



Who Am I Really? – Illusions and Splits in the Mirror

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Abstract

This research paper examines the ‘As-If’ personality, characterized by mimicry, emotional distance, and disconnection from one’s true self, within the context of today’s social media culture. Drawing upon psychoanalytic insights, it explores the impact of living a superficial existence, marked by illusions and isolation. Through the lens of the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus, it reveals the yearning for authentic connection and love beneath these personas. The study highlights the potential for healing and self-discovery in Jungian analytical psychology, emphasizing the journey to self-realization and authenticity.

Keywords: ‘As-If’ personality, Narcissism, Social Media culture, Psychological dissociation, Jungian analytical psychology.

“As a result of some psychic upheaval whole tracts of our being can plunge back into the unconscious and vanish from the surface for years and decades...disturbances caused by affects are known technically as phenomena of dissociation, and are indicative of a psychic split”

(Jung, 1934, para. 286).

The 'as-if' personality and our narcissistic culture signal the superficiality, lack and absence typical of the current era of social media, ego/persona images, and absorption with 'likes' on the internet. Meanwhile, COVID-19 bringing the reality of death and precarity of life into our analytical consulting rooms has been sobering. It paradoxically heightened awareness of the singularity of narcissism, the lack of internal reflection and isolation haunting many of this personality type.

The narcissism of our era includes impenetrability, fragmentation, and avoidance of self and others, often without awareness. Likewise, the 'as-if' person needs outer image and adoration while the issue is loss of self-connection. Jung did not directly discuss narcissism but recognized overemphasis on the ego and persona meant denying the shadow with adverse effects on becoming oneself and relating with others.

The illusory world of the 'as-if' personality addressed by Jungian analyst Hester Solomon (2004) is combined with Andre Green, the French psychoanalyst. He described what he called death narcissism or the void, emptiness, and destructive withdrawal with a masochistic quality. He called another attitude life narcissism characterized by an impoverished ego limited to illusory relationships without deep involvement.

Andre Green further ascribed the parental loss, the lack of presence or aliveness and the child mutated with fractured attachments and internal discontinuity. The splits and cracks in the mirror for the self bring destabilization to the personality. He described the "*lack: absence of memory, absence in the mind, absence of contact, absence of feeling all—all these absences can be condensed in the idea of a gap...instead of referring to a simple void or to something which is missing, becomes the substratum of what is real*" (Kohon, ed., 1999, p. 8). For a child, attachment forms not to the parents but to the gap and the absence and the personality becomes one of pretense. Andre Green named the suffering in which all seems to have ended like "*a psychic ruin that seizes hold of the subject in such a way that all vitality and life becomes frozen, where in fact it becomes forbidden...to be*" (Green, 1986, p. 152).

Enchanted with youth, living in the fantasy worlds of video games, online pornography, and social media can indicate these lacks in the psyche, arousing this variety of defenses against reality. Jung commented, "*the degree that one does not admit the validity of the other person, denies the other within the right to exist—and vice versa*" (Jung, 1973, para. 187). This is accentuated during times like ours of uncertainty and absence of internal reflection.

Echo and Narcissus

The Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus illustrates this absence as Echo's female body wastes away while seeking Narcissus, who can only seek his image yet not recognize it as his own. Echo continually makes dramatic appeals for connection, attention, and love. This is a dialogue composed of Narcissus' statement and her repeat, question and answer, back and forth. The rhythm can be likened to the dialogue of therapeutic inquiry on conscious and unconscious planes. The therapeutic crucible of comment and repeat evolves in a rhythm to awaken desire based on difference yet predicated on the sameness of being human. The verbal and nonverbal speech between participants draws the self from

the unconscious, the absence, and into the process of mourning for repairing the losses.

The Greek writer Ovid's account in 8 CE depicts Narcissus paying a price for his rejection as a lover of anyone other than himself. Although this self-sameness allows for no differences, there is a deeper individuation-urge embedded in the myth. The issues highlighted similarly appear in our lives, relationships, and dreams, indicating the conflicts, impasses, and desires encountered along the psychological journey. The scenarios of life and death, love and relationship are personal and collective dramas rendering the psyche and its conflicts visible through metaphors, images, and symbols. Like in analytical work, this includes the agony of questioning, "*Who am I?*". The dance between conscious and unconscious elements is choreographed through the archetypal themes in the myth, representing the universal and timeless pathways of the psyche.

This myth recounts the hunger for love. Echo enacts the search for the other who is different and desired, while she plunges into psychological and physical lack from being refused. Narcissus enacts isolation from others, ignoring the world while Echo reaches out to connect. Although Narcissus wants sameness and Echo difference, each experiences body and psyche disintegrating from the lack of love.

