



It's a Thin Line Between Healthy Self-Esteem and Narcissism

A Review of

Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love

by Simon Blackburn

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Reviewed by

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I distinctly remember, when I was child in the stage of development that is now referred to as the “twens,” looking at myself in the mirror, and, for the first time, seeing myself as others saw me. I had always been there, and the mirror had always been there, but for some reason I was now able to step outside myself and take the perspective of another person. I didn’t like what I saw—my hair was a mess, and I didn’t think that I looked particularly good. It was not a good feeling. That moment has always stayed with me, and, to some extent, my life since then has been concerned with coming to terms with what it represents: the loss of the un-self-consciousness of childhood, the realization that others have opinions about me, and the struggle to live a life that is driven by my own values and not unduly influenced by my awareness of others’ perspectives or opinions about me. As I now know as a clinical psychologist who works with people diagnosed with mental illness and studies the impact of stigma on the identity of such individuals, our thoughts about what others think of us can be a great barrier to our ability to feel good about ourselves and live self-directed lives. I’m also a parent, and wonder how I can raise my children so that they can continue to “be themselves” even after they become aware of how others view them.

Of course, although many people struggle with an identity that is unduly influenced by others’ views, at another extreme is the reality that a large number of individuals seem to have no awareness of or concern for the fact that others are negatively affected by some of their actions. Individuals who appear to be particularly consistent offenders in this regard might be called narcissists, or more bluntly, *assholes* (see James [2012] for an excellent treatment of the subject). What excited me about the prospect of reading *Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*, the latest offering from philosopher Simon Blackburn, was the prospect of reading a book that would explore the tension between these two extremes. In other words, how can humans find a way to be aware and respectful of others’ rights and feelings without being unduly influenced by an awareness of their opinions? How can humans feel appropriately good about themselves without thinking that they are “better” than everyone else, and treating others accordingly? (It’s no coincidence that in his

song "I Am a God" rapper Kanye West [2013] follows the title refrain with statements such as "Hurry up with my damn croissants!"). The answer to this question could have great implications for how we raise and educate our children. Although reading *Mirror, Mirror* did not offer a clear proscriptive answer to my question about how this can be best done, it gave me plenty to think about and, in this regard, did not disappoint.

Definite highlights are when Blackburn directly addresses the absurdity of what he reveals to have been the inspiration for the book: an advertising campaign by cosmetics company L'Oreal with the tagline "Because you're worth it." Blackburn incisively decimates the shallow irony of this campaign and what it represents, which ultimately plays on consumers who lack self-esteem. However, a disappointment of the book is that Blackburn only briefly analyzes the relevance of the most recent obsession of current society, the "selfie" (a self-portrait taken with a phone/camera or similar device), and the corresponding presentation of the self that is now routinely engaged in via social media.

On a related note, the prospective reader should know that Blackburn is a philosopher and not a psychologist or sociologist, so his treatment of the issue of self-perceptions and presentations draws primarily from philosophical and literary sources, and there is almost no discussion of research findings. Although it was interesting to learn about writings on the topic that were outside my realm of expertise, I really thought that some engagement of the school of sociology sometimes called "symbolic interactionism" would have been appropriate (e.g., Goffman, 1959). This might have also allowed for a more explicit examination of the current obsession with self-presentation via "selfies" posted on social media, which take Goffman's characterizations of performative social behavior to a "whole new level."

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, I found Blackburn's treatment of issues surrounding self-love and self-consciousness to be engaging, readable, and thought-provoking, and the book is therefore recommended. It will be especially of interest to the psychologist who studies issues of the self and is interested in a summary of what the field of philosophy has to say on this topic.

References

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

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West, K. (2013). *I am a God. On Yeezus* [CD]. New York, NY: Def Jam.