Narcissus and his vain search for the invisible other: An interpretation from the point of view of valency theory

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Abstract

In the present paper, I have first attempted to discuss the Greek myth of Narcissus, showing that Narcissus’s was not really narcissistic in the narrow and strict meaning of the term. For Narcissus’s real “sin” is not self-loving, but his indifference towards, hate and confrontation of others, or the group and its mentality as defined by Bion. Viewed from the standpoint of valency theory, Narcissus’s mental difficulty or disorder was not his self-loving but his pathological or minus valency structure. Furthermore, based on valency theory and Bion’s idea of “narcissism/social-ism” as modified by the author, 1) I attempted here a new definition of narcissism as a psychic state comprising two inseparable poles (narciss-ism and social-ism), and 2) proposed a new typology of narcissism including pathological (with three subtypes), and normal narcissism. Pathological narcissism refers to 1) a psychic state, characterized by excessive self-loving, and indifference and hate towards the group, similar to Narcissus’s one, 2) a state where excessive love of the group coexists with self-abnegation as a result of repression, 3) a severe state characterized by low amount of both self-love and love of others or narciss-ism and social-ism. Finally, normal narcissism is redefined as a mental state characterized by a balance between “narciss-ism” and “social-ism”. This valency theory-based conception and typology of narcissism has various significant implications for not only clinical but also empirical research.

Key words: Narcissus myth, narcissism/social-ism, valency theory

Since Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysts have always displayed an interest in mythology, especially the Greek one. Gods and heroes of Greek myths, such as Psyche, Oedipus (Freud, 1910), Electra (Jung, 1913), Eros, and Narcissus, are often referred to and used as models (Bion, 1970) to illustrate, and name their clinical discoveries about human mind with its functions, complexes, and developmental stages. In the present paper, I will discuss Freud’s application of the myth of Narcissus, then will, as suggested by the title, propose my own interpretation of the myth based on valency theory (Hafsi, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2013a, 2013b). However, prior to that I will try to summarize the content of the myth.
The Myth of Narcissus

There are various versions of this myth, therefore I will refer to the one by the Roman poet Ovid which is included in book three of his *Metamorphoses*. According to Ovid’s tale, Narcissus was the son of the blue Nymph Leiriope of Thespia and the River god Cephisus. Concerned about her son’s future, his mother, Leiriope consulted a prophet who told her that her son, Narcissus, “will live to a ripe old age, as long as he never knows himself.”

Narcissus was endowed with an incomparable beauty. A young and beautiful Nymph named Echo was charmed by Narcissus, and fell profoundly and secretly in love with him. Echo was punished by Hera, the wife of the Olympians King Zeus, by taking away her voice when she discovered that Echo conspired with her husband by distracting and amusing her with long and entertaining stories while he was ravishing other nymphs. Following her punishment, Echo was unable to talk, the only thing she could voice was foolish repetition of another’s shouted words.

One day when Narcissus was out hunting, Echo, driven by her strong love and attraction towards Narcissus, followed him through the woods, longing to address him, but she was unable to say a word. When Narcissus finally realized that he was followed, he shouted “Who goes there?” and Echo repeated “...goes there? ...goes there?” This nonsensical conversation lasted until Echo lost patience, and finally showed herself and rushed to embrace Narcissus. But he avoided her and vainly asked her to leave him alone, breaking thus her heart. Profoundly hurt after this vain encounter, Echo spent the rest of her life lonely until nothing but an echo sound remained of her.

Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, learned of this story and decided to punish Narcissus. She lured him to a pool where he saw an image, and fell in love with it, unaware that it was his own reflection. He repeatedly bent down to kiss it, but each time he tried the image seemed to “run away”. Like Echo, Narcissus was thus heartbroken, because he realized that he could not possess the object of his love. Out of despair, he finally killed himself and was, as suggested by the story, transformed into the flower named after him, Narcissus.

In spite of their minor differences concerning the context and the narration style, most of the versions depicting the myth of Narcissus have or suggest a similar tragic denouement. In most of them, Narcissus is condemned to loneliness and the disappear of not being able to be loved by, and love another being.