The pain of Echo is mirrored in the narcissistic personality prevalent in Western culture. The cultural and psychological lack of attention to Echo reflects the negation of the feminine, the physical body, the longing and desire frustrated in relationship to self and others. Narcissus portrays a self based on the illusory, unable to be grasped, elusive and, as such, is death-dealing. He is unable to include the other or the feminine, and his passion remains unrequited. His personality depicts the defenses bolstering self-sameness and protecting against the vulnerability that a relationship entails. Self and world become disjointed rather than unified, hanging onto youth and fantasy, attempting to escape time, existing 'as-if' in the bubble of narcissism.

Echo invites dialogue and connection with the masculine, the other in vocalizing her desires for love and relationship. She presents a way out of the impasse of sameness and lack of intimacy. Her voice, tone and inflection define and accentuate her subjectivity. Echo is active through her repetition, persistent, unyielding, determined. Echo presents a contrast from the self-sameness of narcissism turning away from others. Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, contended Narcissus hears himself through the resonance of Echo (2005, p. 164). Her words draw out Narcissus as he hears and responds, but he answers with rejection. The extent of her unmet mourning, loss and desire results in her body disappearing and symbolizes the psychological effects of not being received or seen. These are emotional ingredients essential for development and growth. Derrida expanded on this theme, describing the situation when "the defenses turn and suicidally destroy its self through the very act of defending its self" (Derrida, 2005, p. 123).

The myth portrays how little Echo and Narcissus know each other, yet each needs the other to live. The process of Jungian analytical psychotherapy opens a gateway to aliveness and love with self and others, persona, and shadow. Jung called this holding the 'tension of the opposites'. It can be interpreted here as listening and responding to the voice of Echo rather than remaining in the singularity of Narcissus.

‘As-If’ Personality

The ‘as-if’ personality was originally labeled by the Freudian psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch in the 1940s. She diagnosed this person as an impostor type without genuineness, acting in mimicry of others (Solomon, 2004, p. 637). Deutsch described ‘a spasmodic, if skilled, repetition of a prototype without the slightest trace of originality’ (Deutsch, 1942, p. 303). She noted, “*another characteristic of the ‘as-if’ personality was that aggressive tendencies were almost completely masked by passivity, lending an air of negative goodness, of mild amiability with an absence of feeling connection*” (Deutsch, 1942, pp. 304, 305). This personality type was typified as inauthentic, although social and able to assume expected appearances, seemingly capable of warmth, but with stunted emotional depth. According to Helene Deutsch, as well as the analytical methodology and thought of that era, this person was considered psychologically unreachable.

Hester Solomon, the British Jungian analyst, has written about this personality type more recently (2004). Now, this person is no longer assessed as hopeless and is accessible for psychological treatment, understanding and growth. The ‘as-if’ adaptation is an aspect of the psyche, one with splits and dissociations formed in defense of the self to the point of the person being described as emotionally stricken (Solomon, 2004, p. 637). The internal dissociation develops as a survival attempt and reflects there is a void where the feelings and emotions should be. Unnerving are the yet-to-be-discovered layers behind the veils, mirrors and empty cheer. There is a lack of passion, the kind that comes from going to the depths rather than sidestepping them.

The child early on learns she must not have a mind of her own, that her own thoughts, needs, emotions and desires are dangerous to her parents. Her own emerging independent sense of identity becomes eliminated as she must be in tune with the parental desires. It is the individuation process itself that such parents experience as threatening and which they seek to destroy (Knox, 2007, p. 545). This becomes the unconscious envious attack on the child’s self-agency, destroys aliveness and becomes a self-torture of inability and feeling inadequate.

Many ‘as-if’ people feel their lives are senseless and barriers exist between them and others, exacerbating apathy and lack of connection. Often, they construct a false body-self or need a perfect body to which they cling to ward off feeling not alive, and they operate like a disembodied mind. The person acts in defense of the self and lacks the inner nourishment, hindered by the unaddressed emptiness within.

Something is needed to combat this sense of deadness. Distanced from their true selves, the ‘as-if’ person comes to a place they can no longer deny living in a void and now facing the emptiness (Solomon, 2004, p. 636). There is a precariousness to the defenses, panic, and fear that there is nothing, including no inner representation of face or body. Estranged from one’s affective core (Modell, 1996, p. 150), the loss of contact with an authentic self means closing from others. The regime of images imposed on the body from the outside creates violence and anger turned inward, bringing an accompanying disappearance of the body. An independent self or omnipotent self is convinced it needs no others due to the perceived absence of safety. The self is felt as fragile and vulnerable, empty, and dead, as if nothing was there (Modell, 1996, p. 151). The inner darkness, the shadow, potential and energy lies secreted beneath the surface, making this person seem brittle, hollow, and false. These people often appear able and confident, yet the core is shaky. T. S.

