

# Narcissism and the Dynamics of Evil

DOUGLAS MCMANAMAN

"Narcissism and the Dynamics of Evil." [LifeIssues.net](http://LifeIssues.net) (April 1, 2005)

Doug McManaman is a Deacon and a Religion and Philosophy teacher at Father Michael McGivney Catholic Academy in Markham, Ontario, Canada. He is currently the President of the Canadian Fellowship of Catholic Scholars.

## Selected excerpts:

Moral evil is primarily about a disordered will; for only a being with intellect and will is a moral agent. ... A good will, however, is one that "wills the good". This is what love is: willing the good of another (benevolence).

And so evil is parasitic. Its host is always a good. And since evil is a kind of non-being or nothingness, pure evil is impossible. Pure evil would be completely nothing, and nothing is not evil; it simply 'is not'. Evil is a privation that requires a subject in which to inhere.

There is a relationship between choosing (doing) and becoming (being). We *are* (character) what we choose. Nothing is more intimately our own than our character, which is determined by nothing other than our free and self-determined choices. And since evil is a privation, a kind of non-being or nothingness, the more one makes morally evil choices, the "less" one becomes. In other words, choosing moral evil, such as treating another or others as a means to an end, brings about a shrinkage, a lessening of the self. If perpetuated and unrepented, such de-creation leads to a kind of self-loathing; for there is less of oneself to love – just as the more one severs pieces of one's face with a knife, the more unsightly he becomes and the more horrified he is as he beholds his reflection in a mirror.

What is morally noble is beautiful (kalon), but what is morally evil is ignoble and morally unsightly. That is why one who commits to injustice or who gives himself to evil for the sake of ends that are good becomes morally unsightly to himself, as well as to those who see him as he is. He becomes ugly. Hence, the self-loathing that is part and parcel of the depraved.

Another property of moral evil, concomitant to self-loathing, is egotism. Consider that injustice is the freely willed decision not to render to another his due, whether it is truth, property, liberty, impartial treatment, or reverence of his life. The golden rule is a traditional formulation of the requirement of fairness: do unto others what you would have others do unto you, or, do not do to others what you yourself dislike. Injustice is precisely a failure to love another as another self. The unjust man treats himself with a degree of partiality, and he fails to recognize the other's status as a person equal in dignity, to be treated as an end in himself. The unjust man has thereby established a degree of egotism within himself; for he has made himself larger than another, at least in his own eyes and according to his own behaviour.

Some have made a commitment to do battle against their own tendency to sin, while others have simply surrendered to a life that places the self at the center. The refusal to behold one's own moral unsightliness—and thus the refusal of repentance and moral growth – brings about a conflict that demands resolution.

Such a person is aware of his own moral deficiency and loathes himself accordingly. The degree of his self-loathing corresponds to the degree of his depravity. At the same time, though, he has surrendered to an egotism that is part and parcel of an unjust character. The egotist that he has become cannot tolerate the awareness of his unsightly ignobility. This conflict has to be resolved because he has a radical need for affirmation. Like all beings, he naturally desires to be most fully, and so he desires the fullness of the good – it is just that he will not choose in accordance with what he really desires. The need for affirmation persists nonetheless. And affirmation is the natural and proper response to what is genuinely good. The problem is that he cannot affirm himself – he beholds his depravity and sees others as far less unsightly, which of course spawns envy – , yet his egotism demands affirmation all the more and to a much greater extent and intensity. The greater his moral depravity, the greater and more unbearable is this fundamental conflict.

He either beholds his corruption and repents of the choices that brought it about, or he turns his gaze from it and commits to creating an image, a reflection, a false self that others will be able to affirm.

He cannot allow others to see what he sees in himself, for they will reject him. What they see will be as repulsive to them as it is to himself. So he must create a highly likable and acceptable image that will procure the affirmation he requires for himself, an affirmation that he can only get from others who do not know him as he really is. Thus begins the fundamental lie of the self-loathing egotist. For an image is a reflection. One can only see a reflection if it is mirrored in some way. The egotist must see his reflection through the eyes of others, and so others become a means to his own affirmation, a means to his own conviction that he really exists. For the deeply depraved have created a void, a nothingness in the heart of their character. But a person cannot detect the presence of nothingness. Hence, the egotist desperately needs to be convinced of his own existence. He needs to feel that he is. If he will not achieve this through the pursuit of virtue, he will do so through the affirmation, praise, and adulation of others, or through their fear of him.

But what others affirm (or fear) is not the true self of the egotist. He cannot show his true self, for he does not know who or what it is. His true self is fractured, dilapidated, and in pieces. Thus, it is only a reflection that they affirm.

Such a person, by virtue of his olympian egotism, always regards others as inferior to himself. Everyone is a simpleton in his eyes. What helps afford him this illusion is that most people are unsuspecting and are unaware of the degree to which they are being taken advantage of, used and abused. This unawareness is not due to a general lack of intelligence in people, but to their tendency to project their own range of normalcy onto others. Hence, their disinclination to suspect someone so profoundly depraved to be in their midst, carrying on an existence that is fundamentally and thoroughly a lie. But the character disordered conveniently regard this trait as evidence of intellectual inferiority and will take a twisted delight in the knowledge that they have so many fooled.

... men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived. When it is a question of evil, it is precisely the element of disguise that people tend to overlook. We are wont to assume that evil, character disorder, profound moral depravity, psychopathy, pathological narcissism, etc., are easy to detect and that such people can only intimidate and inspire fear upon a first encounter. But this is only the case with those not intelligent enough to disguise their depravity, like the common

criminal. The most dangerous among us are those intelligent enough to appear as paragons of virtue.