The Myth of Narcissus has inspired many artists, poets, and writers, such as Caravaggio, Salvatore Dali, Turner, John Keats, Housman, Dostoevsky, to name only few. Most of these artists have tried, each in his way, to relate this story conveying a given message the artist believes deserves to be known.

Freud on narcissism

Unlike the artists, poets and writers Sigmund Freud, as a scientist and psychoanalyst, used
this myth as a model, and following other thinkers, he extracted from it the concept of narcissism, using it to illustrate what his psychoanalytic investigation has revealed about the human early developmental stages. The following is a summary of what Freud meant by narcissism.

Freud (1914) used the term narcissism before publishing his famous work. “On narcissism”. According to Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), we are not sure about the origin of this term, because Freud mentioned two names, Paul Nacke and Havelock Ellis. Like the former, Freud used the term to refer to a sexual perversion (treating one’s body as a sexual object), a developmental stage, libidinal cathexis of the ego, and an object-choice. He use it, for the first time in his works “Three essays on the theory of sexuality” (Freud, 1905), then in “Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of his childhood” (Freud, 1910), and “Psycho-analytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoids)” (Freud, 1911). Discussing the case of Schreber in the latter work, he states:

There comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual instincts (which have hitherto been engaged in autoerotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking himself, his own body as his love-object (p. 60).

A similar conception of narcissism is also found in his work “Totem and Taboo” where he deals with “Animism, magic, and the omnipotence of thoughts” (Freud, 1913). He argues that it is of practical necessity to conceive of an intermediary stage between the primitive or early auto-erotic stage and the stage of object-love, or object-choice. He explains that

In this intermediary stage, ...the sexual impulses which formerly were separate, have already formed into a unit and have also found an object; but this object is not external and foreign to the individual, but is his own ego, which is formed at this period. This new stage is called narcissism (p. 89).

As demonstrated by this statement, Freud postulates the existence, at the beginning of mental life, of a developmental stage characterized by auto-eroticism or anarchical auto-erotic satisfaction of the infant’s (sexual) instincts before the stage of object-love, then situated the narcissistic stage between the two stages. He referred to this intermediary stage as “primary narcissism”, and defined it as “a primal psychical situation” (Freud, 1915) wherein “the ego is cathected with instincts and is to some extent capable of satisfying them on itself” (Freud, 1914, p. 134).

According to Freud, later a part of this libido cathected onto the ego will be directed onto objects to become an object-libido, the counterpart of ego-libido. He (Freud, 1915) also
metaphorically conceived of the ego as a “great reservoir from which object-cathexes are sent out and into before they are withdrawn once more” (p. 218), and to the body of amoeba that can put forth and withdraw extensions or pseudopodia that can be withdrawn again when necessary (Freud, 1920, 1923a, 1923b, 1940).

Hence, as pointed out by Laplanche and Pontalis (1973), the definition of narcissism as an intermediary stage characterized by libidinal cathexis of the ego implies that narcissistic stage coincides with the emergence and formation of the ego. Genetically, continue Laplanche and Pontalis, “the formation of the ego can be conceived of as the formation of a psychical unit paralleling the constitution of the bodily schema” (p. 256), or image of oneself. Laplanche and Pontalis go further suggesting that this psychical unit, or the ego, is precipitated by the subject’s acquisition of a self-image modeled on the other person. They thus conclude that conceiving of the ego as the result of an identification with the other, implies that primary narcissism is the result of an intersubjective relationship and its internalization. According to these authors, although Freud’s later works seem to suggest that primary narcissism is unaffected by and independent of any intersubjective relationship, this conception is nevertheless still reflected in Freud’s (1917) work. “Mourning an Melancholia”, and his concept of “secondary narcissism”.

Besides primary narcissism, Freud speaks also of “secondary narcissism”, and conceives of it as the result of withdrawal of libido from objects, and its re-investment in the ego. This phenomenon which was first discussed by Freud in relation to paraphrenia, is associated with a lack of interest in external reality, megalomania (illusion of grandeur), and omnipotence. The libidinal withdrawal and re-investment of the ego is responsible of disturbed internal relationship to external reality and others.

