Paradoxical and Vulnerable Narcissisms: Reckoning with Our Deeply Social Selves

Josh Dohmen

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that rather than rejecting narcissism, the most appropriate response to contemporary egoism and individualism is a revised understanding of narcissism, one that acknowledges the deeply social nature of our selves by seeking to understand the ways in which we exist as individuals through others. I will call this form of narcissism "vulnerable narcissism." Once we recognize the extent to which we are, as individuals, constitutively social, narcissistic investments in oneself can be recognized as investments in particular social conditions that influence, sustain, or disadvantage us.

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Perhaps it would not be hyperbolic to claim that we in the U.S. are living in a narcissistic age. According to the Pew Research Center, 81% of adults in the U.S. own smartphones, handheld computers that promise to help us do everything from communicating with friends and family to watching videos on demand to learning new languages to being happier, and promise to let us do so on our own terms, whenever and wherever we want. Public discourse calls on individuals to make themselves more marketable, to invest in themselves, to be entrepreneurial (that is, to treat oneself as a firm), to develop "highly effective habits." Under the current neoliberal regime, formerly public goods and services are being privatized and responsibility is increasingly placed on individuals. My aim, here, is to argue that rather than rejecting narcissism outright, the most appropriate response is to develop a revised understanding of narcissism, one that acknowledges the deeply social nature of our selves by seeking to understand the ways in which we exist as individuals through others. I will call this form of narcissism "vulnerable narcissism." Once we recognize the extent to which we are, as individuals, constitutively social, narcissistic investments in oneself can be recognized as investments in particular social conditions that influence, sustain, or disadvantage us.

The essay progresses in three sections. In the first, I develop and explain the concept of "vulnerable narcissism." In the second, I argue that Julia Kristeva's notion of "intimate revolt" provides one helpful process for working toward the vulnerable narcissism I advocate. In the third, I offer reasons for thinking that we should be vulnerably narcissistic. In order to defend these claims, however, it will first be important to clarify what I mean by narcissism.

Varieties of Narcissism and the Social Self

Problematizing Narcissism

In his well-known essay, "On Narcissism," Sigmund Freud differentiates between primary narcissism and secondary narcissism. To understand this distinction, it may first be helpful to clarify some psychoanalytic vocabulary. "Narcissism" as I use it here will mean an investment of psychical energy in oneself. I will refer to the psychical energy being invested as "drives" or "libido" interchangeably (usually following the language of the author most immediately under consideration). I use the word "psyche" or "psychical" to avoid terms like "mental" that might convey a dualism that psychoanalysis rejects. For the authors I consider here (namely Freud and Kristeva), we are constitutively bodily, affective, imaginative, and thinking beings. "Investment" should be understood in both its more contemporary and archaic senses. An investment involves directing resources, in this case psychical resources, in hopes of a return. So, for example, if my drives are invested in developing a talent, I may (to varying degrees of conscious awareness) be seeking to be good at that skill, to attract friends or lovers, to please those I respect, to bring something of beauty into the world, or to be better than someone I perceive as a competitor. The archaic sense of investment meant being wrapped or clothed in something or being endowed with a certain authority. Indeed, it is through my investments that

I become who I am. The talent I invest myself in becomes part of my identity, as do my style and the people I surround myself with. Finally, the person, thing, or idea that my drives are invested in becomes my "object."

With these terms in mind, how does Freud distinguish between primary and secondary narcissism? In primary narcissism, an infant's libido is invested in itself. The infant takes itself as its own object. While one's libido is rarely if ever totally disinvested from oneself, one's libido does become invested in others, in things, and in ideas as they become one's objects. Thus, as we mature and our libidinal energies become directed outward, secondary narcissism becomes possible. In secondary narcissism, the libidinal energy we had invested in others returns to ourselves; it becomes reinvested in the ego. This happens most clearly in the onset of illness or injury. If I have a severe headache, my energies are diverted from others and focus instead on myself. "What can I do to make this headache go away?" becomes my most pressing concern. But secondary narcissism can take less justified forms, for example, in people obsessed with their own beauty or fitness, or in hypochondriacs (who experience the same withdrawal of libido from others but without reasonable justification).

