

UNITED WISDOM

Narcissus: image, reflection, and the danger of everyday diagnosis

Human Nature and Inner World

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

I-20-N01 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

Narcissus: image, reflection, and the danger of everyday diagnosis

Epigraph

> *Be ye doers.*

Epistle of James, 1:22; short fragment from the King James Version. Text.

What this article is about

Imagine a fictional scene. Two people return from a dinner at which one spent almost the entire evening describing his achievements. The other wanted to talk about a difficult week but never found room in the conversation. At home, a ready explanation arrives: he is a narcissist. The word promises several things at once: to explain the evening, restore justice, and predict the relationship's future. With that explanation, the scale quietly changes. The claim now concerns someone's entire personality, although only one conversation has been described.

The ancient image of Narcissus can illuminate the tension between a living person and his reflection. But myth, everyday accusation, and clinical terminology belong to different languages. This article considers how to use the image while preserving precision and the right to a boundary. Neither excusing unpleasant behaviour nor establishing someone else's diagnosis is required. We can instead distinguish an observable action, its effects, a possible explanation, and a decision that actually lies within our scope. Sometimes that distinction is less dramatic than a final label. It leaves room, however, for facts that may still change the picture.

I. One word can do several jobs

The name of a myth can serve different purposes. In a literary discussion, it identifies a character in a particular text. In personal reflection, it helps bring several experiences together in one image. In an argument, it becomes an accusation. In a clinical setting, definitions and rules of assessment accompany it. These purposes do not become identical because they share a root. If we overlook the difference, literary expressiveness starts presenting itself as diagnostic precision, and a limited observation acquires the appearance of a final conclusion.

In the fictional dinner scene, we can say with reasonable confidence that the account of the difficult week never happened. We can recall whether the other person interrupted, asked questions, or returned to the abandoned topic. It is already much harder to establish why he

talked only about himself. He might have been celebrating an unusual success, feeling anxious, missing what was happening, or deliberately taking no interest in the other person. Listing possibilities does not require choosing the kindest one. It shows where observation ends and an explanation begins that cannot yet count as fact.

A word's usefulness also depends on what it enables us to do. If we cannot name a specific action, request, or limit after using it, the explanation remains too large. It may express pain without yet helping us understand the relationship. Describing a repeated kind of conversation, by contrast, does not require an endless investigation of someone else's motives. A person can say that this way of communicating does not suit them before the question of its causes has been answered. The right to a boundary is not issued only to people who can prove a diagnosis.

There is another danger: forbidding ourselves any judgement because we will never have the complete picture. Precision does not mean silence. We can distinguish rudeness, lack of interest, a broken agreement, and our own wish not to continue a meeting. These descriptions are serious enough in themselves. They do not need a mythological seal. When a claim's scale matches the information available, we retain the possibility both of protecting ourselves and of revising our initial understanding when new evidence appears. That is a judgement's working form, rather than its weakness.

II. A reflection and a conversation partner work differently

In Book III of Ovid's Metamorphoses, in the episodes concerning Echo and Narcissus, the protagonist mistakes a reflected image for a desired being. He then recognises himself, but recognition does not end his painful desire. In the same narrative, Echo is confined to repeating what she hears. This briefly describes a particular literary version; it is not a history of the origins of modern diagnosis. Henry Thomas Riley's translation provides access to the episode. The mere existence of the story contains no psychological conclusions about contemporary people.

For our reflection, the difference between an image and a conversation partner matters. A reflection responds in precisely the form our movements give it. Another person can hesitate, disagree, change the subject, or see something we have missed. That independence can be inconvenient. It disrupts a conversation's pleasing coherence. But it also allows an encounter to communicate something new instead of merely confirming a prepared self-image. This is a distinction proposed here, rather than a demonstrated universal theory of relationships.

Imagine a fictional workplace conversation. A manager asks whether the team is pleased with a new plan but accepts only grateful replies. A comment about excessive workload is recast as a lack of loyalty. In that situation, people gradually receive a choice between confirming a

desired image and facing the consequences of disagreement. We can describe that structure without reaching a conclusion about the manager's inner constitution. What matters is the conversation's rules: may someone name an obstacle, does information affect the plan, and does the speaker retain the right to an independent judgement? Those questions have observable answers.

The mirror metaphor becomes useful when it redirects attention towards an encounter's structure. It becomes dangerous when it turns into a mind-reading device. A person has no right to demand that someone else always confirm their worth. But not every request for attention is that sort of demand. Sometimes someone simply needs to be heard to the end. The distinction concerns the possibility of exchange: may a response be independent and still remain permissible? Here the image helps frame a question without replacing observation of the answer.

