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Title: Narcissism or 'In search of collision'

Melancholia

In the essay I focus on a certain way of Being-in-the-world and show how it overlaps with the concept of narcissism when we look at it from a phenomenological existential perspective. A closer look at the main character of the film Melancholia paralleled with one of my clients serves as an illustration of that idea.

In the film Melancholia, Lars Von Trier, following his own experience, artfully portrays the experience of Being-in-the-world of a melancholic person. Personally I understand the movie more as a portrayal of a person who is labeled or diagnosed with depression, but whose experience is one of inability of relating to others. The reason not being sickness but a more fundamental estrangement from self and others. Melancholia has a double meaning: it is the mood of the main character Justine, metaphorically and literally it is also the name of the planet that is threatening to collide with Earth.

In the first part of the movie we get to know Justine as a beautiful, intelligent, strong woman who just married a 'perfect' husband. Her sister Claire is organizing an expensive fairytale wedding reception. As the party progresses we slowly realize the reality is anything but fairytale. Justine's new husband appears to have an apprehensive adoration towards her and in the wedding speech he is unable to say anything but "I never even dreamed that I would have such a gorgeous wife". Her parents are divorced and evidently hate each other. Justine's father is a drunk, joker and a womanizer. Her bitter mother bluntly says: "Enjoy it while it lasts, I myself hate marriages, especially when they involve my closest family members!". Justine is visibly affected by her mother's attitude and after that speech her mood starts to downfall as she slowly detaches from everyone

and secludes herself away from the meaningless bourgeoisie rituals of the wedding reception. Her family tries to stop her mood getting worse by cheering her up, talking her out of it, and even threatening her. She desperately tries to talk to her parents, but they don't seem to care. Her mother dismisses her with the words: "Stop dreaming. We are all scared, sweetie. Just forget it. Get the hell out of here!". No one is able to connect with her, to see her inner turmoil. In the end of the night, as she indifferently watches her husband leave in disappointment, we can sense her deep isolation.

In the second part of the movie Justine's sister Claire invites Justine to live with her family as she is now completely debilitated. Claire is not comforted by her husband's reassurance that the planet Melancholia will pass them by. Every day she becomes more anxious, as Justine becomes calmer. Justine seemed to have sensed the approaching catastrophe long before everyone else. When they finally realize that the world will end with the collision, Claire's husband cannot cope with the dread and kills himself. Claire, in her despair to control the last hours of their lives, is planning the final meaningless ritual of wine drinking in the garden. Justine sarcastically mocks her plan and scolds her for evading the realization of inescapability of death. Justine's mood no longer seems melancholic but a situation appropriate acceptance of death in which she overcomes her existential anxiety. The only person who Justine is able to connect with is Claire's 10 year old son. His innocence and vulnerability seem to get her in touch with her emotions. Moments before the collision they all hold hands, truly connecting in Being-towards-death.

Narcissistic way of Being-in-the-world

The movie starts with a long series of slow-moving images of the coming catastrophe combined with Wagner's prelude to Tristan und Isolde, proposing the union between love and death. With this opening scene the viewer is immediately thrown into a mood of embodied death realization or Being-towards-death (Heidegger, 1996) and pushed into feeling with Justine as she struggles to find meaning in the empty rituals and superficial relations. In my

view she is anxious in the face of her own death. This anxiety is showing her what is really there and more importantly what is not there: the lack of honesty, genuine human relations, completeness. Kastrinidis (1988) argues that narcissistic individuals have a special openness or sensitivity towards a basic ontological characteristic of Being-in-the-world: the potentiality-for-Being-a-whole. This concern consumes every moment of their existence in the relentless demand for completeness and totality, otherwise their existence seems a miserable fake. They are particularly attuned to the possibility of Being-one with Power, Beauty and Absoluteness. This is coupled with a radical closedness to other, equally human characteristics, like imperfection, failure and guilt. To be narcissistic is to be without guilt and regret (Kastrinidis, 1988). In her last big attempt to become complete Justine realizes that not even a perfect wedding will make her feel alive. She is unable to 'really' love herself or love her husband but instead is in love with the mirror image he reflects back to her: "the whole experience of love revolves around the mirroring of the self in the experience of the other" (Kastrinidis, 1988, p.177). There is a profound sense of failure in developing any kind of genuine unity with others. No one else seems to care and she stands alone in her emptiness.

She does not see her possibility of freedom from the 'They' (Heidegger, 1996). As a narcissist she is closed off from the possibility of the only kind of wholeness we can reach as human beings: authentic response to the embodied realization of our fundamentally imperfect human nature. Therefore, where there could be the shy acceptance of her own humanity there is instead "a malignant, melancholic withdrawal, a kind of functional catatonia which leaves the person incapable of carrying out even the most basic responsibilities" (Kastrinidis, 1988, p. 182). The last possibility for the desired completeness she sees in death. According to Heidegger (1996) dying is the only way we can truly realize this potentiality-for-Being-a-whole. With the certain collision of Melancholia the prospect of becoming whole by death fills her with life. Lars Von Trier himself explained:

"Justine has nothing to lose. She is a melancholiac, and we are ever longing, you know. And when you are longing, you can't lose anything. You

have nothing... We melancholiacs skip lightly over all that. Perhaps it's a way of surviving. Then you don't need to mourn the things you loose. If you do not care for anything or anyone there is nothing to live for and nothing to mourn for.”

