

Narcissism and helplessness: some considerations about interpersonal relationships today

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Abstract: This essay aims to discuss the phenomenon of narcissism today, starting from the hypothesis that interpersonal relationships are configured by helplessness in its traumatic dimension, and not as an opening to alterity. This would be so because, in the current social scenario, human relationships tend to lack help and alteritarian support for subjects' transformation and development, posing three disruptive threats to them: *lonely emptiness, invasion of the other and impotence*. In the absence of supportive relationships, the other appears as a threat against which narcissism emerges as a possibility of defense, prevailing in the form of regenerating narcissism.

Keywords: narcissism, helplessness, interpersonal relationships, psychoanalysis.

Freud (1917/2010), when stating that “*the ego is not master in its own house*” (p. 250), encountered resistance from all sides for hurting western and modern humanity's narcissistic illusion of subject of consciousness. This statement reflects the difficulty in dealing with the alteritarian dimension and everything that breaks with the established stability, escapes control and comes along unpredictably, in all its threatening power of indeterminacy, revealing the precarious and fragile structure of our subjectivity.

What can we say, then, about the condition of the contemporary individual, who in the midst of his activities is constantly confronted with news of natural catastrophes, violence, murders, terrorisms? The threat seems to be everywhere and, therefore, it often takes on an indeterminate character: it is everywhere and, at the same time, it is not always possible to touch it. This means that the vulnerability of the human condition announces itself around every corner, with each new news of tragedy, leading to a sense of loss of trustworthiness and therefore to an anguished state that something bad can happen at any time. In a society in which one is led to see the other as a competitor, rival or enemy to be fought, trusting has almost become a heroic task. Most of the time, however, the rule to be followed in human relationships is that of defensive withdrawal or the assumption of hostile behavior.

As an example of how this happens in Brazil, Dunker (2015) presents the *logic of the condominium*, which underlies the middle-class ideal of consumption:

the closed residential of life between walls, whose objective is to occupy a space and delimit a territory, protecting you from possible intrusions. Not by chance, the author considers that condominiums appear as an attempt to remove or even abolish from the everyday sphere everything related to precariousness, risks and uncertainties: “a region isolated from the rest, where one could freely exercise coexistence and the sense of community among equals” (Dunker, 2015, p. 47).

Bauman (1998, 2004) also highlights the crisis present in human relationships today, which have become one of the greatest sources of anxiety, because, while bonds are expected to be strengthened, they always end up proving fragile and insufficient to be fully trustworthy. Psychoanalysts (Birman, 2005, 2014; Costa, 1988, 2005) have also been paying attention to the present time as an era marked by the predominance of the image, by the speed and intensity of events, excess and simultaneity of information, by the fragmentation of units in favor of multiplicities and varieties, where the solidity and durability of relationships, projects and the world itself have weakened. As a consequence of the new subjectivation processes that occurred in this scenario, the themes of helplessness and narcissism have been recurrent in the field of psychoanalytic studies, being presented in connection with the experiences of panic, depression, violence, body image disorders, expressions of the feeling that, increasingly, the subject is thrown into situations and affections that he cannot effectively symbolize or anticipate (Campos, 2016; Garcia & Coutinho, 2004; Menezes, 2005; Pereira, 2008).

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A prominent aspect observed in the way human relationships are woven today is the elimination of the other as a figure of alterity and the assumption of symmetrical relationships, in which the other is seen as an object to be used in favor of self-aggrandizement and exaltation of one's own image, which, as soon as no longer useful in this function, can easily be discarded and replaced. It is in this sense that it is said that today's subjectivities are, to a large extent, narcissistic, that is, self-centered subjectivities, but externalized, as they seek themselves in the admiring look that the other can have towards their image, performance and accomplishment (Birman, 2005). In the same direction, Costa (2005) describes the present time as *somatic culture*, in which the subjects' identity started to be defined from physical attributes of the body, so that even the pleasure and the ideal of happiness are circumscribed to the body and to what it can provide, whether through sensory satisfaction or through the interest and curiosity it elicits in others. It is in this sense that body shape and performance have also become a guarantee of moral admiration, in such a way that those who do not cultivate the ideal of having a good quality of life, do not take care of the body, health and beauty, are considered weak, negligent and incompetent. Thus, one of the consequences of somatic and performative culture is the ambiguous and contradictory relationship that takes place in interpersonal relationships. This is because, if on the one hand the others are necessary to confirm the image that each one has of themselves, on the other hand, they present themselves as an undesirable threat for revealing not only how far from the ideal this subject is, but also his vulnerability by sustaining his identity on an image.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, this feeling of vulnerability, however, finds its foundation in the very constitution of the Self, since this is nothing more than a precipitate of images and experiences that is constituted in the relationship with the other and that, although it achieves a certain unity throughout its development, it always protects, in its way of structuring, a fragility of its borders (Freud, 1914/2010). This view, which removes the psychic apparatus from a model that until then seemed to be based on a developmental and endogenous process to ground it in an intersubjective model, although it gains strength with the introduction of the concept of narcissism by psychoanalytic theory, is highlighted in current discussions made around the issue of helplessness, as this is understood as the fundamental condition for social ties to take place and, therefore, the constitution of the Self (Birman, 2014; Menezes, 2012). It so happens that helplessness, in addition to configuring itself as an opening to the other, can also be felt as a threat, mobilizing defensive processes that include narcissism itself. This is because, in addition to a primary and constitutive narcissism of the Self, there are also

