

THE POINT OF EXISTENCE: Transformation of Narcissism in Self-Realization

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1 Dimensions of Self

What makes it so difficult for us as human beings to be deeply authentic and spontaneous, to feel free to be who we naturally are? One aspect of the answer lies in what most spiritual traditions understand to be a case of mistaken identity. Most of us are consciously and unconsciously identified with self-concepts which greatly limit our experience of ourselves and the world. Who we take ourselves to be, as determined by the sets of ideas and images that define us, is very far from the unconditioned reality that deeply realized human beings have come to recognize as our true nature, who we truly are. Numerous approaches, such as psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and various self-improvement techniques can help us change our self-concepts so that we are more realistic, more satisfied, and more effective in our lives. But only an exploration of the actual nature of the self, beyond the details of its content, can bring us to realms of experience which approach more deeply fulfilling, fundamental levels of philosophical or spiritual truth.

Our experience of ourselves can be transformed from identifying with our mental self-images to having awareness of less contingent, more fundamentally real aspects of the self. It is possible to arrive at a place where we can experience ourselves as the actual phenomenon, the actual ontological presence that we are, rather than as ideas and feelings about ourselves. The more we are able to contact the actual presence that we are, the less we are alienated in a superficial or externally defined identity. The more we know the truth of who we are, the more we can be authentic and spontaneous, rather than merely living through concepts of ourselves.

Among the many methods that shift the quality and depth of experience, those used by religious and spiritual traditions are more effective in contacting deeper dimensions of the self, with a more thoroughly developed understanding of these dimensions and their significance for living life than those used by the newer science of psychology. However, psychology has contributed powerful new knowledge about the human being that allows us to systematically work through the barriers to these deeper levels of self, especially the barriers to integrating these levels into one's identity. In particular, the current understanding of narcissism is very useful for the process of inner realization, the process of learning to contact and appreciate the deeper levels of our nature and allowing these dimensions to actually affect our identity.

The inquiry in this book is part of an exploration which can be found in several lines of tradition in the history of human thought and experience: the exploration of deeper, more objective, or more "real" perceptions of the world and of ourselves than we encounter in ordinary experience. These historical paths include:

1. Western philosophy, particularly the Platonic and neoplatonic traditions, some existentialist and phenomenologist thought, and the mystical/gnostic threads within Western religious (Jewish, Islamic and Christian) traditions
2. Modern psychological research and practice, particularly from the perspective created by Freud and developed within ego psychology, self psychology, and object relations theory (including transpersonal, existentialist and humanistic currents in depth psychology, such as Jung's work)
3. The Eastern traditions such as Buddhism, Vedanta and Kashmir Shaivism, which have developed enormous bodies of understanding of the nature of self and mind based on powerful techniques of inquiry.

These lines of thought all explore the nature of the human being as self or subject and its relation to existence, to the divine or ultimate reality, or Being. In the West, a particularly potent thread of this exploration began with the Platonic inquiry as developed by Socrates. We will see in the course of our investigation how pursuing deeply Socrates's admonition, "Know thyself," is a powerful path of liberation from the "cave of illusion," and how, in our own times, we have knowledge and techniques available to help us engage in this inquiry with more precision and ease.

The development of depth psychology has enabled us to take Socrates's query to a new level. Freud's discovery of unconscious aspects of the self was a pivotal development in the understanding of human consciousness. The current focus on narcissism in psychoanalytic and psychological research adds further important knowledge about the self.

However, in the current context of psychology this development of our potential for self-understanding has not really penetrated the question of the nature of the self in a way that would satisfy either the philosopher or the mystic's quest. Existential psychology and some aspects of transpersonal psychology have explored this territory, and its explorations have led to a certain degree of integration of philosophical and spiritual understanding with psychology. In general, however, psychological theory is limited by its conceptions of the self, which we will examine in detail in this book. In the philosophic and spiritual realms the pursuit of truth is often limited by ignorance of the unconscious factors that keep our limited conventional view of ourselves and the world trapped in egoic veils, and thus often render spiritual experience as exasperatingly short-lived or unintegratable into our everyday sense of ourselves.

Not only do these limitations affect the theoretical models of the self in the science of psychology and in the traditions of spirituality and religion, but they also affect, in practice, how psychological treatment is conducted, which methods are used by spiritual traditions and psychology to explore the situation of the self, and what defines success in terms of psychological health or spiritual development.

