

Overcoming Narcissism

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Abstract

Narcissistic personality disorder describes people who demonstrate an exaggerated sense of entitlement, lack empathy and crave admiration. But philosopher Simone de Beauvoir argued that, even if a person isn't a pathological narcissist, narcissism can be a strategy that some people use to help them cope with being undervalued. Through examples such as singer-songwriter Taylor Swift, I show how Beauvoir's philosophy gives us a framework to understand some narcissistic behaviour and possibilities for more authentic ways of being in the world.

Social media isn't inherently narcissistic, but it might feed our tendencies towards narcissism. Platforms such as social media make it easy for us to put on masks, misrepresent ourselves to others, and alienate ourselves from ourselves. Social media wasn't around when French existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir was writing in the mid-twentieth century, but people wanting to be the centre of attention, such as on a theatre stage, were. And Beauvoir's thinking can help us understand the phenomenon of narcissism and a potential antidote: authenticity.

Simone de Beauvoir lived through two world wars and massive political upheavals. She is most famous for her 1949 book titled *The Second Sex*, exploring women's situation as secondary to men. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir dedicated a whole chapter to narcissism. Men can be narcissistic too, but Beauvoir's analysis focused specifically on what drives some women towards narcissism.

In psychological terms, narcissistic personality disorder describes people who demonstrate an exaggerated sense of entitlement self-importance, lack empathy and crave admiration. Beauvoir realized that even if a person isn't a pathological narcissist, some people sometimes behave in narcissistic ways.

Beauvoir was intelligent and found that men accepted her into their circles because of her exceptional brain. But Beauvoir came to realize that she, as well as other wealthy white women in particular, were privileged in ways that many women were not. Beauvoir saw that narcissism can be a strategy that some women use, without necessarily being fully cognizant of it, to help them cope with being in a world and a society that doesn't value them in the same way as men or token women such as Beauvoir.

In her essay *What is Existentialism?* Beauvoir defined existentialism as a philosophy based on the notion that the individual is 'the source and reason for being [*raison d'être*] of all significations



and all colours' (p. 325), but also, our lives only take on meaning through our engagement in the world and with other people. Authenticity is the process of creating our reason for being, meaning setting and pursuing self-chosen goals, while respecting that other people are doing the same. But problems arise when people are oppressed and thus blocked from creating themselves.

For Beauvoir, as for other existential philosophers, we exist first and then create who we become. To be human is to transcend the facts of our existence towards self-chosen goals. If we're caught in the facts of our existence, or our 'facticity', we become passive objects in the world. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues, 'circumstances invite woman more than man to turn toward self and to dedicate her love to herself' (p. 667). When women take on stereotypical roles of housewife or mother, they find that they are relegated to generality. Barred from expressing themselves in the world, many women are pushed into roles they didn't actively choose and defined by generic functions such as

housekeeping, childrearing, lower-paid caregiving jobs.

An existential framework to understand this phenomenon is being-for-yourself and being-for-others. Human life incorporates both dimensions. Being-for-yourself is being assertive in creating yourself on your own terms. Being-for-others is about getting along with other people because we live in a world where other people are there and we have to take them into account. Purely being-for-yourself is selfish and narcissistic because it overlooks, or at least downplays, the existence of others. Purely being-for-others means giving yourself up for other people, beholden to what they want of us.

Often women have been pushed into being-for-others at the expense of themselves. They have been pushed into roles where they're expected to give everything of themselves and relentlessly subordinate themselves to the desires of others. If they don't, they're cast as selfish. The ideal woman gives up everything for her

husband and children. But husbands and children are not expected to do the same for a wife and mother.

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Women have been trained to see themselves as objects, as passive and desirable. For example, I was born a woman with female sex organs. That’s a fact of my existence. But just because I have the biology to become pregnant doesn’t mean I should have children. Through birth control, I can transcend the facts of my biology. If I’m prevented from choosing whether to become a mother, that’s oppression; I’m being held hostage to my biology and society. If I do have a choice to be a mother and just go along passively with whatever other people tell me to do, then I’m giving up responsibility for creating myself. I’m making myself a static object beholden to other people’s desires.

Such circumstances thwart people from being appreciated as unique individuals. When people cannot (or choose not to) exercise their freedom to create themselves, some attempt to escape their situation by turning inwards to self-worship and self-indulgence. This is narcissism, which Beauvoir defines as ‘a process of alienation: the self is posited as an absolute end, and the subject escapes itself in it’.

In other words, Beauvoir’s explanation for why some people, especially some women, behave narcissistically is that they’re responding to a world in which they aren’t important. When people are kept from participating in activities that they find meaningful and engaging, they do not have a chance to express their individuality. Being relegated to an unimportant role in life, at the expense of a rich and varied multi-dimensional life, wipes out singularity.

Beauvoir writes, ‘not being able to accomplish herself in projects and aims, woman attempts to grasp herself in the immanence of her person’ (p. 667). Narcissism is born of frustration over being kept or pushed into inferior positions and not being able to fully assert themselves in the world. When people are treated as nobodies in the world, when their choices and interests are highly limited, then it’s understandable that they will feel dispossessed, separated from genuinely participating in the universe.