regressive conditions of narcissism within the broad scope of what Freud (1914/2010) called secondary narcissism, but which gained important developments, such as the idea of negative narcissism or of death (Green, 1988). In this renewed sense, narcissism can be understood as a primary process of psychic elaboration in the face of trauma to which the psychic apparatus is exposed since the beginning of its structuring (Campos, 2014).

Given this context, this essay seeks to discuss and problematize the phenomenon of narcissism present in human relations today from the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis, through an articulation with the concept of helplessness. Our hypothesis is that the prevalence of narcissistic interpersonal relationships, characterized by an externalized self-centeredness, in which the other appears as an object that supports and confirms a person's identity fantasy while at the same time threatens that same identity, brings the mark of helplessness in its traumatic dimension, not its creative dimension.

The Freudian notion of helplessness

Initially, Freud (1895/1995) presents helplessness in conjunction with the baby's motor and biological inability to satisfy his own vital needs. For the author, it is this inability that makes the baby find himself in a position of complete dependence on the other to end his emotional excitement and, also, to establish in him the possibility of desire. Such dependence, however, goes far beyond a simple biological fact. It presents itself as a condition of possibility for social ties and for the inscription of desire in the child's psyche, which always implies an appeal to the other, so that this gives meaning to their helplessness (Fuks, 2003; Menezes, 2012).

Although the concept of helplessness presented at the beginning cannot keep up with the reach of his later thinking, it will cover the entire work of the author, gaining strength and resonance in more mature theorizations and appearing more clearly when Freud (1926/2014) presents the newborn's helplessness as the *original* experience that underlies all anxiety-generating *situations of danger*. This is because, at birth, the baby is seized by a wave of strong flux of excitement that hits him in an unbridled and invasive way, throwing him into a state of total passivity and impotence, as there is still no possibility, including biological, of defending himself. He does not know whether a situation is dangerous or not, since there is no psychic content in him to which the initial experience could be linked, so that everything that happens to him still has no name, is not symbolized and, therefore, does not find a place of representation. There is only the sensation of being hit by a great amount of excitement, which produces a strong feeling of displeasure and is associated with an original

anguish modality, namely, *automatic anxiety* (Freud, 1926/2014). As the human baby is born less ready than other animals, the dangers of the external world appear to him with more emphasis and force, which makes the object capable of protecting him from these dangers to have a very great value and to establish, for the entire life of the human being, his strong need to be loved and his dependence on his love object. As it is the mother who generally satisfies the baby's needs, her absence is configured as a dangerous situation, since, without her there to help, the feeling of displeasure is raised to very intense magnitudes, analogous to that which occurs in the moment of birth.

Despite placing the two situations as constituted by the same core of danger, Freud (1926/2014) differentiates between them. What occurs in the birth experience is automatic anxiety, an involuntary economic disturbance, which lies at the origin of all psychic functioning and at the core of all experiences of danger. The anguish over the mother's absence, on the other hand, is defensive in nature and has a protective function, as it is deliberately emitted by the Self whenever a situation analogous to that of birth may occur. The latter is called *signal anxiety*. Thus, as long as the child is unable to master the automatic anxiety and emit a distress signal in order to defend himself, he will continue to be affected by the brutal discharge of automatic anxiety and will feel that he is completely powerless and helpless to get out of that situation.

The mastery of automatic anxiety goes directly through the emergence of an Ego, for it is only from the moment in which it is constituted as a unit that the emission of the signal is made possible. For this to happen, the child needs to be affectively invested by another who supports him and introduces him to the desiring logic, so that only when this anguish is linked and invested in representations can this helplessness be developed. Conversely, if, on the one hand, adults present themselves as this possibility of the first instinctual connections, on the other they are also a strange, excessive and threatening presence, since it imposes itself on the child as something that escapes and is beyond its capacity of symbolization at the moment when his psychic structure is still incipient, configuring what some authors have called the *complex of the fellow human being* (Fuks, 2003; Schneider, 1997).