According to Freud (1917), secondary narcissism is closely linked to object-choice of narcissistic type which Freud (1914) contrasted with the anaclitic or attachment type. In the case of narcissistic object-choice the person loves “a) what he himself is (i.e. himself), b) what he himself was, c) what he himself would like to be, d) someone who was once part of himself ... [whereas in anaclitic object-choice a person loves], “the woman who feeds” or “the man who protects” (1914c, p. 90). According to Freud (1918), the “Wolf Man” was a clinical illustration of narcissistic object-choice. The little Sergei (Wolf Man) experienced a shift of object-choice from his nurse to his father, a shift which was triggered by his subjective feeling of rejection by his nurse. Thanks to this shift little Sergei could, according to Freud, “renew his first and most primitive object-choice ... which, in conformity with a small child’s narcissism, had taken place along the path of identification” [with the father] (p.27).

In “On Narcissism” Freud (1914) introduced the concept of “ego-ideal” and an agency responsible for observing and measuring the ego against an ideal-ego which constitutes the basis for what he later called “super-ego” (Freud, 1923b). He described ego-ideal as the heir to
the childhood narcissism wherein the child used to satisfy himself. Freud (1915) explains that the “ideal ego [he did not distinguish it from ego-ideal] is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego...is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood” (p. 88). After the appearance of the concept of superego in Freud’s (1923b) thinking, the ego-ideal began to fade away, with Freud (1921) referring to it only intermittently in his later works in a quasi-technical way.

**The myth of Narcissus from a different vertex**

As mentioned above, myths have always served as a source of inspiration and models for explaining and illuminating those dark areas of human psyche. One of the outstanding contribution of mythology to psychoanalysis, according to Bion, is “depicting mind’s functioning” (Sandler, 2005). Freud’s use of the Greek myth of Oedipus by Sophocles is one example among many others. As pointed out by Bion, resorting to this myth helped Freud discover and understand the roots of some of his patients’ psychical conflict and sufferings, and further develop psychoanalytic theory.

In “Element of Psychoanalysis”, Bion (1963) writes: “The Oedipus myth may be regarded as an instrument that served Freud in his discovery of psychoanalysis and psycho-analysis as an instrument that enabled Freud to discover the Oedipus Complex” (p. 92), as an individual, or “private myth”, and as “the pre-conception, by virtue of which the infant is able to establish contact with the parents as they exist in the world of reality. The mating of a-element Oedipal pre-conception with the realization of the actual parents gives rise to the conception of parents” (p. 93). For this reason, he writes: “I wish to restore it [myth] to its place in our methods so that it can play the vitalizing part ...that it has played in history (and in Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis) ...” (p. 66)

Bion’s references to myths suggest that there are various vertices from where one can approach a myth. This is demonstrated by his various references to myths, especially Oedipus, the Garden of Eden, and the Tower of Babel. He considered myths from the K system, regarding them as elements belonging to category C of his Grid (Bion, 1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965). According to Bion, all these myths share the presence of a deity opposing and prohibiting the K-link (Bion, 1970) and its inherent characteristic wish to satisfy one’s curiosity by knowing a prohibited truth. Hence, Freud’s interpretation of the myth of Narcissus from the libidinal vertex is one the many possible ones. I am not challenging Freud’s interpretation here: I will rather try, following Bion, to demonstrate that this myth is also 1) about the prohibition of K, namely knowing oneself. Then I will discuss the implications that this interpretation have for the notion of narcissism.