Understanding narcissistic way of Being-in-the-world as a ‘way of surviving’ takes away the usual accusatory implications. We can only imagine how discomfoting it was for Justine to live with such non-caring disregarding parents, possibly narcissistic themselves. I am not searching for a causal deterministic explanation of narcissism but will mention a few interesting ideas of authors who formed elaborate theories of narcissistic neurosis. Fairbairn (1976) said that we are all seeking emotional contact with another, and this is the deepest yearning of the human heart as it gives life the ultimate meaning.

“Frustration of his desire to be loved as a person and to have his love accepted is the greatest trauma that a child can experience.” (Fairbairn, 1952, p.41).

Both Fairbairn (1976) and Winnicott (1971) arrived at a similar formulation of narcissism that the true self is not really in contact with others and the outer world but instead retreats behind a false façade as means of self-protection. Symington (1993) argued that a narcissistic individual refuses to acknowledge being affected by others. Rather than narcissism being determined, caused, by environmental deficit, it is the result of a choice being made to turn away from the other. As it is a choice it can be unmade. He grants the narcissist the possibility of an existential choice.

India

All of these theories can make a lot of sense but do not help us understand the experience of a narcissistic way of being, which is what we are concerned about as phenomenological therapists. Sadly there is no known research about the phenomenology of narcissism, especially the embodied or emotional aspects.

Perhaps a description of a clinical case would shed some light on these aspects. In what follows I will try to portray my work with a client whose way of being reminds me of Justine.

India is a 16 year old girl who came to counseling because of being bullied by her schoolmates. She is a good student, an only child, intelligent, beautiful and gives an impression of inner strength, much like Justine. A few months ago she started dating a boy and soon after her schoolmates posted mean gossip about them on social media. She eventually broke up with her boyfriend because she could not take the pressure. The girl who started the gossip made all the other girls in their common group of friends decide to take a side. They all decided against India. Since then they have been bullying her in and out of classes and made her school life a hell. India's response was one of indifference. She tried to ignore them and give them the impression that she does not care about anything they do or say to her. When I asked how she feels about it she said she doesn't care anymore but at the same instance got teary eyes. She could not understand why this was happening to her or how could they be so mean.

India always came to therapy smiling but I felt that her smile was not genuine, it was covering up her true feelings. Apart from that occasional tear in the corner of her eye, she appeared as if she was not in touch with her feelings, body or emotions at all. She reported not caring about the breakup with her boyfriend or losing her friends. Her parents did not seem to pay much attention to her but, in her own words, she 'got used to it'. She didn't have a care in the world, and no one to care for, no one really cared for her either. Like Justine she was empty and lonely, unable to genuinely relate to another. No one really knew her as she did not know herself.

Like Justine she seemed to have a perfect life on the outside, but there was something missing on the inside. The search for that kept her coming to therapy even though most of the time she didn't know what to talk about. Giving an impression of perfection, strength and indifference provokes admiration but also jealousy and cruelty from others. Being bullied was crushing her on the inside, I

could sense her pain, but she was good at hiding it on the outside. Existential theorists argue that the adolescent's strife for group membership is a reaction to a fear of isolation and meaninglessness (Chessick, 1996; Ellsworth, 1999). This experience was probably waking her up to existential anxiety. In a way the collision with her classmates was pushing her into an identity crisis. She had a diffused identity with no commitment and no choice, open to manipulation, slowly sipping into a foreclosed identity of becoming a smaller version of her own parents (Marcia, 1980). This crisis shook her up and she was willing to explore her own experience and opening up to expansion into new ways of being.

My work with her was mostly focused on developing a safe therapeutic relationship by being genuinely and empathically interested in her. Rubenstein (1996) noted that adolescents immediately detect and reject any kind of pretentiousness or insincerity, so I always tried to be honest and admit my mistakes or confusions. The work also consisted of phenomenological exploration of her experience. I was reflecting back what she was saying, as well as opening it up and slowly taking her (and me) a step further. As Bowlby (1988) warns I was careful not to repeat the original damaging parental approach by showing indifference or rejection. Mostly we were Being together instead of Doing something together. She said this was a new experience for her that she found intriguing and releasing. We sometimes had minute long silences of just looking into each other's eyes. These were intense moments that I would compare with the moments before the Melancholia collision. It was a genuine I-Thou meeting that felt real and alive. It was painful and releasing at the same time. I think we both felt a kind of joy but also discomfort of being so intimate with each other. It felt like the potentiality-for-Being-a-whole came into being between us. This is where I felt her sadness, her tragedy. She cut herself off from her emotions in order to survive, to numb the pain of not being truly seen by her parents. But now in her narcissistic way of being she was not able to let herself become vulnerable and to let anyone truly see her. She felt that showing her emotions is shameful. In order to show her that becoming vulnerable and imperfect in relation to me is safe and doesn't mean losing her integrity (Kastrinidis, 1988) I first had to honor my truth and by sharing my emotions

show her my vulnerability.

It seems to me that it is an unavoidable developmental characteristic of our human nature to long for completeness. We are all to some extent disembodied, narcissistic, detached from our emotions, disappointed with the incomplete existence. Instead of searching for fixed ideality the way forward might be living with flexible authenticity.

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