Narcissism is, therefore, a response to being beholden to other people, to having little or no power over your own life. The desire to make oneself matter, to be important in the world, at least to oneself, can fuel narcissism. When people aren’t valued for who they are and what they do, narcissism can be a tempting way to assert one’s importance, even if only in one’s own reflection. To objectify oneself, and then love that image of oneself, is a coping mechanism when one can’t take real responsibility in other realms of one’s life.

Beauvoir saw the process of narcissism working in a few different ways. For girls, dolls can serve as the conduit for seeing oneself as object. In adolescence and beyond, the mirror is often the means of objectification: ‘passive and given, the reflection is a thing like herself’ (p. 669). Through the mirror, the narcissist falls in love with their own beauty or another aspect of their body that they find charming. The mirror provides a safe and limited zone in which one’s reflection shines centrally: ‘Both priestess and idol, the narcissist crowned with glory hovers in the heart of eternity, and on the other side of the clouds kneeling creatures worship her: she is God contemplating himself’ (p. 670).

Another escape is to daydream about ideal images of themselves. They fantasize about

being unique, autonomous and in charge of their own lives. It can be a nostalgic approach, since it's the sort of perspective they might have had as a child, when they lived in blissful ignorance about their destiny. Creating a static idealized image of themselves can make them feel as if they are whole. God is also a complete being, unlike humans who are fragmented and always becoming more than what they are. Feeling like a god, like you're the centre of the universe, is ecstatic. Beauvoir writes, 'The moments an individual thinks he has succeeded are special times of joy, exaltation, and plenitude' (p. 670).

Still another way that narcissism reveals itself is when people fabricate uniqueness. They are so afraid of being mediocre, unnoticed, or a failure that they create a manufactured character that makes them stand out from everyone else. One person who seems to have gone out of her way to fashion herself into a unique character was Elizabeth Holmes, founder of the now-defunct Theranos biotech company. Theranos's technology promised to save lives by being able to do fast medical testing with blood drawn from a prick of a patient's finger. Holmes's image was carefully curated: she dropped out of Stanford, she had a closet full of only black turtlenecks and pant suits to make herself look like Steve Jobs, with wide staring blue eyes – she had a reputation for never blinking – and an allegedly false deep voice.

A Beauvoirian reading suggests Holmes may have created a false character and quirkiness to transform herself and stand out from the crowds of people being rejected for venture capital funding, and to seduce rich and powerful (mostly) men for their money and influence. Holmes raised millions of dollars from high-profile investors including Henry Kissinger and Betsy DeVos. Theranos grew to be worth nine billion dollars in 2015. In 2018, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission charged Holmes with fraud because the Theranos technology did not work.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir wrote of narcissists, 'Around this heroine, life goes on like a sad or marvellous novel, always somewhat strange. Sometimes it is a novel already written' (p. 672). Sometimes it is a novel but now more often it's a film or reality television show.

Indeed, biographies and documentary films have already been made about Holmes.

Holmes was certainly not afraid of taking risks and she had a grand vision for healthcare – even noble humanitarian aims of giving people cost-effective information about their own health. Beauvoir's analysis suggests that the fear of mediocrity might propel people deeper into narcissism. When a person's identity is based on an imaginary world in which they become dazzled by their own glory, their desire to succeed can grow to epic proportions. They continually have to take bigger risks and tell bigger lies in order to sustain the illusions they create about themselves and their activities.

Beauvoir criticizes narcissists for not engaging in the world in a reciprocal way. A narcissist's life becomes an insincere act. They fabricate their world and emotions. Narcissists alienate and destroy themselves, becoming trapped in contingency and abandonment. They are desperate for others to recognize their value, but they are too arrogant and greedy to value other people in return. In Beauvoir's words, 'The paradox of [the narcissist's] attitude is that she demands to be valued by a world to which she denies all value, since she alone counts in her own eyes' (p. 682).

A narcissistic life is not an enjoyable one. External validation is 'an inhuman, mysterious, and capricious force [...] it is why she is uneasy, susceptible, irritable, and constantly suspicious; her vanity is never satisfied [...] lost and obsessed, she sinks into the darkness of bad faith and often ends up by building a paranoid delirium around herself' (p. 682). Bad faith is the phenomenon of denying the reality of your own life.

Beauvoir identified that the narcissist's key problem is that they aren't living in the real world. They're living in their imagination. They lose hold of the concrete world and genuine connections to others. They fail to listen to others and when they talk they're delivering a script. If you look at yourself too much you'll fail to see what else is around you. 'The narcissist, alienating herself in her imaginary double, destroys herself' (p. 681).

There are many pressures that tempt us to deny the reality of our lives. After visiting the

United States, Beauvoir observed that in wanting to be idolized, American women become enslaved to their fans' gazes. And public opinion is tyrannical. This was a phenomenon that the singer-songwriter Taylor Swift said she was excruciatingly aware of.