With this, it can be said that, if the antidote to helplessness and to the experience of annihilation of the psychic apparatus is the careful presence that unites, binds, nourishes, links and shelters, the statement that "we are never so defenseless against suffering as when we love, never so forlornly unhappy as when we have lost our love-object or its love" (Freud, 1930/2010, p. 39). It is by feeling this condition as a threat that the subject is driven to flee in search of protection, which can lead him to the search for absolute protection, or to a creative construction to

be able to deal with his condition. In the first case, highly restrictive subjective modalities are discovered, into which the work of psychic elaboration struggles to flow, given its incessant need to defend itself from anxiety (Birman, 2014; Menezes, 2012; Rocha, 1999).

As an example, we have cases in which alienation from oneself to another prevails, relations of servitude and dependence, as well as the search for pleasure and refuge in one's own body and image (Figueiredo & Coelho Junior, 2018). They are different, therefore, from creative solutions in the face of helplessness, capable of having in it the driving force for a freer psychic functioning, which do not have the defensive processes as an almost exclusive resource.

Helplessness, therefore, marks a model of open subjectivity, which carries within itself the mark of the other as an alterity figure and which, at the same time, is a fundamental condition of possibility for defensive processes and also for the transformation of nameless experiences to the field of symbolic representation. Therefore, this opening to social bonds made possible by helplessness is not free from contradictions and conflicts, since, while the other is present in the psychic economy of any subject, human relationships are marked by the inherent vulnerability of this structure of bonding, because, before the other, there are never guarantees that he will respond to the appeal addressed to him, nor is one sure of how his response will be:

It is hard to imagine a form of loneliness greater and more painful than that of the helpless.... The helpless feels so alone, like the castaway lost in the immensity of the sea. The metaphor is an attempt to show that the essence of helplessness is loneliness and the feeling of impotence, constituted by the subject's inability to find a way out of the situation in which he finds himself. But that is not all there is to it, because, at the same time and normally, helplessness opens up to otherness. It is a desperate cry for help launched towards the other. When the cry goes unanswered, helplessness turns to despair. (Rocha, 2000, p. 343, translated by the authors)

What is called *despair* here seems to find a correspondence in what Birman (2014) calls *despondency* and Campos (2014) understands it as *psychic pain*, experienced whenever the traumatic experience of helplessness takes place. What is interesting to be observed in the considerations of these authors is the statement that, in the development of the psyche, pain can be both a reaction to the loss of an object of love and also a record of an unnamable experience, which leaves an indelible mark on the psychic functioning. It thus circumscribes a space that guards the mark of the possibility of annihilation and of diving into the

abyss of radical indeterminacy and, therefore, it is beyond what can be represented by defensive signal anxiety. In this sense, no matter how hard one tries to protect oneself from this pain and the mark left by it, the defense will never be absolute.

In a different line of argument, Costa (2007) presents a more hopeful view of human helplessness. Starting from a pragmatic view, he questions the placement of helplessness as a constitutive category in the formation of subjectivity, understanding that the emphasis given to helplessness, in a Freudian conception, centralizes the discussion around human impotence and its impossibility in dealing with that which surpasses him. Thus, supported by Žižek and, above all, by Winnicott, the author states that the experiences of lack or emptiness are not usually felt as helplessness, but rather as a place for creative power, which allows the subject to invent and create himself, the world, and thus feel that life is worth living. Therefore, only when the environment, understood in a Winnicottian view, does not offer the necessary conditions for the child to feel capable of creating, is there an experience similar to that of traumatic helplessness, namely, the so-called *unthinkable agonies* (Winnicott, 1974/1989). This means that if the baby, from the beginning of his life, found space to be and experienced life as a creation, he will also be able to accept what happens to him without terror or without feeling that it can annihilate him.

What is worth highlighting at this point about helplessness is that it offers the possibility of thinking about the structuring of the subject from a relationship of openness to the alterity that comes from the other and from oneself. This opening, in turn, is what makes life always be at risk, under the imminence of constant collapse, a condition that can be experienced as trauma, despair and despondency, and, therefore, mobilize a feeling of helplessness and pain about which the subject needs to protect himself or escape at any cost. On the other hand, this same condition can be experienced as a possibility of opening for the creative mobilization of existence itself. Thus, there are indications that the path to one or the other of these two experiences goes through, among other factors, the way in which relationships with others are configured and, in particular, how this appeal is addressed to them and, therefore, the way the correspondence to such an appeal happens, which, from the psychoanalytic point of view, implies narcissism.

A wounded Narcissus in search of himself

The myth of Narcissus is always remembered when we want to refer to the love one feels for oneself. In it, the passion for his own image in the water is so intense that the subject is unable to abandon it or see anything else around him. Attached to his own

image, in the end he withers and dies alone, in a scene that clearly reminds us of the classic statement that “A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we are unable to love” (Freud, 1914/2010, p. 29).

