

## Is Narcissism a Bad Thing? Classic Narcissism versus Echo Narcissism

**Craig M Traub\***

Clinical Psychologist & Criminologist,  
Johannesburg, South Africa

**Keywords:** Narcissism; Echo; Unapologetically vacuous

**Received:** January 29, 2018; **Accepted:** February 05, 2018; **Published:** February 10, 2018

**\*Corresponding author:** Craig M Traub

✉ craigmtraub@gmail.com

Clinical Psychologist & Criminologist,  
Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Tel:** +27011 656 1058

**Citation:** Traub CM (2018) Is Narcissism a Bad Thing? Classic Narcissism versus Echo Narcissism. J Psychol Brain Stud. Vol.2 No.1:3

### Opinion

Our story is a variant of Ovid's tale of Narcissus and Echo, which is found in Book III of his long narrative poem, *Metamorphoses*, giving a mytho-historical account the history of the world. In this version, a beautiful youth, Narcissus, burns with love for the image of his own self that he sees reflected in the shimmer of a lake's surface. Echo, a timid and kind water nymph, becomes almost equally enamoured with Narcissus. She cautiously approaches the self-fixated Narcissus, and begs him to return his affections. Although he ignores her, he is intrigued by her desire for him. Narcissus is only able to resist the fascination of his own image when he is admired by Echo – or the external world. Narcissus's responses to Echo's advances, although few and far between, elates her, and encourages her to further engage with him. Echo feeds and grooms Narcissus, both physically and emotionally.

Narcissus quickly grows bored with, and loses appreciation for, Echo's yearnings and attempts to gratify him. His rejection results in her increasing her efforts to satisfy his physical and emotional needs. Echo's interests, goals, aspirations, and meanings eventually become extinct over time. Narcissus, who has himself become increasingly and heavily reliant on Echo for his well-being, eventually withers away, as Echo, despite her best efforts, cannot meet both his increasingly extensive and intensive needs. Echo, then, feels distraught, fragile and purposeless. She crawls into a nearby cave where she, too, ceases to exist. All that remains of her is the reverberation of another's voice and words spoken in caves, which denote her final resting place, that is, an echo.

To propel this story into the modern era we need to understand the characters in it, beginning (obviously) with Narcissus. Narcissus may be viewed as self-centred, self-absorbed and over-indulgent of his own needs (i.e. classic narcissism). These needs are his only interests, and they must be met by the external world. His need for affirmation is likely to become increasingly and unapologetically vacuous, as expected from an extreme perfectionist. He is able, at least initially, even if superficially, to convey a sense of self-esteem. Although this bravado, which is a form of pseudo-confidence, is often appealing to others, this shell he creates is generally quite fragile or sensitive to criticism, imperfection, emotional vulnerability, and shame.

It is not surprising that his capacity for empathy is limited. He soon becomes bored with, and grows weary of, anyone else's needs and aspirations. He becomes frustrated, and criticises and controls others in order to elicit affirmation of his beauty, brilliance and/or status. Negative or ambiguous comments made to him by anyone are often perceived as shaming or devaluing. This can result in his emotional vulnerability, leading to him being overly critical of others, as well as blaming and shaming of others. This often leads to the recipient feeling 'not good enough', and feeling like a failure in almost every attempt to please.

Echo may be viewed as someone who has an overwhelming desire to please, a willingness to sacrifice herself with a disregard for her own needs, because she feels the need to meet the demands of others more strongly (i.e. echo narcissism). Full of self-doubts, she is drawn to the pseudo-confidence of Narcissus and the image he has projected as someone who does not have to please others. Echo may want to help him for a number of reasons, such as, her own need to be seen as – or to feel – altruistic; to save someone; to provide proof to herself of her own worth (adequacy or excellence); to avoid the possibility of rejection; to distract herself from her own life's challenges; or to avoid the potential feeling of failure in trying to achieve one's own goals and aspirations. The energy she expends in giving affirmation to Narcissus places her in a precarious position, for it means that she is often unable to meet her own needs. When these are not met, and all her attempts to please Narcissus are continuously considered insufficient, she is likely to experience frustration, resentment, anger, futility, anxiety, loneliness, neediness, guilt, shame, emptiness, and sadness.