Eliot, the American and British poet, in his famous poem, 'The Wasteland', written in 1922, referred to life as 'a heap of broken images', meaning the unreachable, damaged, or there is simply no meaning at all.

The emptiness, longing and needs are re-enacted in the therapeutic relationship. Jungian analytical treatment allows for a place to dissolve the falsity, the persona/ego reliance and the gradual emergence of the more complete personality. The metaphor for this is Echo reaching out to Narcissus. Human beings are born naturally passionate, according to Jung, but the 'blocking of libido' (1967, p.170-171), as he called it, can lead to feeling life has lost its zest and enjoyment, and one feels stuck or lost.

The dimming of life and joy creates psychological agony afflicting many, especially in our image-driven world. The defensive adoption of psychic retreat and narcissism hide gnawing anxiety, the internal dissociations and fragile self-cohesion. Preoccupation with glitz, sleek self-image, and prestige indicates individuals beset by social forces. Social media platforms feature an inauthentic presentation with inaccurate information, telling us the world is full of impossibly beautiful people with wonderful and luxurious lives. The shift towards appearances can affect distancing from the inner life and the feelings and emotions affecting wellbeing. As British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips said, "*we learn to live somewhere between the lives we have and the lives we would like*" (Phillips, 2012, p. xi).

The needs for love and attention get obfuscated in a deception to self and others by putting on a performance and acting 'as-if' (Solomon, 2004, p. 639). What seems like self-absorption is a defense against intimacy and interior reflection. The genuineness of the inner experience is missing, including the capacity to love (Sheehan, 2004, p. 413). To love is to be vulnerable and open, to trust, face the risks and possible rejections and to be seen. The avoidance of love and loving results in a lack of engagement and depersonalization.

The Narcissus myth represents the psyche injured and leaves questions about how it may be healed. Although narcissistic injury commonly appears in therapy, it can get missed. The narcissist is a master at the art of the mask maker, often not realizing it is a mask. No one else is to see or realize who is behind the mask. Narcissists lack the key to the experience of others, and with them, one feels there is something wrong. He is oddly unsatisfying to be around: after a conversation with him, you may feel cheated or empty. He seems to be posing. Normally, it is love that makes us feel alive – love for other people, love for activity and nature, quiet. However, because this person cannot love, they feel deadened and numb.

The myth reveals disturbances of the self-connection. We see this in people marked by continual self-representation, an absence of empathy, a need to be admired by others, a sense of superiority, looking at others with a sense of disdain, and exaggerating achievements. They have difficulty seeing how these actions harm others. At least, this is how it appears. Underneath is a personality quaking, insecure, frantic to cover the holes with the acceptable persona.

Jungian analytical psychology has much to say about how we can create new channels in the psyche, to be creatively engaged and involved in our lives. Here is the symbolism of Echo in her appeal to Narcissus for listening to the love and connection needed for developing a more complete self.

Jungian Analytical Example

Tahira dreamt she was on a beach, and three men in black capes with a flock of black birds behind them walked past her. One of the men laid a book with the cover decorated in jewels and the pages in an old manuscript style. When she looked up the image online, she found it was an alchemical Codex from the Middle Ages. These are powerful images to reflect upon and unravel, taking her into the mystery of herself. What is she to do with this information? She did not yet appreciate the wealth of her psyche or the depth of understanding she could acquire, as indicated in the appearance of the Codex in the dream. At this point, she had no idea of alchemy or the value of the Codex until she checked on Google, and then she was very surprised. It opened her world, the symbols and the ancient interpretations applied to her current life.

In the Jungian analytical process, she is uncovering her background, but it was not the one she assumed. The psychological descent into the unconscious is leading to the revelation of the truths of her heritage. This and other secrets of the family and herself were emerging. This dream image, with its symbolism and historical roots, is beyond the personal and reaches into the collective unconscious, the storehouse of images and meanings. These were guiding her ever deeper to answer the question, *"Who am I really?"*.

One of the gifts of depth psychology is the capacity to understand the invisible forces at work in the unconscious. We grasp their context and understanding as we pay attention to dreams. Tahira had neglected her inner life with its wealth of images and symbols for years. She is to explore this text referring to alchemy, the mystical, the masculine presenting this gift to her, the meaning in his black cape signaling another earlier era and what all this signifies now for her life. The hope is harnessing the energy and imagination to transform the 'as-if' image for the real, release personal and cultural constraints, and widen consciousness.

She commented, *"The mirror was in a space I had to walk past every day. Though I did not have to look in it, I did anyway and didn't feel good in the mirror regardless of how I looked. Every day I walked past that mirror I looked at a man who was hurt and confused"*. This comment is typical of the 'as-if' personality. It begins with a low level of self-discomfort, the separateness and unease adhering to even the smallest moments. The feeling becomes part of each day, and swells to thunderous noise until it drowns out any presence for oneself. This is the low level of despair, instigating attempts at dissimulation to escape the inner disappointment and heaviness. The adopted masks and illusions actively work to mystify and deceive themselves and others.