Interestingly, in this essay Freud already begins to problematize the distinctions between self and other upon which narcissism rests. Examples of narcissistic love include love of "(a) what he himself is, (b) what he himself was, (c) what he himself would like to be [later discussed as the "ego ideal"], (d)

someone who was once part of himself." Examples of anaclitic (other-directed) love include "(a) the woman who feeds him, (b) the man who protects him, and the succession of substitutes who take their place." These examples strike me as surprising. Consider Freud's examples of anaclitic love. We love those who feed us and protect us because they give us the gift of continued life. In investing a breastfeeding mother with libido, for example, the child finds satisfaction in the warmth she brings, the milk she offers, the soothing sounds her voice provides. Freud also later notes that love for others can be narcissistic when, for example, we seek love objects who complement us or possess "the excellences to which [we] cannot attain." On the other hand, the examples of narcissistic love are equally surprising. First, we understand ourselves and are thus able to love ourselves, at least in part, through how others understand us. A talent that I love about myself, that I invest energy in, is something that a guardian or teacher noticed and fostered. If I feel pride in a certain aspect of my identity (say my family, my country, or my commitment to a political ideal), these are identities enabled by others and the broader social world. Second, these points also relate to narcissistic love of what we would like ourselves to be. The ideals we set for ourselves are never inventions from nothing, but inheritances from or reactions to others with whom we interact. Third, Freud discusses one's love for a child as potentially narcissistic, because what parents love is the child's ability to be the person the parents themselves wish they could be: "The child shall fulfil those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out." Freud's understanding of narcissism, here, and indeed his understanding of the boundary between self and other in general, presents us with instabilities. Might these instabilities be fruitful?

Vulnerable Narcissism and the Social Self

Pushing this analysis further, I would like to propose a third, other-oriented narcissism that I will call "vulnerable narcissism." Vulnerable narcissism is a love of oneself, an investment in oneself, that expresses a gratitude toward others, acknowledges oneself as responsive to and in relation to others. How, then, do I exist through others? In this section, I will outline three levels of social relations that shape us as individuals: broad social and political factors, the ways in which those factors are modulated by one's immediate social environment, and one's close personal relationships.

First, consider some of the ways in which who I become is affected by my wider social and political environment. I am the person I have become through political institutions that enable certain practices and hinder others. For example, I am a voter, or a public protester, or a child protected from being forced to work to the extent that those activities are deemed legal and made accessible and to the extent that appropriate protections are in place. Otherwise I may be a disenfranchised member of my society or a criminal for breaking public assembly laws or a person expected to work at the age of 10. I am the person I have become through moral, discursive, and behavioral norms that structure how I may behave, address others, and interact with others and with what consequences. Who I am is in part the result of educational institutions that afforded certain opportunities while foreclosing others. I am the person I have become through economic networks that make the things I need (and, for the most privileged among us, often my most frivolous desires) readily available and the availability of which shapes what I desire. Who I am is the result of shared forms of language, gesture, and expression that enable me to understand certain others and express certain ideas while making other ideas more difficult to comprehend or communicate. The person I have become is affected by forms of media and transportation that expose me to certain forms of information, artistic expression, and advertisements and enable communication in various modes (like speech, handwritten notes, electronic text, or video) with various others (like friends, newspaper editors, online video posts, or discussion board participants). Finally, who I am is affected by subject positions or social roles that position me in relation to others and institutions, that enable certain possibilities while hindering or foreclosing others, and through which I understand myself. Such subject positions include roles like parent-child, teacher-student, physician-nurse-patient, or job titles, social and legal identities like citizenship or nationality, disability status, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, felon status, and so on.

Of course, these factors are in constant interaction and can really only be separated analytically. For example, how people are portrayed in the media will differ depending on their subject positions; one's subject position may affect their available employment and benefits, housing, and educational opportunities; one's education may make it easier or more difficult to acquire legal protections, and so on.

