Narcissism and Moral Education: Extending the Debate

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In his analysis of Lasch's thesis, as well as in his critique of my interpretation of Lasch, Professor Gary de Leeuw intimates that I have accepted the whole of Lasch's view of narcissism and modern culture. While I certainly contend that Lasch presents an intriguing explanation of how a narcissistic life-plan and belief system have the potential of colliding with efforts to foster moral principles and moral sensitivity among school children, I, like de Leeuw, have reservations concerning the fine points of Lasch's thesis. Summarizing Taylor's central view of culture and individualism, de Leeuw points out that individualism can lead to "valid accomplishments" and "valid forms of expression." In many ways, these observations echo Goldberg's understanding of *positive narcissism*, by which persons can master their own realities and by which "an ensemble of Selves can come together to share, encounter, and meaningfully experience the world" (1993, p. 13). Hence, in the context of Taylor's and Goldberg's observations regarding culture and individualism, it is clear that the fruits of positive narcissism can indeed be moral.

My recognition of positive narcissism is not something that, as Professor Garlikov suggests, I was "forced to recognize." On the contrary, from my first reading of Lasch, I was puzzled by his inability to account fully for the prosocial contributions of positive narcissists in contemporary culture. I was also perplexed about Lasch's claim that narcissism, of the pathological variety, is ubiquitous throughout modern culture. His explanation of the etiology of pathological narcissism – which essentially claims that pathological narcissism can be somehow culturally induced after the period of rapprochement (in children age 2-4) has been successfully negotiated and which suggests that a narcissistic personality disorder is no different from a borderline personality disorder – contradicts the mainstream understanding of the origins of the pathology (Masterman, 1981).

Despite these shortcomings, I am still convinced that to the degree that *negative narcissism* compromises the development of prosocial behavior, and

the sentiments and values that support such behavior, it has the potential for undercutting efforts to foster moral sensitivity and moral judgment among children and especially among adolescents.

Professor de Leeuw also notes that narcissism receives support "from a vast political and economic establishment of commerce and advertising." Lasch, too, recognizes how these institutions contribute to proselytizing the narcissistic mindset. I agree with de Leeuw that it is indeed a daunting enterprise for the school alone to guide children in recognizing the prevalence of the narcissistic life-plan and in how such a view of life may compromise prosocial behavior and ultimately moral conduct.

As part of this enterprise, schools might extend an analysis of narcissism in literature in English classes to include a similar analysis in social studies classes of various manifestations of popular culture, from magazine features and rock song lyrics, to TV commercials and newspaper advertisements. But such a recommendation leads into another of de Leeuw's concerns – how could such a program be undertaken "without serious disruption of curriculum requirements?"

I assume here that he is referring to the additional curricular time required for such activities (which could take away from other content requirements) and to the parental support for a program that focuses on linking negative narcissism to the fostering of moral principles.

A solution to the first concern would be a shift to what Joseph Carroll (1990) calls the "Copernican Model" of school structuring. This model calls for a redesigning of the typical high school class period from the traditional 40-42 minutes to 80 minutes. In such a model, students take just three or four major courses each semester, and teachers have responsibilities for teaching fewer classes and fewer students. Within such a structure, teachers utilize many different student-centered activities that address various learning styles, and they provide opportunities for students to explore material closely and deeply, rather than panoramically and superficially. The Copernican Model is ideally equipped to operationalize the strategies I recommend for analyzing narcissism in literature because, in addition to underscoring the effects of negative narcissism as it relates to prosocial behavior and moral principles, it also reinforces the literary analysis skills relating to characterization, motivation, and theme. However, it does not address, as de Leeuw observes, whether the local community would support such an analysis of negative narcissism, especially as it relates to prosocial behavior and moral conduct.

Professor de Leeuw has framed here the larger issue central to all programs of moral education: the content. Historically, the debate over moral content may be graphed linearly with two polar extremes. On the one hand are

those like Edward Wynne, who see schools as essentially doctrinal and who espouse "good conduct as that which demonstrates truthfulness, promptness, obedience to authority, diligence, patriotism, and acceptance of authority" (Beane, 1990, p. 98). On the other hand are those like Alan Lockwood, who challenge the notion that there is or ever was consensus on codes of conduct (p. 98). Within these opposite positions, many public schools, with parental collaboration, have identified community values, that are emphasized in all phases of the school day, from classroom activities to policies and protocols observed in the student cafeteria and during school assemblies. Similar endeavors could also be undertaken, with parental support, to include an analysis of the culture of narcissism in adolescent literature and in popular culture as it impedes the fostering of moral principles and conduct.

While these efforts at defining good conduct have been successful in many public school districts, some parents choose to send their children to private or parochial school where the school philosophy corresponds closely to their beliefs about schooling and where they need not compromise even the finer points of their own values, which they hope to impart to their children with the help of the school. Moreover, it is this controversy over the content of moral education, as well as the techniques of teaching moral education, that is in large part responsible for the dramatic increase in the number of private schools throughout the United States today.