This person has an impoverished or absent emotionally and physically comfortable relationship with the world, belied by their presentation of glitz and shine. They are unable to bear, even momentarily, to be seen up close, beneath the skin. They might be perceived as winners who have made it by others but often are internally empty, disillusioned, anxious, confused, alienated, and, most of all, estranged from themselves. Looking successful to others does not fill the spaces inside.

Tahira described, *"Today I had a moment of feeling real. Usually, I am somewhere else. But now I caught it and could tell the difference for the first time"*. The 'as-if' person narrates a story of personal and collective history composed of the

vicissitudes with which they secretly engage. This personality has a penchant for poses, an imposter based on inner distress and psychological confusion. One's soul feels wrecked from within, forming a swarm of instability and pain of existence.

This 'as-if' person exhibits an elusive, flighty, and often dramatic approach to life to mask the emotional, interpersonal, and behavioral fragility. Underlying is a sense of distrust and lack of confidence. Filling the emptiness with people, places, and things attempts to compensate for the feeling of being unreal. As adults, these people become performers, needing attention, and seeming superficial. The question is how to bridge the gap to access who one really is.

The way of relating to the world is through mimicry, while the adaptation 'as-if' comes at the expense of authenticity. One feels as flat as the social media screen, yet this is often hidden from themselves and others. The internal division signals being trapped in unconscious personal, cultural, and historical wounds. These include unfinished mourning processes, intergenerational issues, and archetypal anxieties. What seems a flaw is often a mysterious key to the secret life of an individual. If this becomes pathologized, we kill the soul. The unconscious calls to be more deeply known, relationships with self and others open rather than closed, life no longer avoided with emotional distancing, compulsions, or perfectionism.

This personality type, although clever at disguise, is haunted by aims and aspirations not yet achieved, along with the pressure of nothing ever being enough. An enigma to themselves and others, this person is impenetrable. These people *"defend against aspects of reality concerned with absence and loss that are felt to be intolerable"* (Colman, 2006, p. 22). They need the illusions and idealizations of others focused on them so life can seem other than it is. They construct a solid and tight package as a defense. In dreams, she/he might appear inappropriately dressed or insufficiently rehearsed because she/he does not feel ready for life.

The 'as-if' person has yet to travel the road inward, faced with the truths they know unconsciously, including the discontent and discontinuity. However, the 'as-if' person cannot stop long enough and needs to cover the real and just go on because it hurts too much. At some point, life catches up, and they must address issues formerly denied, evolve out of the fog, and be present.

Some conclusions

Tahira commented, *"I think I've always felt a kind of floating feeling – I don't know how else to put it. But I've always also, even more, had this feeling nothing is quite real, what are we doing, and it is sort of strange. All that has always been present in my feelings and in my thoughts. It made me feel displaced and ungrounded while moving through life"*. This recognition was positioned at the beginning of her analytical process prior to the Codex dream and pointed towards the process of individuation and finding life meaning. Skimming on the surface and not really living, these people are internally isolated, looking competent, creative, unusual, with quirky perspectives, but insecure. This is the inner mirror showing what they believe and attempt to negate through emotional distancing.

The forces for unmasking compel inward and outward movement through examining the self-deception and fictional behavior. With an aptitude for mimicry, the 'as-if' person watches the world but remains aloof, alone, and above it all. A solitary sadness takes over and deprives the person of joy and the permission to be real.

The necessary acknowledgment of vulnerability and incompleteness provides an end to the flight from reality. The 'as-if' personality, with its narcissist response to life when able to unmask the issues, both personal and cultural, also represents hope. This is needed to untie the internal constraints and create new ways of being in the world. What is made along the way is one's individual and unique self.

"We are meant to encounter these others within us and open to the timelessness and changing aspects of our psychological and social selves"
(Schwartz, 2023, p. 159)

About the Author

Susan E. Schwartz, Ph.D. trained in Zurich, Switzerland as a Jungian analyst is also a clinical psychologist and member of the International Association of Analytical Psychology. She presents to numerous Jungian conferences and teaching programs in the USA and worldwide.

Susan has articles in several journals and chapters in books on Jungian analytical psychology. Her book *The Absent Father Effect on Daughters, Father Desire, Father Wounds* is translated into several languages. Her newest book also published by Routledge is entitled, *The Imposter Syndrome and The 'As-If' Personality: The Fragility of Self*. Her Jungian analytical practice is in Paradise Valley, Arizona and her website is www.susanschwartzphd.com.

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