All of these examples are shaped by and lived within my narrower, interpersonal interactions. Political rights and protections may be enshrined by a State, but if I have not been taught my rights or if those closest to me do not respect them, then it is unclear to what extent I actually have the ability to exercise those rights or be covered by those protections. A society may have broad moral norms, but those only exist through being repeated at more local (community, familial) and interpersonal levels. Discursive norms may lead others I encounter to attend to and respect me, or they may lead others to ignore or disrespect me, or they may render it unintelligible that I could be worthy of attention or respect. Public schools may be instituted and funded at the state and local levels, but my experience in school may differ from others' experiences based on the choices of my school board, school administrators, and teachers. Economic networks may make certain products, services, or jobs available to me, but I rely on the habits and knowledge of my family and mentors to know how to take advantage of these opportunities. For example, a local grocery may make forms of healthy produce available to me, but if I grow up in a family that always eats frozen meals or a meat-and-potatoes diet, I may not perceive many items as actual options for purchase and I may well be too intimidated to try to cook them even if I buy them. A particular language may

be shared broadly, but it is enacted and I learn it through interpersonal relationships. The media may make certain forms of knowledge or art accessible to me, but the habits of what I read, watch, or listen to, are shaped by my family, friends, and mentors. I may watch a show to keep up with water cooler conversations at work, or I may never consider reading a newspaper because my family never did when I was growing up. And the social positions through which I understand myself and others, and through which others understand me, are performatively enacted and reenacted in relation to particular others. The positions of teacher-student may be broadly recognized or codified in school policies, for example, but how those positions are lived and experienced will depend upon particular relationships between students and their teachers.

Let me pause to offer a brief clarification: I am not arguing for a strict social determinism. People clearly do deviate from the norms of their communities and the habits developed within their families, friendships, and so on. Notice, however, that even in these cases, our possibilities for new habits, ideas, or behaviors are shaped by social and material environments. Say, for example, that walking through the store I decide on a whim to buy asparagus though my family never ate it growing up. How do I know how to prepare it? Maybe my family always boiled vegetables, so I cut it up and boil it. Maybe I ask friends or coworkers or search online for recipes. Maybe I take a cooking class or watch a cooking program. Or say that I decide I need to be more informed about my local community, so I subscribe to the newspaper. Where did this desire come from? New relationships with people who stay informed in a way that my family or friends formerly did not? A television show I like that makes me feel ignorant about current events? An ad for the newspaper that says, "You can't make things better if you don't know what's happening"? Or maybe something happens in my community that jars me and makes me realize I need to pay more attention. In short, even when I forge a new path for myself, I am doing so in response to a particular social milieu.

At an even more intimate level, who

I am is a response to those particular others who love me, teach me, support me, harm or abuse me, neglect or mock me. I internalize the ideals others set for me, the ideas of myself and my future laid out for me (often before I'm aware or capable of understanding these ideas myself), the language spoken around me (with all its local idiosyncrasies), and the behaviors of those closest to me or those I most admire. I respond to those others, developing habits that help me cope with them, evaluating or even challenging the ideals and language set out for me. I may project the parts of myself I wish to disown onto others, shoring up my sense of self; or I may compare myself to their perfections, believing myself to be ever incomplete in relation to the talents of those around me. I am also a response to those particular others who I love, teach, support, abuse, neglect, or mock. I understand myself as a friend, teacher, or parent through the successes, failures, happiness, or suffering of my friends, students, or children. My feelings of mastery or control over others depend upon their submission, suffering, or humiliation. Indeed, my very sense of self is indebted to others who either confirm or dispute my self-ascriptions. Throughout our lives, we depend upon others to "reality check" our self-understandings. I walk into a restaurant with the assumption (not always fulfilled) that I am perceived as a potential customer worth serving; I ask a friend, "You think I'm qualified for this job, don't you?"; I look at the faces of my students, hoping to see signs that I am a teacher capable of coherent, interesting, or clarifying lectures.

