

You and me

The cuts to welfare services also have a profound psychological effect as they attack a communal social structure where, through progressive taxation, the community as whole provides for its members writes David Bell.



The image of Narcissus staring into the pool of water transfixed by his own reflection, a kind of imprisonment in fascination, has an emblematic place in the history of psychoanalysis. In 1914 Freud wrote a complex paper entitled 'On Narcissism' which gave the problems of self-love a centrality in our lives, something which we can never completely escape.

Freud saw this self-love as having, and this is typical of psychoanalysis, a strange dual quality. Some degree of self-love is necessary for survival but it is also one of the most powerful sources of resistance to psychological development and the basis of profound disturbance. Later, he was to recognise that narcissism is an important source of human destructiveness, for we all have a natural hatred of everything that is 'not me'.

The word 'narcissism' has of course a number of different meanings and these are all loosely related – we talk of an individual's 'narcissism', certain types of relationship as being predominantly 'narcissistic'. We also talk of 'narcissistic wounds', here referring to the intense pain we experience where there is damage to our view of ourselves, most especially when this fall from grace is felt to be visible to others – here the pain is felt as shame and humiliation.

For Freud, idealisation was one of the hallmarks of narcissism. All of us in infancy have a natural tendency to believe ourselves to be the centre of the world— ‘His Majesty the Baby’ and we have great difficulty in giving up this inflated view of ourselves and accepting our ordinary place in the world. We cling onto this version of ourselves and so it surfaces from time to time in the way we interact with others. In love, we think the object of our love is so perfect, so above criticism, so unlike any other. But this is in reality a remnant of our own narcissism. This perfect object has chosen us as the object of its love. It is true of course that we have to idealise to fall in love at all but then, if the relationship is to survive, we have to be able to give up that idealisation.

In a very poignant piece of writing, toward the end of his 1914 paper, Freud discusses parents' love for their children and suggests that their tendency to idealise their children, to see them as above criticism and immune from the ordinary ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ is, at root, derived from the parents’ narcissism. The parent who has had to give up her own infantile narcissism now recovers it vicariously in her child. As the child has a very special attachment to the parent, in a sense is part of the parent, the parent can thus share in the perfection attributed to the baby.

The overly narcissistic person at depth believes himself to be dependent upon no one, to be above ordinary human needs. People with these difficulties are also unable to distinguish ordinary dependence from a kind of helpless invalidism and tend to treat any awareness of ordinary dependence with contempt. Sometimes this manifests itself as contempt for others who are obviously needy, but as often it is awareness of need *in the self* that is the problem, and so it becomes deep self-contempt.

But these are not just characteristics of certain so-called narcissistic individuals. These individuals make manifest what lies more hidden in the rest of us. Our awareness of our own vulnerability is a continuous source of discomfort –it is a universal narcissistic wound. We all have a natural tendency to locate awareness of our ordinary needs in other people – it is *he*, not me, who is in need, it is *she*, not me, who is vulnerable. Unfortunately, this projective system has a drive of its own: as it gathers momentum it acquires contempt, providing the psychological soil for the germination of destructive social processes such as racism or homophobia. Those in extremes of need (such as refugees) are hated not so much for what they *are* but for they *represent* - a case of shooting the messenger because the message he brings, awareness of the extremes of human need, cannot be tolerated.

This comes to the heart of narcissisms anti-development tendencies. All development entails accepting that there is development to do, and more that it never ends - there is no point of arrival. It is predicated on the capacity to accept our vulnerability and dependence upon others all aspects of reality that insult our narcissism.

Freud never tired of pointing out that one of the most important qualities of the human creature, something that distinguishes us from other animals, is the fact of our very long period of infantile dependence. This is both a blessing and a curse. For this prolonged period of dependency is at one and the same time the basis of all human culture and the source of pain (arising from the recognition of our basic helplessness and need for others) that remains part of our being. We are thus left with a deep ambivalence in relation to this dependence, a continual source of discomfort.

Freud used the term 'the narcissism of minor difference' to describe our tendency to exaggerate the difference between ourselves and others, so providing a kind of crazy justification for our hatred of them. That is we have to make the 'other' much more other than they are in order to rationalise the hatred directed towards them.