As briefly mentioned above, in response to the Nymph Leiriope of Thespia (Narcissus’s mother)’s desire to know the future of her son, a prophet made the omen that her son, Narcissus, “will live to a ripe old age, as long as he never knows himself.” Apparently this prophetic
prediction is so simple and clear that one may tend to think that there is no need to look beyond and for eventual latent (hidden) meaning, or meta-message. However, if we considered it based on Bion’s assumption concerning the universal and common content of the myth, we can conjecture that this prediction or prophecy, addressed to Narcissus as the representative of Man, contains a prohibition of K, and the punishment in case this prohibition or taboo is transgressed. It can be reformulated as follows: “Don’t know yourself, if you care for yourself”. Stated differently, “if you dare know yourself, death will be your punishment”. If this is what the prophecy concerning the future of Narcissus is about, then Bion may be right in attributing prohibition of K to myths.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that this prophetic warning does not concern merely self-knowledge in its strict meaning. It includes also being self-centered, preoccupied with and loving only oneself. However, was Narcissus really guilty of transgressing this taboo of self-knowledge to deserve that death penalty inflicted upon him? Did he really indulge intentionally in this sin of self-knowledge? My answer is no, and I will below plead his case.

In Ovid’s version of the myth, the scene depicting Narcissus’s attempting to commit the so-called crime of self-knowledge is when he saw an image and fell in love with it, unaware that it was his own reflection. Of course this attempt to know, or enter in K-link relationship with the image in the water does not prove that Narcissus has transgressed the taboo of self-knowledge, because he could not know that the image was a self-reflection. That is why he kept tirelessly trying to kiss in vain the image, until his death. Narcissus was therefore, not guilty of self-love. On the contrary, he loved and was trying to earn the other’s (image) love.

Moreover, his rejection of Echo’s love does not mean that he is only self-centered, and therefore can not be blamed for that. The cause behind his rejection of Echo may be attributed rather to the fact that, due her speech disorder, she could not express her love to and communicate with Narcissus. Therefore, he could not understand her, feel attracted to her, and share her unilateral love. His rejection of other’s unilateral love is also not a proof that Narcissus was not interested in, avoiding or hating others. Even if his feelings and attitude towards people around him reflected hate, this is also a way of connecting to others through H-link (Bion, 1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970), and F valency (Hafsi, 2006, 2010a, 2013a, 2013b).

Hence, as I have tried to demonstrate, Narcissus 1) did not indulge intentionally (consciously) in self-knowledge, self-love, and 2) was not really self-centered because he was really seeking the company of another invisible object. It is invisible only in the myth, for the author and the reader of the myth, but not for the eyes of Narcissus. The latter could believe in its presence and see it. It is true that loving one’s own image is characteristic of narcissistic type of object-choice, but this is not enough to make of Narcissus a narcissist, because he was unable to relate to this image. In other words, he can not be guilty of narcissism as conceived by Freud. For, as discussed above, narcissism refers to a psychical state wherein 1) the libido is cathected onto the
ego and the object is libidinally decathected (primary narcissism), and 2) libido has been withdrawn from the object to be invested in the ego (secondary narcissism).

This implies consequently that 1) the myth of Narcissus is not appropriate enough to be used as a model for our “private Narcissus myth” (Bion, 1963), and 2) the Freudian concept of Narcissism may be too narrow to explain the unease, dis-ease, or mental disorder from which Narcissus suffered, and of which his mother may had been concerned when she consulted the Prophet. In the following, I will try, from the perspective of valency theory to shed light on the nature of Narcissus’s disorder, and the factors associated with it.

**Narcissus diagnosed from Valency theory**

If, unlike what Freud thought, Narcissus does not really display, in the strict meaning of the term, narcissistic characteristics, what constitutes the difficulty that prevented him from having a mentally and socially stable life, and “live to a ripe old age”? I will conjecture that the nature of Narcissus’s problem is not merely self-loving, but also, as shown in most versions of the myth, his inability to connect to others in a healthy and stable way. Stated differently, Narcissus’s difficulties and his tragic end are due to the pathological nature of his way to relate to his objects and others, or to his pathological valency *structure* (see, for instance Hafsi, 2006, 2010a, 2013a, 2013b).