Given that who one is is so thoroughly responsive to and shaped by one's intimate relationships and the social world in which one exists, what does it mean to be narcissistic? The answer depends upon the extent to which one takes into account this deep sociality. What I have called vulnerable narcissism would be an investment in oneself that seeks to remain cognizant of and reflective upon these social influences.

Say, for example, that I invest great effort in being a parent and take it as an important part of my identity. I am clearly not only invested in myself. To be a good

parent, I must also be invested in the well-being and success of my child. As I try to figure out what it means to be a good parent, I will (implicitly or explicitly) respond to the methods and behaviors of my own caregivers, repeating some behaviors and rejecting others. (Indeed, sticking to one's own parenting decisions often requires a good deal of effort because of how deeply many parenting habits are ingrained.) In focusing on my life as a parent, I will move toward some relationships (for example, other parents or those who enjoy being around children) and away from other relationships (for example, those who have no patience for children or hearing another story about a child's accomplishments). This change in relationships will also affect my sense of self. I may mourn the loss of my former life; I may welcome the change and feel more at home in this new role; I will likely feel a tension between both self-understandings. If my parenting choices mainly align with those of my family or with broader social expectations, I performatively reinforce those ideals (and will therefore likely be praised or rewarded). If my choices diverge from those of my family or my broader society, I performatively challenge those ideals (and am therefore likely to be shunned or punished). If I take advantage of institutional supports for parents (like home economics classes that prepared me to be a parent, parental leave, health or life insurance policies, State-provided benefits, a spouse's income that allows me to stay at home or work part time), I am invested in and justify the continued existence of those supports. My investments in all of these aspects of parenting position me in relation to other parents. If there are institutional supports I am able to rely upon, then I am privileged in relation to those who lack those supports. If my parenting decisions are questioned or mocked by those around me, I am disadvantaged relative to those whose decisions more closely align with social or familial norms. In short, my becoming the parent that I am and my investment in these social institutions are coextensive. Vulnerable narcissism for a parent, then, would be an investment in oneself that seeks to remain aware of all of these factors, all of

the ways in which focusing my energies on my identity as a parent is at the same time an investment in social norms, institutions, my family and children, and other parents.

Paradoxical Narcissism

Understanding narcissism in this way can help us see the extent to which narcissism as it is traditionally understood, as arrogance, self-obsession, the secondary narcissism of Freud, is internally inconsistent. In investing in myself to the neglect of others, I ignore the ways in which I am a deeply social being. Indeed, an odd consequence of this form of narcissism is that by hiding from oneself this social nature, one often ends up reenacting unquestioned social norms and habits. In other words, investing in oneself absent an awareness of the influences of others often becomes an investment in particular relationships or social structures. For this reason, I will call it paradoxical narcissism.

Consider, again, the example of a parent. If I remain unaware of the extent to which others serve as models for my own identity as a parent, I am more likely to reenact the behaviors of those others. Thus, investing in my own identity as a parent is an investment in those models. If I remain unaware of the social and institutional supports for my parenting, then investments in my identity as a parent may well become investments in those supports. For example, in using daycare or dependent health insurance offered by my employer, I've invested both in my identity as a parent and in a system which distributes parental benefits by employment status (rather than through, say, universal government programs or reliance on extended family networks). If I remain unaware of the unjust distribution of resources for parents, then investments in my identity as a parent become investments in the social and institutional sources of injustice. Say, for example, that out of concern for my child's education I send my child to an expensive private school. In thus investing in my child (and therefore my identity as a parent), I perpetuate expectations that local public schools are irreparably worse and that one's class should determine the quality of one's education. In short, the less I am aware of the social influences upon my own parenting, the more likely it is that my choices will reinforce those social influences.