Morality is in the will. It is very possible to have a brilliant mind, but at the same time a wicked and depraved will. The most dangerous predators among us are ingeniously veiled. They carefully surround themselves with people entirely unlike themselves, that is, with deeply empathic human beings who wish to please others, who are slow to judge, who are excessively tolerant and who have an eye for the good to be found in others. They know how to exploit to their own advantage such character traits. It is their association with such people that maximizes their chances of perpetuating the facade and keeping themselves from exposure.

... so too the depraved cannot help but on occasion burst out and spit their bile, thus providing others a momentary glimpse of their interior rot. Moments such as these are clues that must be stored in the memory and, like disparate pieces of a puzzle, assembled later in order to acquire a more complete picture, which will be a horror to behold, or an experience of terror – if the narcissist discovers that he has been found out by you. The clues, in isolation, will suggest only minor imperfections or character flaws. But taken together over a number of years, they suggest something much more ominous.

Some pathological narcissists are so clever that certain people will simply never be able to penetrate the disguise, no matter what has been pointed out to them. One reason they are so successful is that they have come to believe their own lies. The narcissist has convinced himself that the facade is not a lie.

We cannot forget that they have a desperate fear of exposure, that someone might catch a long enough glimpse at the rot that lies within and raise the awareness of others, thus threatening the power structure that took years of careful planning to erect. That is why the pathological narcissist is a long-term plotter, like the brilliant chess player who plans ten or more moves ahead.

So he will go to great lengths and carefully contrive very devious and underhanded schemes to keep people divided. He will sow division among colleagues by planting lies about one person to another, and another about someone else. This can be a

successful strategy because no one expects a highly intelligent adult to be carrying on like a scheming eight-year-old child or an emotionally disturbed adolescent. And since most of us avoid confrontation, it is much easier to believe the liar.

So adept is he at this narrowly focused persecution, in fact, that any attempt by the victim to tell another will in all probability make him (the victim) appear as if he is losing his mind.

The narcissist takes advantage of every opportunity to favor a person who is down and in need – as long as the prospects that he will be of use later on are good. But the narcissist experiences no righteous indignation. He only rages against the person who is a threat to his charade and/or who refuses to cooperate with his underhanded schemes. But he will not be incensed at injustice.

But they are not brave; they are cowards at heart. They lack the courage to gaze upon the dilapidated specter of their true selves, nor can they bear to look into the eyes of one who has discovered their true nature. They inspire terror only because we recognize that the inhibitions that govern the impulses of normal healthy persons are completely lacking in the pathological narcissist. They are psychopaths.

There have been a number of false norms that have been made popular over the years that have only made it easier for the depraved and pathological narcissist to continue undetected. The popular exhortation to be tolerant, positive, non-judgmental and inclusive are prime examples.

The optimist who refuses to see the lack lest he begin to feel negative is blinding himself to evil and contributing to the creation of the kind of environment that the depraved require in order to flourish. Good is the very subject of evil. And so there will always be something good to behold in the morally depraved egotist.

The biblical precept not to judge (Cf. Mt 7ff) is not and has never been an unqualified and absolute norm, as if making judgments were intrinsically evil. Rather, the biblical norm is qualified by the context in which we find it: "Why do you

observe the splinter in your brother's eye and never notice the great log in your own?...Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's eye" (Mt 7, 4-5). Scripture does not assert that all of us have logs in our eyes that we are forever unable to remove, thus barring us from ever having to judge that someone might have a splinter in his. The norm bears upon the hypocrisy of the morally blind passing judgment on someone much better off morally and spiritually.

St. Paul says: "The spiritual man judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one (1 Co 2, 15). Scripture is filled with examples of negative judgments (Cf. Acts 5, 1-5; 8, 21-22; Rm 1, 1ff; Eph 4, 5). The narcissist is ever scheming to create a safe environment primarily for himself, and so what could better serve him than to be surrounded by people who are committed to an unqualified refusal to make judgments?

But so few are denied positions of authority because they are so adept at disguise. They are convincing, articulate, and charismatic. But the narcissist is all about power.

The facade he uses to hide his depravity and fool the world may very well contain genuinely good things, such as religious, political, judicial, or educational principles. But most of his victims will forever associate his deception with these good things and will be unable to distinguish between what is genuinely good from the narcissist's abuse of it.

Hence, the current widespread approbation of tolerance as the perfection of justice. But tolerance is not necessarily a virtue, for there is a great deal that love refuses to tolerate. Again, such confusion only establishes the conditions that the character disordered depend upon in order to keep themselves from being exposed.

To keep oneself from being fooled by the narcissist whose facade includes Catholicism, we only have to remain faithful to Peter.

If he is ordained, he will plot for ecclesiastical office, for he is not content with the humble and obscure life of a simple priest, which is why as a priest, his ministry almost always takes on a theatrical hue. He will do things out of the ordinary, often subtly unorthodox, things that call attention to himself and make him popular with a particular contingent of the parish. But underneath the facade, nonetheless, lurks a man who is anything but compassionate, as some people eventually discover.

By remaining faithful to Peter, one takes a path that ultimately the narcissist cannot follow. It is by virtue of this fidelity that we share in the benefits of Christ's prayer for Peter: "Simon, Simon! Look, Satan has got his wish to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail, and once you have recovered, you in your turn must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22, 31). All of them will be sifted like wheat, but Peter will not fail, not by virtue of his own strength – from this angle, he failed – but by virtue of Christ's prayer for him.