In his critique of "Unmasking the Face of Narcissism," Professor Garlikov also underscores, in a personal context, this lack of consensus surrounding the content and techniques of teaching morality in the classroom. He perceives moral education as "the fostering of moral understanding and moral reasoning," whereas I describe moral education as imparting to students "specific beliefs and behaviors." My definition, which occurs somewhat early in my discussion and to which he does not subscribe, has apparently led him to infer that I would not encourage students to challenge and to examine critically these beliefs and behaviors. On the contrary, I acknowledge again that students need to analyze "their thoughts and experiences" as they are struggling to come to terms with their own identity, including their system of values.

Influenced by Neil Postman's (1976) thermostatic view of the purpose of education (which focuses on counterbalancing in the classroom those elements of "cultural biases" dominating contemporary society), I am concerned that the culture of narcissism has so influenced the belief systems and life plans of so many young people that the attending self-absorption, self-aggrandizement, need for immediate gratification, and feelings of entitlement have shifted the balance so far to the self that meaningful

discussions of moral issues – that may indeed lead to moral understanding and moral reasoning – have become seriously impaired.

These concerns have been most recently echoed by William Damon (1995), the Director of the Center for the Study of Human Development at Brown University:

> The psychological danger of putting the child at the center of all things, of making children too conscious of themselves and their own feelings, is that it draws the child's attention away from fundamental social realities to which the child must adapt for proper character development. When children learn to place themselves first, they learn to care more about their own personal experience than about the feelings and reactions of others .... They fail to establish a firm basis for respecting others, including even the important adults in their lives. In the long run, they learn to act as their own sole moral-referents, which is not a good way to develop a balanced moral sense .... Without objective moral referents beyond themselves, children cannot acquire a stable sense of right and wrong. (p. 78)

Children do not come from their mothers' wombs fully mature, able to partake in moral discussion, and able to act morally. The development of moral sensibilities and behavior is developmental and simultaneously linear and recursive, requiring, as Damon points out, guidance from "important adults in their lives." However, in attending to "fundamental social realities," children are also socialized as they fine-tune their moral senses. Garlikov is correct in noting, first, that socialization and enculturalization are not necessariliy moral domains, despite claims by Durkheim and even Dewey to the contrary (Chazan, 1985), and second, that socialization and morality can contradict one another. But the two domains, the social and the moral, surely intersect in places and build upon each other. As children refine their formal operational thinking, they should be able, and should be guided by parents and teachers in this process, to separate the truly moral from the mere social.

I do not deny that some, such as Professor Garlikov, may interpret my focusing on prosocial behavior such as empathy, kindness, sharing, helpfulness, and cooperation – all antidotes to negative narcissism – as mere socialization. However, I would argue that these are "moral dispositions" or first steps towards moral thinking and moral action, which is why I have subtitled my discussion "A Pre-requiusite for Moral Education." And while I would not disagree with Garlikov that moral understanding and moral judgment should be fostered in the classroom, I would also argue the need for emphasizing in schools what James Q. Wilson (1993) describes as "moral senses."

William Damon (1995) remarks that many moral philosophers and educators omit or ignore recent findings from the social sciences that bear directly on understanding how humans develop as moral agents. Summarizing Wilson's social scientific research on the moral senses, Damon explains how each of the four moral sentiments – sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty (p.132) – is "representative of an entire class of emotions, intuitions, and regulatory systems that are present at birth and that *predispose* children towards moral awareness" (p. 133; emphasis added).

If Wilson (1993) and Damon (1995) are correct about the existence and functioning of these moral sentiments that are innate and that predispose children towards moral awareness, then my recommendations that schools should challenge the attending attitudes and behaviors of negative narcissism should be seriously considered, especially since so many features of negative narcissism run counter to these moral sentiments. The influence of negative narcissism is indeed at issue here because, even though these moral sentiments may predispose children towards moral awareness, "these [moral sentiments] are not the sole determinants of action; circumstances – the rewards, penalties, and rituals of daily life – constrain or subvert the operation of the moral sense" (Wilson, 1993, p. 24). Like the implications proceeding from recent research on the genetic basis of temperament (Kagan, 1994), culture and the immediate environment are powerful sources in shaping the development and direction of genetically-wired, brain circuitry responsible for these predispositions.

I would like to thank Professors de Leeuw and Garlikov for their thought-provoking responses to my argument. I hope that this exchange will prompt others to question whether Lasch, and more recently Damon, is correct about the prevalence of narcissism and indulgence in contemporary culture, whether these phenomena are interfering with the cultivation of moral sentiments, moral conduct, and a "balanced moral sense," and whether classroom teachers should attempt to address negative narcissism as it relates to the teaching of morality.

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