Intimate Revolt as a Way of Fostering Vulnerable Narcissism

Vulnerable narcissism as I have presented it is certainly a demanding ideal. We must seek to remain aware of the social influences on our lives, but it is easy to lose this awareness. Thus, it is important that we are supported in this task by others, especially others we trust. Julia Kristeva develops a concept for just such supportive interactions: "intimate revolt." In The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt, Kristeva seeks to wrest the concept of "revolt" from its exclusively political usage, noting that historically and etymologically, the term names a turning back, a re-turn. This becomes an important component of revolt for Kristeva. To understand why, it is important to clarify that for Kristeva, individual subjects are heterogeneous in that they are bodily and affective at the same time that they are thinkers and users of shared, symbolic language. "Signifiance" is the name Kristeva gives to the process through which we create meaning by bringing unconscious drives or affects into shared language. In psychoanalytic terminology, putting a drive (especially a destructive or "death" drive) to creative and productive use is called "sublimation," and in this way, signifiance is one sort of sublimation.

Importantly, the semiotic, unconscious register of the drives is not merely biological, it is shaped by the social. What we desire, how we experience our bodies, what emotions we feel are all influenced or ordered by the social, even if they are not immediately accessible to consciousness or expressible in symbolic language. For example, say that I feel a certain tension rising within me. I heat up. I may yell, I may slam my fist on the table, or I may take a deep breath and explain to my friend that chewing with her mouth open is making me angry, frustrated, or annoyed. Note that the anger I feel at hearing open-mouthed chewing is not some natural biological response, it is the result of growing up in a household in which chewing in this way was considered rude. It is the result of growing up in a household and wider society that accepts anger as a response to minor annoyances. Similarly, my expression of this anger can be mediated through the social in a variety of ways. Slamming my fist on the table is surely both a bodily reaction and one that communicates meaning (however vague), and the reaction itself and the meaning that reaction carries are enabled by certain social conditions, like acceptable expressions of anger (where what is "acceptable" is shaped by the social setting, gender roles, and so on). Taking the time to interpret my bodily experience, find the source of that anger, and express it in symbolic language is a form of sublimation that relies not only on shared language, but also the social support of a receptive listener to hear my explanation.

With these concepts in mind, we may now answer the question: in revolt, what are we returning to? For Kristeva, revolt is a return to one's (unconscious and conscious) past, in order to bring meaning to what is unconscious or forgotten, in order to bring the meaningless drives into meaning. Such a revolt enables two forms of questioning. On the one hand, revolt enables us to question the social order, meaning systems, or symbolic language as they exist. We return to the unconscious drives and find that language does not offer us the tools to articulate those drives, such that we must seek to create a meaningful articulation. Such an articulation can happen in at least two ways. First, the creative use of symbolic language can enable us to articulate something new. A neologism, a portmanteau, or a poem or poetic phrase may somehow perfectly capture the experience that I otherwise could not find words for. Second, we may find that, so far, symbolic language cannot articulate the unconscious contents; instead my tone, tears, laughter, or a caesura may erupt in my thinking or speaking. Once expressed, these semiotic phenomena may be made more readily available for conscious, symbolic reflection. On the other hand, revolt also enables us to question our own histories. By returning

to a past that is not (or no longer) in my conscious awareness, I may question how and why I am who I am.

To be clear, these two forms of questioning are not mutually exclusive. Say, for example, that my friends all laugh at a joke, but I find myself unable to laugh; maybe I'm even appalled at their laughter. This could lead me to reflect on the social norms that condition their laughter. Was the joke sexist? How has sexism shaped the norms of humor? What tropes in our culture make that sexist joke possible? It could also lead me to reflect upon my own history. What has led me to be unable to laugh when my closest friends find the joke hilarious? Am I being overly sensitive? Or am I justified in my failure to laugh?

So far, I have portrayed revolt as an individual effort, but for Kristeva, intimate revolt is more often interpersonal. This is because we are often only able to articulate our unconscious drives through links with patient, listening others. These links are most clearly exemplified, for Kristeva, in the relationship of transference and countertransference between the psychoanalytic analysand and analyst. There is no need to limit our considerations to this setting, though. By creating an affective, trusting link with another, I open myself to the possibility of finding meaning with that other. Through this link, the other offers interpretations or silences, I take stabs at interpretations, and through this process we seek meaning together.