In his later work on Group Psychology (1921) Freud explored further the relationship of this process to our group life. Man in order to develop needed to form larger groups. We are bound together in groups through affectionate ties to each other and to our leaders. But this cannot be achieved without the suppression of our natural aggression towards each other. This inhibition of violence has a double register: it is both a precondition of the capacity to form groups and the outcome of living in one. However the suppressed aggression will always seek an outlet. 'It is always possible to bind a number of people in love' Freud writes, 'as long as there are others left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness ... When once the Apostle Paul had posited universal love between men as the foundation of his Christian community, extreme intolerance on the part of Christendom towards those who remained outside it became the inevitable consequence'. The outsider may be different in only minor ways, but this will suffice.

So, if we accept that humanity is divided in its nature – on the one hand an irreducible narcissistic urge to destroy and on the other a reparative more loving wish towards the other - then we can ask what kind of social structures might act to contain our destructiveness and support the better side of our nature and, on the other hand, what kind of social structures will serve the opposite aim – namely support our narcissism, fan the flames of our destructiveness and obstruct our capacity for a more creative engagement with the world.

The welfare state and other forms of public provision, over and above their economic and political significance, have very profound psychological meaning. They create a communal social structure where, through progressive taxation, the community as whole provides for its members. This serves to contain and limit the damage we inflict upon each other; its reparative function acts as a profound source of reassurance.

The capitalist market, it seems to me, acts in exactly the opposite direction – it is an asocial narcissistic structure driven only by its inner needs, sweeping out of its way everything that does not serve those needs. As Marx put it, before the force of capital 'all that is solid melts into air'. But the public sector, representing as it does a different form of social organisation, has always been a thorn in the side of capital, as it ever more seeks to penetrate all forms of social and cultural life. Nowhere is this conflict between market and non-marketised forms of social organisation more acutely contested than in attitudes to the NHS and other sources of public provision.

The cuts, then, should not be understood in terms of economic necessity but as expressions of a violent ideological assault on the concept of welfare. A narcissistic logic comes to dominate where the welfare state is viewed not as providing citizens with the basic necessities of life as part of a duty of state but instead is perversely misrepresented as a mechanism by which people are disempowered, creating in them a helpless state of invalidism. The 'have-nots', instead of 'getting on their bikes' and competing in the

marketplace, 'stay at home and whinge for the nanny state to do something for them'. Namely, to have one's basic needs met is to be treated as if suffering from a state of infantile dependence and to be dominated by a delusion of an inexhaustible supply of provision. In this kind of thinking or more properly non-thinking, the world collapses into simple binary categories – 'us and them' – and all complexity is lost. We are witnessing a kind of social cleansing where those on benefits will have to vacate their homes- this will further fuel this projective process - lending support to the sense that 'they' unlike 'us' do not deserve to live where they are living.

The current assault on public services, serving as it does the penetration of the market into all forms of life, gives force to a primitive moralism. Those that survive have a right to, have done so because they are superior to the brothers and sisters who, now morally inferior, failed, and they failed as they had no right to survive. This thus supports a narcissistic a-social character structure. This archaic world view, the simple binary division between the morally upright and good 'strivers' (like us) and the hated others, 'the skivers', projective targets for our contempt, lays the basis for an increasingly thoughtless and violent world. The market economy may be a necessity of life at least for our current epoch, and that is one thing, but as an ideal of social institutions it is not likely to give much support to the nobler side of our nature.

If we look at the attitude of affectionate parents towards their children, we have to recognize that it is a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism, which they have long since abandoned. The trustworthy pointer constituted by overvaluation, which we have already recognized as a narcissistic stigma in the case of object-choice, dominates, as we all know, their emotional attitude. Thus they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the child — which sober observation would find no occasion to do — and to conceal and forget all his shortcomings. (Incidentally, the denial of sexuality in children is connected with this.) Moreover, they are inclined to suspend in the child's favour the operation of all the cultural acquisitions which their own narcissism has been forced to respect, and to renew on his behalf the claims to privileges which were long ago given up by themselves. The child shall have a better time than his parents; he shall not be subject to the necessities which they have recognized as paramount in life. Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be the centre and core of creation—'His Majesty the Baby', as we once fancied ourselves. The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out — the boy shall become a great man and a hero in his father's place, and the girl shall marry a prince as a tardy compensation for her mother. At the touchiest point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, which is so hard pressed by reality, security is achieved by taking refuge in the child. Parental love, which is so moving and at bottom so childish, is nothing but the parents' narcissism born again, which, transformed into object-love, unmistakably reveals its former nature.