Freud (1914/2010) presents primary narcissism as part of the natural process of development of the psyche and, more specifically, as a new psychic action from which the Self develops. From this initial discussion, we will highlight the placement of narcissism as a fundamental moment in the constitution of the Self, its role in the formation of ideals and, finally, its function of self-preservation and defense. In the course of child development, primary narcissism is located right after the autoerotic phase and before the investment in objects phase, characterized as a moment of investment and confluence of the sexual drive in the Self and also by a certain organization of the drive dynamics, which it is essential for the survival and structuring of its unit. Furthermore, although the crucial point brought by the concept is the formulation that the Self is taken as an investment object of the sexual drive, it is worth highlighting the presentation of primary narcissism as a condition of possibility for the emergence of object relations. Thus, when the investment in oneself reaches a threshold exceeding the containment capacity of the psychic apparatus, the Self starts investing in objects. However, even with the investment in objects, Freud (1914/2010) considers that childhood narcissism is never completely abandoned. In fact, it is displaced to the ideal instances of the Self, which come to replace it and thus ensure that narcissistic satisfactions still find a place.

The role of ideals in psychic structuring, however, will only become clear and gain strength at the end of Freud's works, a fact that, according to Campos (2014), will bring to light some impasses for the discussions about narcissism. The main one concerns the problem of identification processes in the context of the constitution of the Self, brought to light through the constitution of the Super-ego in the resolution of the Oedipus Complex and, therefore, of the identification relationships established by the Self with objects. It so happens that, although the understanding of the psychic apparatus through the identification processes makes room for a more relational perspective within Freudian psychoanalysis, the emphasis given to paternal identifications in the process of structuring subjectivity leads to an undervaluation of the role of narcissistic primary identifications in the constitution of the Self. This is because, if primary narcissism is only regarded as a state prior to object relations, this means that the human baby would initially be closed to relations with others, something that Freud

never claimed, since it is the from the affective investment of the figure of care in the child that the subjective constitution takes place.

One of the hypotheses for such contradiction and ambiguity may be due to the silence regarding the role of the death drive dynamic in the constitution of the Self and the erasure of discussions about the identification process in pre-object periods (Campos, 2014). This aspect is worth analyzing carefully, as this is where the discussion on the defensive function exercised by narcissism is inserted, which can be understood as a primary process of psychic elaboration in the face of trauma generated by the disruptive drive excess of the death drive (Freud, 1920/2010). It is in this sense that the narcissistic organization has a vital function for the survival of the psyche, insofar as it would be a work of connection and representation of the originally disconnected energies. It can be said that this work of connection corresponds to the work of Eros, as it is up to the life drive to create a relationship of object investment, since, as the death drive is more original than the life drive, this connection is not given from the start and depends on the relationship with the other to develop destinies that did not exist until then. This narcissistic structuring corresponds to a narcissism that occurs through the incorporation of love objects and leads to a feeling of unity that allows the subject to continue investing in objects and also in himself.

Highlighting the role of the death drive in the structuring of subjectivity, Green (1988) expands the Freudian theory of narcissism, presenting the concept of *death narcissism*, a modality of defensive narcissism that, by walking in the direction of detachments and retraction in the identification processes, and being marked by the disinvestment of objects characteristic of the dynamics of the death drive, leads to the development of a fragile ego in its structuring, with difficulty in symbolizing and marked by the feeling of loss of identity, disaggregation and, mainly, emptiness. This picture is presented by the author based on the conception of the *dead mother*, a mother figure who, for some reason, is not alive enough in the relationship with the child, that is, she gives him basic care, such as food, clothing, etc., but she does not invest it affectively (Green, 1988). The child's Self, feeling powerless before the dead mother, will look for ways to defend itself, disinvesting, too, from the maternal object and starting to identify itself with the empty and unrepresentable hole left by the absence of its love. In this sense, it can be said that death narcissism is a wounded narcissism, marked by psychic pain resulting from the lack of psychic investment.

If we articulate this proposition with what was previously discussed, it is possible to advance towards a questioning about the quality of the bonds, so that they are configured as a secure bond, and not about emptiness. This is because the dead mother supports the

child with regard to their biological needs, however this support is not enough to give continuity to the deadly drive dynamics and thus help in its modulation and symbolization, which makes the identification occur through the negative pathway. That is, without receiving the sufficient investment that gives it the feeling of security, a Self develops that, in addition to not investing in objects, only finds void and death within itself.