Let me offer a personal example. While I was in graduate school, I was in a car collision on the interstate. I met with my dissertation adviser the next week, and she said, "I heard you were in a car accident." Eager to get to business, I said, "Yeah. It is strange to be told 'You'd be dead if you weren't wearing your seatbelt.' But, it is what it is." Rather than rushing to the business at hand, however, and perhaps because she heard the shock erupting into my speech even while I tried to dismiss it, she offered me the gift of intimate revolt, saying, "I was in a car accident a while back. It is really traumatic, isn't it?" Here, she both offered herself as someone to identify with, someone with whom I could forge

an affective link, and offered me a first gesture at interpreting my experience. Knowing that we had been discussing the psychoanalytic use of "trauma" as a piercing of one's narcissistic boundaries, this interpretation was offered as a way of thinking about how the event was a challenge to my sense of self (one that is already fragile enough for most people working on dissertations!). Still, the term was not imposed, because it was offered as a question: "Would you too describe the experience as traumatic?" Because of this, an opportunity was opened for further conversation. All of this was made possible by her countertransference (identifying with my trauma through a loving connection) and transference (my ability to form a trusting link and identify with her). In doing so, meaning was given to conscious experiences and unconscious residues that may have otherwise remained unarticulated.

For Kristeva, intimate revolts like this one enable freedom. By becoming aware of the unconscious drives motivating us, by articulating what had, until then, been meaningless, and by questioning interpretations that are already in place, we are better able to understand and determine our own actions in the future. In this way, intimate revolt is a form of rebirth, it opens new potential futures. Through intimate revolt, I form a new understanding of myself, I form or revise relationships with others. This process is never complete. As long as I am living, there will be unconscious drives, relationships with others, memories, and conscious experiences to interrogate.

How, then, does intimate revolt foster vulnerable narcissism? Recall that intimate revolt is a form of self-questioning, often fostered by interactions with particular others, that enables freedom by helping us understand those forces that are driving us even if we are not at first consciously aware of such forces. Especially as an intimate interaction, this form of revolt calls us outside of ourselves and back to ourselves at the same time. I forge a link with another, I listen and am listened to in return, and yet I focus on myself: who am I and why? Indeed, it is likely that the other will have insights about me that I would find difficult to es-

tablish independently. My habits, self-understanding, language, and emotional responses are largely pre-reflective, but the other may call them to my attention. Moreover, these interactions do not only draw me outside of myself, but they also call upon me to return to a lost past so that I may better understand the social influences in my life. In returning to a past that is unconscious or no longer conscious, I may be better able to reflect upon the habits, emotions, language, skills, and self-understandings that I have and the extent to which these have been achieved through others. Intimate revolt encourages us to ask questions like: In what ways have my habits developed in response to certain social or familial environments? Which emotional responses have been rewarded, which mocked or punished, and by whom? Whose ideals have I internalized? How has my language or community affected how I understand myself or the possible futures I imagine?

Conclusion: Why Vulnerable Narcissism?

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer three reasons that I believe vulnerable narcissism to be important. First, vulnerable narcissism is important insofar as it seeks the truth, truths about oneself, truths about the world in which one lives, and truths about the interactions between oneself and one's world. To achieve a more accurate understanding of ourselves and our world, it is important to think openly and honestly about who we are and the forces that have shaped us.

Second, and relatedly, vulnerable narcissism has the potential to foster certain virtues like gratitude, humility, hospitality, and justice. If I come to recognize that some of the habits of which I am proudest result from the efforts of my family or teachers, I will be able to express a more sincere gratitude for the love they have given me. Of course, I might also come to blame my family for my bad habits, but a vulnerable narcissism would help me recognize (1) that my family members too were shaped by their social contexts such that their bad habits may have been responses to particular circumstances in their lives, and (2) that my ability to recognize my bad habits, their