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In Taylor Swift's documentary film *Miss Americana* (2020), she explains that her self-worth was so heavily defined by others that her entire belief system was built on getting people to applaud her: 'Pats on the head are all I lived for [...] I was the person who everyone wanted me to be.' If she saw an unflattering photograph in a magazine, she would starve herself until she lost enough weight to get rid of the curve and thought that feeling like she was going to pass out on stage was normal.

Beauvoir suggests there are three major responses to the tyranny of public opinion. One can mould oneself into what everyone wants. Swift did, but realized how impossible the expectations are, such as to be both slim and curvaceous. A second possibility is that one can reject the gaze of the other, slipping into despotism or delirium of persecution, and dismissing criticism as jealousy, spite or conspiracies, as Holmes did at times.

But there's a third option: authenticity. For Beauvoir, the way to overcome narcissism is reciprocal recognition of one another's freedom. Beauvoir wrote, 'If she sought recognition by others' freedom while also recognizing that

freedom as an end through activity, she would cease to be narcissistic' (p. 682). Seizing and exercising our freedom and taking responsibility for our lives, Beauvoir thought, can break us out of narcissism: freedom from being treated as inferior, freedom from thinking of ourselves as inferior or superior to others, freedom to believe ourselves as capable and to be treated with respect, and the freedom to be curious, to learn and to create.

After a sexual harassment incident in which a man groped Swift on a red carpet while multiple witnesses and photographers looked on, and the groper blamed Swift for losing his job, Swift seems to have undergone what Beauvoir would have referred to as a 'conversion' that pulled her away from narcissism and towards authentic living. The groper violated reciprocity with Swift because he treated her as an object. Instead of obediently going along with it and continuing to subordinate herself to him and others, Swift made some radical changes to her behaviour.

Swift said she limited what she looked at on social media. She worked on detaching her self-worth from the approval of fans. She stopped being so afraid of not living up to the 'good girl' ideal. She shared her political views. She used her voice to encourage her millions of American followers to vote. And she risked approval to stand up for what she thought was right. Swift embodied a transformation into an authentic artist.

While some artists seek out the stage to pay the bills, narcissists are attracted to the limelight for the glory and attention. They are what Beauvoir calls 'pseudo-artists'. Of course not all actors and social media personalities are narcissists, but authentic artists transcend themselves in their role.

One such authentic artist whom Beauvoir cited was Eleonora Duse. Duse (1858–1924) was a daring Italian self-taught actor who influenced many literary greats, including Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce and Rainer Maria Rilke. Charlie Chaplin called Duse 'the greatest artiste I have ever seen'. During her time, Duse was lauded as 'Italy's greatest actress' and, later, as the 'first great modern actress'. Duse was applauded for her originality

and her powerful performances of self-transformation. Rejecting the usual theatrical pageantry, Duse wore no make-up, unmasking her raw naturalness.

In Beauvoir's view, Duse wasn't a narcissist because she was extremely generous in her art, to the point that she forgot herself, enabling her to go beyond herself in her roles. While a narcissist uses art as a servant to indulge in self-worship, Duse surrendered herself to her characters in order to transcend herself, ecstatically, through her art.

As Juliet in an 1873 performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona, Duse recalled what felt to her like an 'indescribable sense of abandonment' in which her lines seemed 'to go right through the heat of my blood. There was not a fibre in me that did not contribute to the harmony. Oh, grace, it was a state of grace!'

Duse dissolved the boundaries of her self to enable her characters to shine in all their nuance and subtleties. Professor of Italian Lucia Re wrote that, '[Duse] directed herself, and turned acting and performance into an autonomous work of art in its own right – her own original reinvention of, and endless variation on, the text.'

Duse was criticized for being self-absorbed, single-minded and a diva. Duse knew she had bouts of selfishness. But through her performances, Duse challenged her audiences by revealing new ways of seeing and understanding the world, and sparking a new appreciation for the vulnerability, ambiguity and complexity of humanity. Her performances were so poignant

that people understood her, even when she spoke Italian and the audience did not.

And in her varied and intense performances and life, Duse defied stereotypes about women and actors. Duse became a feminist icon because of her courageous performances, confidence, independence, professional success and criticisms of the patriarchy, including women's repressive upbringing, expectations for a woman to annihilate herself for her husband and children, and lack of access to education and work.

Narcissists are satisfied with showing off what they are; they relish artifice and self-worship as a substitute for meaningful action. An authentic artist, Beauvoir wrote, 'will go beyond the given in the way she expresses it, she will really be an artist, a creator who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world' (p. 741). Duse and Swift are examples of people who orient themselves towards becoming authentic artists.

Whereas the narcissist's life is a delusion, if not a derangement, a person who lives authentically lives in lucidity. A narcissist lives behind a mask, while a person who orients themselves authentically is brave enough to remove their mask – or their make-up, like Duse. A narcissist is obsessed with appearances and lives vacuously and superficially for her own image, to the detriment of reality. A person interested in authentic living pursues meaningful goals and lives in sincerity. A narcissist depends on followers for validation. Authentic living focuses on going beyond ourselves, revealing the world in all its complexity for ourselves and others, and contributing to a better world.

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