Costa (1988) takes up the Freudian position that the body is narcissistically invested because it is a cause of pain, and not because it is a source of pleasure, to differentiate between what would be pain elaborated according to the pleasure principle – therefore of a secondary order – and a potentially traumatic primary pain. According to him, the first can only happen after the traumatic event has already been symbolized, that is, when it has already received a meaning and has been libidinally invested, which results in instinctual discharge and consequent cessation of displeasure. In short, “the psychic movement is triggered by the pleasure-displeasure principle, which aims at the drive's discharge, and by the experience of satisfaction, which shapes the search for the lost object” (Costa, 1988, p. 226). Pain as trauma, on the other hand, has a different type of elaboration, as it relates to a real threat of death, in situations in which the psyche is caught unexpectedly, therefore it is unprepared for what happened. Thus, it can be said that pain as trauma appears as a threat, as it refers to the possibility of an experience of annihilation or disintegration of the Self, which the author calls violence:

Violence, in our view, is any traumatic action that leads the psyche to either *completely destructure itself* or respond to trauma through *defense mechanisms, analogous to the economy of pain*. Violent is any circumstance of life in which the subject is placed in the position of *not being able to obtain pleasure* or only seeking it as a *defense against the fear of death* (Costa, 1988, p. 228, translated by the authors).

In this sense, the author defines as *regenerating narcissism* the investment in the body resulting from an attempt by the Self to control the pain of trauma generated by situations of violence. What interests our discussion is the characterization of regenerative narcissism as the main configuration of contemporary narcissism, which is, therefore, defensive, as it makes the investment in the Self happen in order to safeguard its survival in the face of threats arising from violence imposed by the current way of life based on the consumer society. This type of configuration of narcissism is aligned with others of a defensive and regressive character – such as the negative narcissism presented above – gaining evidence in the psychoanalytic literature as

an important conceptual operator for understanding the destructive and deadly aspects at play in the psychopathological configurations of contemporary subjectivity (Bocchi & Campos, 2018; Menezes, 2012; Pereira, 2008).

This means that, for these authors, contemporary narcissism is far from being a hedonistic enjoyment of oneself. On the contrary, it would be the result of the pain of an individual violated all the time by the excesses and fragmentation of information, which are often beyond the psyche's capacity to elaborate such experiences; by the dissemination of ideal beauty and health standards, whose sole purpose is to perpetuate the dissatisfaction that imprisons subjects in a search that never ceases, since the ideal is unattainable. Thus, these positions go towards the indications offered by Freud (1924/2011) when he presents melancholy as the representative picture of narcissistic neuroses. In other words, the melancholic would be the one who, upon losing the ideal love object, identified with it and, therefore, felt that he had lost himself (Freud, 1917/2010). As a result, he feels unable to invest in new objects, losing interest in the outside world and, at the same time, becoming self-destructive. In this way, melancholy narcissism does not lead to a love for the Self, but rather to a frequent attempt not to lose oneself together with the beloved object.

In terms of the most current discussions on narcissism in the context of culture, Birman (2005, 2014) discusses how the mode of subjectivation has been characterized by the experience of solipsistic pain and, therefore, narcissistic that, at the same time that it needs to respond to the imperative of performance, exposing itself and seeking admiration and confirmation of its identity, it also feels powerless to respond to performance ideals. In this sense, it is a self-centered narcissism in its pain, but which, at the same time, is externalized in its search for the other. This search, however, does not correspond to an appeal to this other as a figure of help or alterity. The demand is for its concrete permanence as a support for one's own image, which, in turn, leads to an experience of alienation, as the subject does not have possession of who he is. In addition, even the identity acquired through the gaze of the other is always very fragile and is under constant threat of collapse, which leads the subject to a paradox that is difficult to overcome, because the more he exposes himself to establish his identity, the more he is faced with the possibility of the terror of losing himself. For no other reason, the author understands that the other can appear as an excessive, strange and threatening presence, which the subject tries to get rid of in order not to have his own image deconstructed.

Following the indications of Birman (2005) about the connections between masochism and the death drive, Menezes (2012) discusses, in terms of culture, how much the terror experienced by the subject, resulting from the

fragility of his social ties, has intensified the emergence of masochism as a central subjective modality, in which what is sought in relationships with the other is protection from one's own helplessness. Thus, in order not to be at the mercy of the short circuit of the annihilating instinctual logic itself, the subject submits to the other and to their desire, maintaining a position of servitude and submission in which the logic of narcissistic omnipotence prevails. That is, for this type of subjective structuring, anything is worth it, as long as the narcissistic ideal is not destroyed or threatened by doubts and uncertainties arising from openness to differences.

In summary, it can be stated, based on the aforementioned psychoanalytic literature, that the sociocultural configurations of the historical period known as post-modernity or late modernity tend to foster structural modulations of subjectivity centered on dynamics of the masochism and narcissism order. This demonstrates how the universal metapsychological schemes that guide the psychoanalytic field are relevant to understand the historical and cultural modulations of human subjectivity and help us to overcome the simplistic and still modern dichotomies between *nature and nurture* or *universality and historicity*.