Moreover, Echo's extreme capacity for empathy and martyrdom has made her exploitable and vulnerable to further mistreatment. She does not seem to understand that the more willing she is to sacrifice her own needs, wants, opinions, aspirations, and goals, the easier it is for someone like Narcissus to exploit her. Because of what she has learnt in the past, she believes that her sacrifice will be interpreted by the object of her affections (Narcissus) as an expression of her love and acceptance, which would convert him into a being that would refrain from pitiless exploitation. The result, however, is that she is exploited even more. Counter to her assumption, increasing her sacrifice tends to not lead to a softer Narcissus, but rather, provides greater opportunity for Narcissus to exploit the kindness of Echo. It is often the case, that greater discretion regarding the extent of one's level of sacrifice is required, as there remains limited human capacity to do so.

As the focus of Echo's desire, Narcissus evidently gains a seemingly endless supply of affirmation, consideration, kindness and dedication. This means that, to some extent, he does not have to cope with loneliness or rejection. Echo, on the other hand, seems to derive little from this relationship. This is not necessarily always the case, though, for it is his approval of her that is her incentive to satisfy his need for affirmation. It is this approval or acknowledgement coming from someone who is often highly critical, perfectionistic, shaming, and unforgiving, that is of profound importance to her. Narcissus's acknowledgement of Echo's efforts makes her believe that her sacrifice is worthwhile, even valuable. This is particularly the case for a starved people-pleaser, or helper, like Echo. In addition, it is worth her while to maintain the relationship because Narcissus becomes at times – even if superficially – considerate and charming, as in the beginning of the relationship, prompted by his fear that she will leave or reject him. This means that there is a perpetuating cycle of Echo's self-sacrifice and Narcissus's exploitation of it, and then his kindness to avoid her potential rejection of him, which reinforces the self-sacrifice as worthwhile.

Ideally Narcissus should attend some form of therapeutic intervention – together with Echo. The purpose of this is to have him become more responsive to the feelings and needs

of others, show a greater empathy and tolerance of frustration, less self-absorption, and a decrease in his need to manipulate or control others via his passive-aggressiveness, criticism, episodes of sulking and anger, and so on (i.e. healthier narcissism). This is something, however, that seldom happens, for Narcissus is unlikely to commit himself to such a process for any significant period. He will argue that it is too costly and inconvenient – or even that he is not being treated with impartiality. This happens in the therapy space when Narcissus' superficial charm wears thin, he feels 'narcissistically injured' or shamed, and/or imperfect or emotionally vulnerable.

Echo, however, is more likely to remain engaged in the therapeutic process. She has already demonstrated her capacity to handle and accommodate difficult situations, emotional vulnerability, sacrifice and pain – all of which may once again come to the fore during therapy. A therapeutic process in which Echo merely wants to fix Narcissus tends to be a recycled version of sacrificing her own needs to aid another. What would be most beneficial for Echo is to be able to acknowledge – and have the confidence to pursue – her own needs, wants, desires, and aspirations (i.e. healthier narcissism). She may need to attain a greater capacity for self-interest and sense of self-worth, both of which differ greatly from selfishness, self-absorption, and self-centredness. Echo's additional challenge may be to explore and understand those differences with less anxiety, shame, and guilt, which tend to be evoked in her, especially when interacting with Narcissus.

It is possible that Echo's nature is simply proof of her purely altruistic desire to show kindness, consideration and sacrifice. This is welcomed as long as there is no expectation from Echo that Narcissus will be similarly considerate towards her. Echo need not feel depressed, bitter, resentful or angry, if her attempts to alter Narcissus's behaviour come to naught. Her greatest challenge is that she has to accept the reality that kindness may neither cure nor control all ills, and that as much as she wants her autonomy to be respected, she may need to respect Narcissus's also – regardless of whether she finds what he does with his autonomy desirable or not.