Briefly, viewed from the perspective of valency theory, the individual’s most fundamental need is to get and feel attached or bound to an object, including here a significant other. The ultimate goal for the individual’s psyche is to secure a link or a bond with an object. For it is on this bond that depends the individual physical and mental existence, and health. This intersubjective bond is formed thanks to a psychical component I, borrowing the term from Bion (1961), call *valency*. According to valency theory, the individual is metaphorically speaking, like an atom, equipped with valency, or a means to unconsciously combine and connect with others. Valency is conceived of as a psychical structure which includes four kinds of valency, namely dependency, fight, pairing and flight. The most dominant valency corresponds to the “active valency” (ACV), and the remaining three valencies are referred to as “auxiliary valencies” (AXV). Valency structure is thus composed of one ACV and three AXV. Depending on which valency is dominant or active, the valency structure type can be of dependency, fight, pairing, or flight type.

Moreover, a valency structure can be also either “healthy”, “positive”, or “negative”. A positive valency structure corresponds to a structure comprising one AXC and three AXV. Whereas a negative valency structure refers to all the types of structure different from the positive one. There are three types of negative valency: hypo-valency structure, hyper-valency structure, and undifferentiated valency structure. All these types of negative structure share the common feature that the person has difficulty relating to reality and others in a socially
adequate and stable manner.

Hypo-valency structure represents a structure wherein the intensity of all the four valencies (dependency, fight, pairing and flight) is so low that the person is unable to establish even basic relationships. This type of valency structure is characteristic of psychosis and most psychotic disorders (schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, schizophreniform disorder).

Hyper-valency structure corresponds to a structure composed of only the ACV which is excessively intense, and three considerably low AXV. This leaves the person with only one means for building relationships regardless of the circumstances and the needs of others. Since this is rarely successful, it will lead to interpersonal fiascos.

Unlike a person with an hypo-valency structure, a person with an undifferentiated valency structure have four high valencies, but no specific ACV. Due to the lack of ACV, he can respond to any valency type, but others are unable to predict or know how this person wants to relate to them. Therefore, they will feel confused, inhibited, and will therefore refrain from trying to interact with him or her (see, for instance Hafsi, 2006, 2010a, 2013a, 2013b, and other works for a detailed description of the different types of minus valency structures and hyper-valency structures).

As mentioned above, the hypothesis developed here is that Narcissus’s difficulties are due to his minus valency structure, precisely speaking his hyper-valency structure. As discussed in detail in other works, a person characterized by this type of minus valency structure has only one strong valency (ACV) at his disposal. Thus, due to his atrophied, inhibited or underdeveloped auxiliary valencies (AXV), Narcissus was left without the means to react, contribute, and adapt to those various interpersonal situations and interactions which do not belong to the domain of his ACV.

Obviously, the myth of Narcissus is not a story of an isolated man, but a tale about a man interacting with a group. For his own survival, Narcissus, consciously and unconsciously, needs physical, psychical and social contact with others to create stable bonds on which depends his body and psyche. For this he has to display and make use of his valency structure, and that is what he spends his short life doing. But, unhappily, his hyper-valency structure prevented him, as depicted in the myth, from securing those life-sustaining interpersonal bonds.

The clinical impression one has about Narcissus is his suspicious, strong, reserved, stubborn and violent character, and his fight spirit. He is at many occasions in the myth depicted as hunting, challenging, fighting with, rejecting and confronting others. There are numerous anecdotes reflecting this impression. For instance, his challenging spirit has led him to, even if not consciously, ignore the prophetic warning, and went to know himself. He also prompted one of his lovers, Ameinias, to commit suicide by sending him a sword, and caused Echo’s suffering by strongly and unscrupulously rejecting her love. The destructiveness shown in relationship to his self-image and towards himself constitute also features of his character. We also know that
Narcissus was the offspring from a violent sexual union between Nymph Leiriope of Thespia and the River god Cephasus. Hence, Narcissus was born from violence, lived in violence, used violence to relate to others, and ended with violence.

The experience of violent interpersonal relationships, has shaped Narcissus’s, minus valency structure, or minus \( F \) valency. He learnt from his experience that fighting and violence are the sole means for relating with others. Endowed with only this hyper-valency structure to relate to people, he resorted to it in all his interpersonal encounters, with lovers, friends, and gods. As a result he created around himself a relational vacuum, loneliness that led him finally to die and become a symbol of death (Narcissus flower).