Narcissistic isolation and helplessness today

After walking this path, it is worth returning to our initial hypothesis that a large part of the narcissism identified in today's subjects would be configured by the defensive isolation of the subject, who ends up seeing the other much more as a threat than properly as help and support.

At the beginning of the discussion on helplessness, it was presented as a condition for opening to the other, therefore as a condition for structuring the psyche. This is because, when the child is affected by excessive excitement in relation to which he has no way of dealing or representing, another comes to him and, by protecting and alleviating him, makes sense of that experience devoid of meaning. It can thus be said that it is the other who does the bonding work that the baby is unable to do; it is the other, therefore, that allows the drive force to be transformed and included in a libidinal circuit and gain psychic representatives (Birman, 1999; Campos, 2014; Costa, 1988; Green, 1988; Menezes, 2012). In this sense, it is in this relationship that the baby can, through narcissistic identifications, gradually assign destinations to his experiences and, thus, constitute a Self that allows him to defend himself from annihilating helplessness. In this model of psychic development, the possibility of avoiding the traumatic discharge of the death instinct is only viable through the action of another capable of helping in the conjugation between the instinctual force and the representation. For this reason, the relationship with others is vital to the psyche, not only at the beginning of life, but throughout its course, in such a way that,

“when the encounter does not happen, helplessness is left as terror. Helplessness demands continence, it demands a construction by two (baby-mother) in the experience, so that each subject elaborates the events and alters himself” (Menezes, 2012, p. 111, translated by the authors).

It so happens that, as we have seen, the present day is increasingly marked by relationships in which the other appears as a threat, because if in their absence there is a risk of being thrown into solitude and no longer having their identity support, their presence may be excessive and, at the same time, destroy the ideal image credited to the very Self. If things happen that way, it is worth reflecting on the forms of bonding that are being built in such a scenario, because, given the considerations presented about narcissism, especially defensive narcissism, it can be considered that it goes hand in hand with relationships that cannot be experienced as support and other support for the transformation and development of the Self.

As we have seen, contemporary discontent can be characterized as an experience of disheartened pain, “in which subjectivity closes in on itself, with no place for the *other* on the horizon of their discontent” (Birman, 2014, p. 140), since the need for the other has become synonymous with failure and impotence, as it hurts the narcissistic illusion. For this reason, in pain, the subject passively waits for this other to come to help him, without ever addressing his demand for support. This type of discontent is opposed to the experience of suffering in which there is an opening to the appeal to the other in his alterity dimension, which enables and makes possible the movement of psychic elaboration. Suffering, therefore, would be of the order of helplessness, as it presupposes that the other will be there to offer emotional support and assist in the production of meaning. If, on the other hand, this other is the potential rival or threat and cannot be found as a reference, the subject finds himself exposed and left to himself, so that, without hope of giving destiny to his pain and transforming it, he falls into dismay and suffers in his confinement.

Returning to Dunker’s (2015) statement that condominium walls are created to prevent the entry of everything that refers to indeterminacy, to what is different and unknown, perhaps it is not an exaggeration to state, weaving a parallel with traumatic helplessness, that this experience reflects a subjective psychosocial condition. This is because the author presents current malaise as an experience of vague and diffuse anguish, about which, in the first place, the subject surrounds himself with equals and seeks to isolate himself so as not to be crossed by the indeterminacy arising from the difference that the presence of the other imposes and, secondly, tries to name his discomfort at any price, inserting it in a narrative structure of suffering that consists in identifying which would be the causative agents of the evil. Naturally, for these discourses, evil always comes from the outside

and with the strangeness that comes with the other and their way of being, their beliefs, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc., which ends up favoring the emergence of *narcissism of small differences* (Freud, 1921/2011).

In the works of Birman (2014) and Dunker (2015), there are two similar ways of approaching the theme of helplessness and relationships with others, even though they use different notions and concepts. Both emphasize the dimension of closure and imprisonment in the face of a threatening other, and what Dunker calls malaise seems to approach what Birman is calling pain. In any case, what is under discussion for both, with regard to the current modes of subjectivation, is the experience of inability to bear otherness without the feeling of being annihilated by it.