We should separately preserve the difference between a lack of reciprocation and cruel treatment. If, in a fictional contemporary scene, one person is in love and another does not feel the same way, the absence of reciprocation is not in itself a wrong. Nobody owes another person the desired feeling as a reward for devotion. Yet the manner of refusal can be discussed separately: it may be clear, evasive, or humiliating. We cannot demand love in place of respect; nor can we shelter humiliation behind the right to refuse. This is the article's ethical distinction, rather than an attempt to rewrite an ancient story according to contemporary relationship rules.

III. Recognising yourself does not already change an action

In popular accounts of inner work, recognition often appears as the ending. Someone has seen what is happening and named their behaviour, and therefore seems to have crossed to the other side of the problem. Yet acknowledgement can remain a verbal event. It matters, but it does not tell us how the next conversation will work. Sometimes a clear statement even becomes a new way to end discussion: everything has now been explained, so the consequences no longer need attention. For relationships, this is a significant difference between understanding and change.

In our fictional scene, the speaker might acknowledge the next morning that he became too absorbed in his own account. That is better than disputing every observation. However, the other person still has not talked about their week. A substantive response to the acknowledgement may therefore be simple: find time, listen, and avoid turning what is heard into a reason to talk about oneself again. This action is not a test of whether someone is a good person. It addresses a particular unfinished episode. Its scale is smaller than global transformation, but its result can be seen and discussed.

In James 1:22–25, the image of someone looking in a mirror belongs to a distinction between hearing the word and carrying it out. This is a Christian normative framework, rather than a psychological experiment. For an editorial comparison, it raises a question about the move from hearing to action. We do not claim that the epistle's author explains Ovid, or that the two texts describe the same clinical problem. They can be compared on a limited question: what follows recognition, and how does that continuation differ from recognition itself?

This comparison does not create an obligation to fulfil every request immediately. Someone may hear a request, understand their behaviour's effect, and still state a limit of their own. What matters is responding to the conversation's actual substance rather than performing a predetermined ritual of agreement. An apology, a clarification, a refusal, and an offer of another time may all be different honest responses. What becomes empty is not refusal in itself, but the absence of a connection between words and the subsequent handling of the situation. Participants can examine that connection without a mythological tribunal.

IV. A clinical term requires its own grounds

The professional Merck Manual describes narcissistic personality disorder through a persistent pattern and clinical criteria. The definition and diagnostic section of the current page were read; no primary study or complete DSM was read. This supports a limited conclusion: the clinical concept cannot be reduced to one unpleasant evening, a selfie, or a refusal to agree. This article does not invite readers to diagnose themselves or someone else from a list of signs. An artistic image and medical assessment require different grounds.

An everyday label often works faster than observation. Once it appears, any new action can be interpreted in support of the initial conclusion. Someone argues, so they supposedly cannot accept criticism. They agree, so they supposedly know how to pretend. They do not answer, so they are supposedly punishing through silence. They answer at length, so they supposedly want to confuse things. This reasoning becomes closed not because every supposition is necessarily wrong, but because the conditions for revising it disappear in advance. An explanation stops being provisional when no observation can any longer count against it.

Rejecting everyday diagnosis, however, does not oblige us to doubt every experience of our own. If a promise was broken, it was broken. If we are being interrupted, we can ask to finish. If an interaction involves humiliation, that provides enough of a subject for deciding on the limits of contact. Uncertainty about a clinical explanation does not turn an effect into fiction. Two different things particularly need to be held together here: we may not know the structure of someone else's personality and still know that what is happening does not suit us. Neither cancels the other.

Finally, a diagnosis should not serve as a moral classification dividing people into those who deserve a relationship and those who do not. This article makes no claims about treatment prognosis, prevalence, or the biographies of people with the disorder. Such claims would require separate research. A narrower question remains within our scope: what is known in this encounter, what is supposed, and what responsibility do the participants bear for specific behaviour? This limit does not impoverish the conversation. It frees the discussion from having to prove more than an available decision requires.

V. Caring about an image does not always mean being closed

A person may choose a flattering photograph, enjoy praise, worry about a speech, and want to make a good impression. None of those actions alone establishes a clinical condition or a moral failing. Images participate in ordinary social life: a letter has a recipient, a presentation has an audience, and clothing can belong to a role. The question begins where an image becomes the only permissible basis for an encounter and anything that does not fit must disappear. At that point, the specific rules of interaction need examining; visibility itself need not be forbidden.

Imagine a fictional artist before an exhibition. She chooses her work carefully, asks someone to check a text, and worries about how visitors will see her. This tells us nothing yet about her ability to take an interest in other people. She might calmly accept a comment about a poorly lit painting, disagree with an assessment of its composition, and thank the person for helping. Agreeing with everything is not a measure of maturity here. What matters more is whether a comment retains the right to be considered and whether disagreement differs from punishment for holding a separate position.