As mentioned above, hyper-valency structure is a pathological or minus valency structure correlated with pathological object relations, and relational (including mental) disorders (see Hafsi, 2010a). It includes four types of minus valency, namely minus dependency valency, minus fight valency, minus pairing valency, and minus flight valency. Based on the clinical impression discussed above, I conjecture that Narcissus had a \textit{minus fight valency}, and that that was the fundamental cause of his failure to secure stable relationships with others, including gods. In fact, in Greek and Roman versions of the myth, Narcissus’s sin is not his self-loving, but hate towards others. Self-loving was his punishment. He was punished by gods because of his minus fight, that is his egoistic, manipulative, unfair and arrogant behavior that made others (e.g., Ameinias and Echo) suffer.

Viewed from the vertex of group dynamics, Narcissus’s negative attitude towards others was perceived by the group (including gods) as opposing the “group mentality” and the “basic assumption of pairing” (Bion, 1961, Hafsi, 2003, 2004) associated with it. Furthermore, applying Bion’s idea about the relationship between group mentality, the individual and “group culture”, the myth itself can be interpreted as a cultural means or artefact whose aim is attempting to resolve the conflict that may set the individual against the group mentality. The myth is a legacy from the past to human groups after Narcissus.

But does he really deserve the punishment inflicted on him? Viewed from valency theory vertex, the answer is “no”. Because, he was under the influence of his minus fight structure, and his conscious desire was not to harm and avoid others, but to relate to them, unaware that this action was leading him to suffering. Therefore, in my view, punishment was not the “right” response to Narcissus’s “sin”, because it was based on retaliation which is a component of minus fight valency. And therefore, it may be experienced as a confirmation of Narcissus’s illusion that he can reach and get bound to others only through his minus fight valency structure.

**Beyond Narcissism: a contribution from valency theory**

By arguing that, as I did above, Narcissus’s real sin was not only his self-loving but his indifference, hate and aggressivity towards others, I am suggesting that Narcissus’s self-loving
or simply “narcissism” is only one pole of a bipolar psychic state; the other pole being an opposite state which may be temporary called “others-loving”. This bipolar psychic state is akin to Bion’s (1992) conceptual bipolarity of narcissism/social-ism as I understand them.

According to Bion (1992), narcissism is an independent concept; it can be defined only in relation with social-ism. The hyphenation in social-ism was used to create an unsaturated concept different from the well known term of socialism. He conceived of these concepts as two tendencies characterizing human beings (Sandler, 2005), operating in conjunction with life and death instincts, including respectively love impulses and hate impulses. When narcissistic tendency prevails, the life instincts (also referred to as love impulses) are oriented towards the ego, and the death instincts towards others or the group. On the other hand, when it is social-ism or social-istic tendency that is manifest, the direction of the two groups of instincts change; life instincts will be directed towards the group and death instincts towards the ego.

This is only one way of understanding narcissism and social-ism. For, as usual, Bion did not provide us with a precise definition and hint about how these two concepts can be used. However, what is certain is that narcissism and social-ism may be regarded as “opposite poles” (Bion, 1965; p. 80), constituting a spectrum and operating in tandem, and in combination with all the instincts. Due to a lack of a detailed discussion of these concepts by Bion himself, and researchers after him, I will confine myself to Bion’s vague definition, and will discuss how I have adopted and integrated this in my valency theory.

Primary narcissism as conceived by Freud has no place in valency theory, because it implies that man is primarily self-oriented, and that the ultimate aim of the psyche is instinctual satisfaction, and this is opposite to the very fundamental assumption of valency theory. As adumbrated above, according to valency theory, what man craves for is not instinctual gratification but object relations and relationship (attachment to, and bond) with a significant

![Diagram of Narcissism Continuum](image.png)

*Figure 1. Narcissism Continuum*
other. Based on object relations theory, this idea is partly reflected in Bion’s concepts of narcissism and social-ism. Therefore I borrowed these concepts and slightly modified them so that they fit in valency theory.