sources, and ways to change them is itself a gift, perhaps from a teacher, an author, or a friend. If I come to recognize that my accomplishments are always enabled by relationships with others, or that my self-understanding is always changing and incomplete, I may well have greater humility in assessing myself and my achievements. Recognizing the supports I have for my projects and self-development may also lead me to be more hospitable. Insofar as I am fortunate enough to have been accepted into a community that enables certain projects for me, I ought to recognize the challenges that others face merely by virtue of being born into different communities and welcome them in their attempts to pursue similar projects. Finally, reckoning with the ways in which social relationships have rendered me unearned privileges and disadvantages may foster a greater pursuit of justice and a greater awareness of what justice requires. If I recognize that I have been disabled by an educational system that caters its instruction and supports to certain types of students at the expense of students like me, I can now understand my situation as shared with others, as systemic, and thus seek to change that situation (rather than seeking only individual accommodations). If I understand that my positive habits were made possible by my parents' careers (perhaps they offered ample time off to spend with me or wages that allowed us to buy and prepare healthy foods), I can work toward making this type of employment available to more people.

To be clear, I am only arguing that vulnerable narcissism enables these virtues and the pursuit of justice, not that it is a sufficient condition for them. One can surely maintain vulnerable narcissism and still be selfish. I may, for example, rec-ognize the benefits of my wealth, remain aware of the disadvantages others face, or send my child to an expensive private school keeping in mind the impoverished public schools around me without being moved to change these unjust social conditions. Indeed, being aware of the social institutions that benefit me could make me more adept at navigating those institutions and reinforcing them in ways that continue to benefit me to the disadvantage of others. But the logic of individual responsibility, of self-making, of paradoxical narcissism shields the privileged from confronting the social conditions from which they benefit. It also impairs the ability to understand the social disadvantages faced by the oppressed, replacing structural diagnoses and solutions with discussions of personal responsibility. In these ways, I believe that vulnerable narcissism opens a door that would otherwise remain closed.

Erinn Gilson offers a helpful example of the sort of process I have in mind. She draws on an example from Patricia J. Williams to argue that one reason many people avoid considering the claims of homeless persons, or avoid even looking at them, is to disavow their own vulnerabilities. Indeed, this is often done in the name of good intentions. In Williams's example, a father explains to his daughter that it is better, that is more efficient, to give to aid organizations than give directly to a homeless person in need. The lesson is that "statistical need" is opposed to "actual need," and that the former is worthy of consideration and response while the latter is not. For Gilson, this is because to consider the claims of the homeless person would be to confront the fact that I too could be homeless, or to admit that I have certain unearned advantages (family resources, access to education, the absence of disabling conditions) supporting me and (so far) keeping me out of homelessness, or to "experience the insignificance of what we do (give her a few dollars perhaps) in the face of structural impediments [and the] frustration of such recognitions." Recognizing this disavowal could result from intimate revolt, but just naming the disavowal is clearly insufficient. Once I understand that I am avoiding the homeless person to maintain an illusion of invulnerability or merit (or both), I will not have truly integrated this new self-understanding (in psychoanalytic parlance, I will not have worked-through my resistances to this new understanding) until I can form some sort of community with the homeless person. Perhaps I recognize my relative privilege and give charitably to the homeless individuals or to organizations for the homeless (assuming I keep in mind that such actions are never sufficient, but always partial and inadequate); perhaps I recognize the dignity and humanity of the homeless individual by talking with her and showing direct concern, opening myself to the experience of my own relative privilege and shame; perhaps I become an ally to homeless people in my community and advocate alongside them for a robust social safety net that takes into account and responds to the vulnerabilities of the members of our shared community. Note that each of these responses achieves a form of vulnerable narcissism: as I perform this work, I invest in myself by understanding myself in relation to the social circumstances within which I am positioned.

An honest, self-reflective investment in myself, in other words, has the power to lead to the most selfless actions.

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Dr. Josh Dohmen

Dr. Josh Dohmen is an assistant professor of philosophy at Mississippi University for Women. His research interests include twentieth century continental philosophy, philosophy of disability, and feminist epistemology. His publications include "Interactions with Delusional Others: Reflections on Epistemic Failures and Virtues" and "Disability as Abject: Kristeva, Disability, and Resistance". His article "'A Little of Her Language': Epistemic Injustice and Mental Disability" was awarded Res Philosophica's 2016 essay prize.