all the difficulties ...? (Freud 1914c, p.76).

For Freud, the problem arises that, with the unification of instincts (better referred to as drives), there is the loss of his essentially conflictual account of the operation of the agencies of the unconscious. To put matters very simply, the ego is the jam in the sandwich between the conflicting demands of the id and superego. This will not work if everything turns into jam.

As Gaitanidis shows, Freud suggests one elegant solution after another to this knotty problem. Firstly, Freud avers that perhaps the essential (for him) element of conflict can be retained by proposing that narcissism is a state where the ego loves itself too much. Thus in order to avoid the trap of endless narcissistic self-reference, the ego has to 'learn' to lean on others.

Gaitanidis detects a Hegelian dialectical argument implicit in Freud:

Psychoanalysis, in this respect, pushes the ego to the path of maximum resistance as it invites it to work hard so as to *negate* (in the Hegelian sense of transcending by simultaneously destroying and preserving) its narcissistic boundaries that prevent it from investing its libido in others, that is to say, it enables the ego to move from narcissism to object-love. Therefore, if narcissism represents the negation (in the Hegelian sense again) of the original state of autoerotic existence, object-love represents the negation of this negation. Pathological narcissism, therefore, signifies the ego's inability to engage with the systematic and continuous (psychoanalytic) work of dialectical negation. (Gaitanidis & Curk 2007, p.16)

Almost a decade later, Freud pushes this argument even further. In *The Ego and the Id* he suggests that, instead of the concept of primary narcissism, the ego is founded by means of identifications. As Gaitanidis says, 'Specifically, it [the ego] originates in identifications with objects that were cathected by the id and then lost.'

In the following pages Gaitanidis clearly describes Freud's reluctance to come down either on the side of the ego being at the mercy of the id or *vice versa*. Despite the many temptations detailed in papers such as *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Freud refuses to depart from his ambivalent stance, thus keeping the door open for negative dialectics. The latter is an extremely useful body of ideas that can be applied in the clinic on a daily basis. The thoughts of the majority of our patients move endlessly between one set of unacceptable/untenable/contradictory ideas and another. Freud's theory allows us to grasp what is going on and intervene by disrupting the dialectical oscillations.

In the second half of the paper, Gaitanidis criticises such varied writers as Jung and Adler (for prioritising the ego at the expense of libido and the id), Hartmann (for detaching the part of the ego from its narcissistic libidinal origins, dubbing it the 'conflict-free ego sphere') and Jacques Lacan (for forging a rigid connection between narcissism and the ego, thus reducing any claims to autonomous agency on the part of the ego). Freud alone, claims Gaitanidis, continues the balancing act of allowing the ego some agency in the face of the incessant demands of the id and the superego thereby providing a dialectical space for the psychoanalytic enterprise, a space for negotiating the multiple ambivalences of subject and object.

The remainder of the book contains many papers that are of a similarly high quality. Of particular interest are Julia Borossa's paper, 'Narcissistic wounds, race and racism' where she discusses Fanon's insistent opening up 'the universals of psychoanalysis to the demands of the particular' in the context of race. In other words, the narcissistic wound always remains but is constitutive of subjectivity. Larry O' Carroll's use of the work of Laplanche, a much underrated analyst in the UK, is also worthy of mention.

There are many books where a reviewer struggles to find something to praise amongst the dross of poorly presented and ill-thought through ideas. In the case of *Narcissism – A Critical Reader*, the opposite is true. Buy a copy and, like me, enjoy a wide and intriguing collection of ideas.