First of all, I will, like Bion did for social-ism, use hyphenation for narcissism, writing it “narciss-ism” to distinguish it from both the Freudian and Bionian terms. Like Bion, I regard narciss-ism and social-ism as two inseparable and interdependent concepts; the definition of one depends on the other, and the existence of one depends on the absence or hiding of the other, like in the two sides of a coin, when one side is visible, the other is invisible.

Furthermore, by integrating some of Freud’s and Bion’s ideas, I arrived at a new understanding and typology of narcissism. Using Bion’s concept of narcissism/social-ism, and the concepts of self and group, I redefined narcissism as an object-relations continuum with two poles: narciss-ism, and social-ism. As shown in Figure 1, at the beginning of this continuum, stands a type of narcissism characterized by libidinal hyper-cathexis of both the self and the group (others). This corresponds to what is generally understood as “normal” or “healthy” narcissism (Jacobson, 1964, White, 1986), indispensable for the psychological and physical survival of the person. To put it differently, healthy narcissism, or narciss-ism/social-ism refers to a psychic state characterized by a moderate amount of both narciss-ism and social-ism. Unlike Narcissus who, as discussed above, unconsciously loved only himself, and evaded others, a person with normal narcissism is supposed to be able to display both self-love, and establish stable relationships with others characterized by what Bion (1963, 1970) calls \( L(\text{Love})-H(\text{Hate})-K(\text{knowledge})-\text{links} \), or mutual growth-inducing emotions.

On the contrary, the end of the continuum corresponds to a severe pathological psychic state wherein neither the self nor the group is sufficiently cathexed. This state represents an extremely pathological object relations state, I call “minus narciss-ism/social-ism”. In this state, neither the self, nor the group is libidinally cathexed, or object of love; due to projective identification both are experienced as object of psychotic fear and anxiety. In between these extreme types of narcissism, comes first a type of narcissism characterized by a hyper libidinal cathexis of the self and a withdrawal of cathexis from the group. This corresponds to the mental state, usually referred to as secondary narcissism, which characterizes Narcissus, and is called here “narciss-ism”.

Narciss-ism state is followed by another type of narcissism wherein it is the group – to which the ego identifies – that is highly cathexed to the detriment of the self which is almost decathexed and abnegated. This type of pathological narcissism, or “social-ism” did not attract much attention, and has therefore not been sufficiently investigated. It is very often associated with ultra-nationalism, fanatism, terrorism, and all kinds of “isms” which require conscious and/or unconscious self-abnegation, absolute selfishness, total obedience to, and masochistic idolatry of the group with its ideology and illusion.
It is noteworthy that, in spite of their apparent difference, all the types of pathological narcissism constitute defensive reactions against separation fear and anxiety. They constitute attempts to restore the initial undifferentiation condition (Hafsi, 2014) wherein the foetus was still bound to the mother’s womb, and which was interrupted by what Bion (1977) paraphrasing Freud calls the “caesura of birth”. In other words, these attempts aims at crossing the caesura to reunite with and stick to the unforgettable other.

In the case of narcissism, the person defends himself against this fear and anxiety by withdrawing libido from the group, and libidinally amplifying the self, to prove that the self is so omnipotently strong that there is no need for the object, the group. For without the need for and relatedness with the group, there is no risk of experiencing separation and suffering it.

The defensive procedure against separation, or lose of relatedness in socialism consists, as discussed above, in cathecting the group, identifying with it, and withdrawing cathexis from the ego. This is concomitant with pathological idealization of the group and self-abnegation. For, as discussed somewhere else (Hafsi, 2013), the presence of the self and its recognition is felt by the person as a prove of his separation from the object, and as cause of painful psychic experience. Hence, whether the person defends himself by avoiding others and relations with them, or denying oneself and idealizing the group and identifying with it, the aim is the same: avoiding the painful experience of being disconnected from the other.