According to Birman (2005, 2014), much of this impossibility stems from the very dynamics of the contemporary world, which, marked by unpredictability and instability, has intensified the experiences of helplessness in its traumatic sense, as it launches the subject more and more recurrently in situations and affections that he can no longer symbolize or anticipate. In this sense, in view of the dissemination of countless cases of daily violence, tragedies, murders, cruelty, helplessness experienced towards the other seems to no longer find its necessary correlate, namely, safe and reliable support, so that, unable to see the other as a help, the subject is left with the sensation of being adrift and in solitude, aboard an abandonment that, in such conditions, can only be experienced as pain. That is, even if helplessness is seen as an experience of opening to the other, if the cry towards the other does not find its counterpart, or if this other, when he comes, appears more as a threat than as a help one can count on, the psyche is stricken with terror, that is, it is swamped by the traumatic helplessness against which it will need to deal with by defending itself. In this sense, narcissistic isolation is still a means found to avoid psychic death. By following Costa’s (1988, 2005) argumentation logic, for whom the violated subject deals with the object through the model of pain, it may be possible to affirm that the other is presenting himself as this strange and threatening element.

The paradox at stake in this relationship is that, even though the other appears as a threat, the subject must constantly launch himself in his direction, in order to inscribe in himself the marks of this presence that never remains as an internalized figure. Thus, when resuming the discussions presented by Green (1988), it is possible to problematize the extent to which this other, when it does not come as a threat, perhaps presents itself only as a record of absence, or nullity, leading the Self to constantly build on a feeling of emptiness. This is because, in current subjective configurations, what is sought in the other is not the *other*, but the same, one’s own image, like Narcissus by the lake. The image, however, does not manage to offer the subject a safe buffer for the void that

inhabits him, given that finding one's own identity in an image is always risky, because in this form of relationship, the Self is always in the possession of the other. Without being master of his own house, he remains adrift and uninhabited, so that if the other is not internalized, there is only the compulsive and incessant search for his concrete presence, never having the guarantee that he will remain there, and without the certainty that the mirror found does not reveal the strange and undesirable of oneself. If, as Bauman (2004) states, social relations have become liquid, it remains to be seen how much, even they, have the potential to be built in a solid, lasting and profound way, beyond the superficial and fleeting world of images.

One of the resources presented in this context is to disappear from the gaze of the close other and try to obtain the imaginary recognition of anonymous and distant figures (Costa, 2005, 2007). Thus, the ideal of happiness is limited to the body itself and, more precisely, to the sensations themselves, because it is from there that the feeling of existing will be sustained. However, this type of immediate satisfaction is fleeting and poor in its symbolization process, leading the subject to have to live it and restart it all over again in search of new objects and sensations. This need leads to an excess that, at the same time, momentarily satisfies and leaves the subject exposed and vulnerable to excitations he is unaware of, in the same way that leads him increasingly to relationships marked by distance and superficiality, for which the other can present itself as a disposable object, since its presence is necessary until the moment it confirms the image that the subject has of himself.

Given the above, it can be said that the subject is constantly faced with at least three disaggregating threats, namely: *lonely emptiness* experienced as despair and despondency, *invasion of the other* with their excessive presence and beyond their psychic ability in representing, and, finally, *impotence* arising from the uncertainty revealed by what the gaze of the other reflects on their own image and on the veracity of the link between them. The three cases confront the subject with his experience of radical helplessness, which, as they require an intense and exhausting process of elaboration, lead him to be always fighting to protect himself and, thus, to regulate the impact of these experiences on the psyche, so that he does not enter into an economic upheaval nor succumb to his own emptiness.

The question that we must problematize at this point is whether, in fact, the current configurations of social ties need to be so fatalistic that the subject is either open to otherness or imprisoned in its narcissistic grandeur. As an alternative to such polarization, Costa (2007) suggests that things change shape if omnipotence and impotence, autonomy and heteronomy, instead of being taken as separate poles in opposition, are understood as sides of the same coin. In this sense, self-sufficiency would not only need to mean belittling or alienating the

other, nor would it only need to be a terrifying experience of loneliness. That is why he suggests a more optimistic view in which assuming the condition of helplessness is not simply going with open arms towards the tragic events of life, in a kind of *Nietzschean amor fati*, nor is it understood as an omnipotent and solitary way of dealing with tribulations inherent to existing, which would be nothing more than a defense of our narcissistic ideals governed by utilitarian logic in which there is no room for failure experiences. On the contrary, the illusion of omnipotence is part of the development process, not because it is a defense against instinctual irruptions, but because it manifests the creative potency inherent in each and every human being. Such an illusion, in turn, depends on an environment that offers a relationship of care and trust, from which the child will maintain the feeling that he continues to exist and, thus, feels free to spontaneously create himself and his world.

Within this perspective, the relationship with the other does not arise from lack or excess, except when these make it impossible for the child to continue in his sense that he continues to exist. The other appears, in this sense, much more as a support for the lack, inherent to every human being, to be experienced not as horror, but as an opening and possibility for the movement of transformation and development. It is in this sense that Costa (2005), although problematizing the issue of somatic culture, with its emphasis on body care, also presents it as a possibility for the emergence of a different relationship with the body, which also implies an ethical concern with oneself, capable of offering the individual the option to live better and to find, in his own body, his own history as well. Certainly, such a form of care is only possible when he is no longer a hostage to the images.