Self-realization and narcissism

This book is an exploration of the nature of the self, and the relationship between the knowledge of psychology and that which is the focus of various spiritual disciplines. These realms have much to contribute to one another. Our research has come to an understanding which is not a synthesis of the realms of psychology and spirituality, but rather a fundamental view that encompasses both realms.

This fundamental view has illuminated one clear truth about narcissism: Narcissism is a direct consequence of the lack or disturbance of self-realization. It is the most specific consequence of this lack or disturbance, and can be completely resolved only through realization of all aspects and levels of the self. When one is self-realized, one is consciously identified with the most true, real nature of the self. We cannot present here any simple, common-sense description of that true nature; exploring it has occupied philosophers and mystics for centuries. In the next chapter we will describe in more detail what we mean by self-realization. For now, we will simply say that narcissism involves being identified with relatively superficial aspects of the self, as opposed to being aware of one's identity as Being. This identification with superficial aspects of the self results in a feeling of alienation. The only complete resolution of this alienation, and of narcissism, is the realization of one's truest, deepest nature.

In order to contact the deeper truth of who we are, we must engage in some activity or practice that questions what we assume to be true about ourselves. Psychological methods, as well as spiritual and certain religious ways of inquiring into the nature of the self, all have in common processes of seeing through illusions—inaccurate beliefs about oneself, about other people, and about the world. With a deeper appreciation of the nature of the self, psychology could take these processes much further, expanding both the theoretical understanding of self and its usefulness for the healing and support of human development. Also, the methods and results of spiritual traditions could be made much more effective if they utilized the detailed understanding of the nature and development of the egoic self that has been so effectively explored by self psychology and object relations theory.

Dimensions of experience

That there are dimensions to human experience other than those of conventional reality is universally known. Most of us have had profound experiences involving religious insight, deep self-awareness, or some other opening into a realm of Being not generally seen. Visual art, music, and literature aspire to enable us to see or feel aspects of the world or of ourselves without the usual veils. We have been moved by moments of awareness of a larger reality or an unseen force, or by visions or insights, that cannot be explained within the conventional concept of the self. Love and wonder, a sense of light and grace, and peak experiences of oneness in nature are all insights into deeper dimensions of reality.

In addition to appreciating these more commonly experienced deeper dimensions, it is also possible to become aware of the more specifically spiritual dimensions of the human self, what could be called the true human qualities: selfless love, radiant joy, inner strength and will, brilliance and clarity of mind. These qualities are universally acknowledged and valued aspects of ourselves that we can at least participate in occasionally.

Most of the current concepts of depth psychology cannot account for these experiences, and bodies of work which do address these levels of experience, such as Jung's, are generally not informed by the detailed understanding of narcissism which is part of ego psychology. This situation, however, is in the process of changing, and the present work is our contribution to that change.

Even though the existence of the deeper and more expanded dimensions of experience can be easily verified personally by anyone who engages seriously in any of the myriad spiritual practices, and even though there are indeed whole centuries-long bodies of scholarship in which these dimensions are explored in detail by communities of mystics, philosophers, artists and writers, still, the current conventional mind, including the perspective that dominates modern psychology, considers such realms of experience unscientific or unverifiable. (See Appendix A for a discussion of the question of the scientific status of discrimination within these realms of experience.)

It is true that the deeper, or spiritual, dimensions of experience are not normally accessible to everyday consciousness. But this is true of many realms of experience. With respect to physical reality, for instance, it took the use of specialized instruments and a body of scientific insight to reveal that the physical world is made up more of space than of solid matter, and that the nature of solid matter is not what it appears to superficial perception. The conventional, "obvious" opaqueness and solidity of the physical world is a limited experience; it is only the way things appear.

By analogy, then, if the psychological researcher insists on validating only the standard levels of the self's experience, concerned merely with disturbances in this conventional experience, we will not end up with a true science of the self, but at best, with something like folklore. A trained psychology professional can see and understand psychological phenomena that are invisible and most unlikely sounding to the rest of us. He might be aware of more objectively real aspects of the self that are invisible to his patients. However, even this greater depth of insight is limited by the prevailing psychological concepts of the self, which do not include or explain what other systems know about the self. In the next chapter we will explore a more complete view of the nature of the self and its relationship to narcissism.