Finally, viewed from the perspective of valency theory, besides the difference concerning the object cathected (self or object), healthy narcissism, narcissism, socialism and minus narcissism/socialism differ in terms of valency structure with which each of these pathologic state is associated. As suggested above concerning Narcissus, narcissism, owing to its characteristic self-loving, avoidance and denigration of the group, may be associated with hyper-valency structure, especially the minus fight valency structure (see Figure 1). Concerning socialism, due to the characteristic self-abnegation, and identification with and idealization of the group, it may be related with minus dependency valency structure. However, although this relationship between valency structure and narcissism as discussed here is clinically meaningful, it is still in need for further clinical investigation and empirical testing.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

Myths are unsaturated collective works. Thanks to their “unsaturatedness”, they constitute ideal screens for human projection, and textbooks for learning about human psyche. They also provide us with models that can help us think and transmit the result of our thinking about the psyche. That is why psychoanalysis has been interested in myths.

The unsaturated character of the myths has also resulted in different interpretations of a same myth. In the present paper, I have first tried to discuss the Greek myth of Narcissus from a different vertex, showing that Narcissus’s was not really narcissistic in the narrow and strict
meaning of the term. I argued that Narcissus was not intentionally and really self-centered, because he really loved and was expecting to be loved by the image reflected in the water, even if that was his self-image. Therefore, I have also tried to show that Narcissus real “sin” is not self-loving per se, but his contempt for, indifference towards, and hate of others (e.g., his lovers Echo and Amphitrite), or the group. I believe that it is this that has angered the gods as representative of the group, and led them to punish Narcissus, because his attitude was contrary to the large group mentality. The punishment by gods is a cultural reaction to resolve the conflict which set Narcissus against this mentality.

Viewed from the standpoint of valency theory, I argued that what constitutes Narcissus’s mental problem or disorder was not his self-loving but the nature of his way to relate others, that is, valency structure. Based on some episodes described by the myth, I conjecture that Narcissus had a pathological or hyper-valency structure. Precisely speaking, it was his minus fight valency structure that is at the roots of his failure to secure stable relationships with others, including gods.

Moreover, according to valency theory, the Freudian concept of secondary narcissism was concerned with principally one aspect, namely ego cathexis and its consequences (self-loving, for instance). I have thus suggested, based on Freud’s economic point of view, Bion’s idea of “narcissism/social-ism”, and my own interpretation of the myth of Narcissus, that narcissism is a psychic state comprising two inseparable and interdependent poles or sides: narciss-ism and social-ism. Reinterpreting these Bionian terms in a way that fits my valency theory, I regard narciss-ism as a psychic state characterized by ego cathecting and decahcting of the object (other, the group), and social-ism as an opposite state wherein it is the object that is cathected to the detriment of the ego.

This led me to the conception of narcissism as a continuum starting from normal or healthy narcissism to highly pathological narcissism, as shown in Figure 1. Normal narcissism corresponds to a mental state characterized by a balance between narciss-ism and social-ism. That is, the person is able to display love towards both himself and the group (object), and show tolerance of the frustration that may result from what Bion (1961) calls the inevitable group individual dilemma. For it is on these two interdependent loves that dependent his mental stability and growth. On the contrary, pathological narcissism includes respectively 1) a psychic state illustrated by Narcissus, which is characterized by excessive narciss-ism, or self-loving and indifference or/hate towards the group, 2) a state of excessive social-ism, or excessive love of the group coexisting with self-abnegation, 3) a severe state characterized by a considerably low amount of both narciss-ism and social-ism. In this state neither the self, nor the group is object of love; both are experienced as unconnected particles or “bizarre objects” (Bion, 1962b), and therefore as object of psychotic fear and anxiety.

Pathological narcissism as discussed here is thus not merely about self-loving; it is also about
how the group (object) is cathered and therefore perceived by the subject. Finally, as I have
tried to show here, the three types comprised in the narcissistic continuum constitute, in the last
analysis, attempts to restore the initial prenatal state where self and object were
undifferentiated in a state of physical and psychic at-one-ment, a state which was interrupted by
the caesura of birth.

References

*Memoirs of Nara University* 32: 117-133.