With these considerations, we can return to our initial hypothesis that narcissism, in its contemporary version of externalized self-centeredness, can be considered in close relationship with traumatic helplessness as a disruptive experience of the psyche, which leads us to reflect on the specificity of human ties built today, to the extent that these do not seem sufficiently solid and reliable to present themselves as a source of security in relation to creative development and the very ability to launch oneself to the other with all the risks that this implies. The scope of human relations is not constituted by way of guaranteeing what will be received and achieved and, as observed, one is still far from the courageous acceptance that it is possible to survive, even when the narcissistic illusion of omnipotence threatens to collapse.

Final considerations

In conclusion, a brief reflection on the ethical dimension of alterity in the face of the scenario presented is worth considering, as opening up to the other implies being willing and prepared to let go of the illusions of absolute protection, such as "a child who

has left the parental house where he is so warm and comfortable” (Freud, 1927/2014, p. 292). This means, if not abandoning, at least being willing to suspend many of the totalizing convictions about oneself and others, in favor of a friendly posture to everything that presents itself as *foreign*, that is, like what comes to us, but which is from another land, from another place. On the other hand, one cannot fail to consider that the courage to face the unknown is perhaps stronger and more consistent, after a long journey in safety, in the presence and support of another person that is capable and willing to provide live and genuine care. Otherwise, even the light and unpretentious breeze can be experienced as the most menacing of hurricanes.

Thus, it is not our intention to affirm that social relations today are doomed to failure and can only generate pain experiences. Rather, it is about emphasizing even more the need to look carefully at this field, so that, from the tension promoted by reflection, creative outlets can emerge from its own midst, and not the result of the narcissistic illusion of omnipotence, which make possible creative and transformative actions to deal with the reality that presents itself. Thus, psychoanalysis, with its ethics based on the alteritarian model of subjectivity, reiterates its strength and importance insofar as it offers the subject the opening towards which he can address his demand for care to another who will reflect him beyond the ideal mirror.

Narcisismo e desamparo: algumas considerações sobre as relações interpessoais na atualidade

Resumo: Este ensaio objetiva problematizar o fenômeno do narcisismo na atualidade, partindo da hipótese de que as relações interpessoais se configuram pelo desamparo em sua dimensão traumática, e não como abertura à alteridade. Isso se daria assim porque, no atual cenário social, as relações humanas tendem a não oferecer apoio e suporte alteritário para a transformação e o desenvolvimento do sujeito, pois o coloca diante de três ameaças desagregadoras: o vazio solitário, a *invasão do outro* e a *impotência*. Na ausência de relações de amparo, o outro aparece como ameaça diante da qual o narcisismo advém como possibilidade de defesa e prevalece em sua forma de narcisismo regenerador.

Palavras-chave: narcisismo, desamparo, relações interpessoais, psicanálise.

Narcissisme et détresse : quelques considérations sur les relations interpersonnelles aujourd’hui

Résumé : Cet essai problématise le phénomène du narcissisme aujourd’hui, en supposant que les relations interpersonnelles sont configurées par la détresse dans sa dimension traumatique et pas comme une ouverture à l’altérité. Cela se produirait parce que dans le scénario social actuel, les relations humaines tendent à ne pas offrir de soutien et de support d’altérité pour la transformation et le développement du sujet, en le plaçant devant trois menaces de désagrégation : *le vide solitaire*, *l’invasion de l’autre* et *l’impuissance*. En l’absence de relations de soutien, l’autre apparaît en tant qu’une menace devant laquelle le narcissisme surgit comme une possibilité de défense et prévaut dans sa forme de narcissisme régénérateur.

Mots-clés : narcissisme, détresse, relations interpersonnelles, psychanalyse.

Narcisismo y desamparo: algunas consideraciones sobre las relaciones interpersonales en la actualidad

Resumen: Este ensayo pretende problematizar el fenómeno del narcisismo en la actualidad partiendo de la hipótesis de que las relaciones interpersonales no se configuran por la apertura a la alteridad, sino por el desamparo en su dimensión traumática. Esto se debe a las relaciones humanas, que el escenario social actual tienden a no ofrecer ayuda y apoyo a la alteridad para la transformación y el desarrollo del sujeto, pues lo coloca ante tres amenazas desagregadoras: el *vacio solitario*, la *invasión del otro* y la *impotencia*. En la ausencia de relaciones de amparo, el otro aparece como amenaza ante la que el narcisismo adviene como posibilidad de defensa y prevalece en su forma de narcisismo regenerativo.

Palabras clave: narcisismo, desamparo, relaciones interpersonales, psicoanálisis.

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