It helps to distinguish presentation from substitution. A presentation selects: nobody can say everything about themselves at once. Substitution demands that a selected part be treated as exhaustive reality. A professional page, for example, may show skills and projects while leaving family life outside publication. That is a genre's boundary. But if the claimed competence is not supported by the work, attractive design no longer resolves the question. Results and the grounds for the claim then need examining. The existence of a page cannot establish substitution; its visual persuasiveness cannot establish competence either.

The same principle applies to ourselves. Sometimes wanting to disappear from view seems more noble than wanting to be liked, yet it too may involve constantly imagining other people's judgement. We do not explain every case of reserve in this way. We propose only a question: does this action answer my task, or does it mainly serve an unproven scenario of evaluation? The answer may differ across circumstances. Freedom from an image's power does not necessarily look modest. Sometimes it means calmly showing the work; sometimes it means declining an unnecessary presentation.

VI. Feedback has substance and conditions

Someone else's independent voice matters, but this does not create an obligation to accept every judgement about ourselves. A comment may be accurate, superficial, rude, self-interested, or simply irrelevant to our task. Leaving a mirror-like circle is therefore not the same as handing every spectator the final word. Feedback requires a distinction between its substance and the manner of presenting it. We can acknowledge an error in our work without agreeing to humiliation. We can reject an assessment and still examine the specific example on which it rests.

In a fictional workplace scene, a colleague says that you cannot listen. Instead of immediately denying the claim or surrendering, you can ask which moment they mean. If it concerns yesterday's meeting, the discussion acquires a place and time. Perhaps you really interrupted before an important explanation was finished. Perhaps the discussion had already exceeded the agreed time, and a decision was needed immediately. Context does not erase an effect, but it helps determine what can actually change: how someone interrupts, meeting rules, time allocation, or the decision-making process.

In the first section of Epictetus's Enchiridion, in Elizabeth Carter's translation, reputation is distinguished from one's own actions and judgements. This is a Stoic normative distinction, rather than proof that a person entirely controls their circumstances. For our question, it offers a limited point of comparison: we cannot simply appoint someone else's assessment according to our wishes. We do not propose ignoring consequences or denying other people's significance. Lacking authority over the entire assessment and bearing responsibility for one's own action can coexist.

Working feedback differs from a fixed mirror precisely because it preserves several centres. You clarify your action; another person clarifies its effect; both may revise the description. If one participant is already assigned only the task of admitting fault, exchange has been replaced by a ceremony. If nobody can name their own contribution, a conversation may remain an exchange of accusations. Between those extremes, a small fragment can be discussed carefully enough for the next episode actually to differ. This requires conditions in which an independent response does not automatically become an offence.

VII. A boundary does not require explaining an entire person

There is a temptation to decipher another person first and then decide what to do. It is as if the right to decline a conversation, change an agreement, or reduce contact arrives only after a complete explanation of its cause. This sequence is often logically unavailable: someone else's inner motives are not at our disposal. Nevertheless, we can define the conditions of our own participation. This does not promise an easy decision. Relationships involve material dependencies and limits. Yet available options can be described without a final judgement about another person's nature.

In a fictional example, someone asks that their appearance not be discussed at a family dinner. The reply is a joke about excessive sensitivity. To repeat the limit, they do not need to prove that the speaker seeks domination or has a disorder. Linking the request to specific behaviour is enough: these comments are unwelcome, and the conversation will be interrupted if they continue. The ability to interrupt a gathering depends on the circumstances. If that is impossible, a smaller limit may be sought: change the subject, shorten the time, or agree beforehand with a supportive participant. These options are not declared obligatory.

A boundary differs from an attempt to educate someone because it describes one's own participation instead of promising to correct the other person. It also differs from a secret test. If we devise a situation in which a partner must show care in a prescribed way, the result may be ambiguous. A direct statement about an important condition offers clearer grounds for observation. This is an editorial proposal, rather than a universal formula for safety. In circumstances of threat or coercion, an ordinary conversation about limits may be unavailable; the article does not make an open explanation the obligatory way to act.

The other person's refusal must also have room. They may not accept a proposed condition; the issue then becomes a decision about compatibility rather than proof of their corruption. Of course, refusal can hurt and may end a relationship. But incompatible conditions do not always reveal a hidden diagnosis. When that distinction is preserved, a person gains the right to say that a particular arrangement does not suit them without turning their decision into a judicial verdict. This form can be firm without claiming to know everything behind someone else's response.

VIII. We can become stuck in our own reflection too

The image of Narcissus is easily directed at another person and much harder to apply to our own way of telling a story. After the unsuccessful dinner, our fictional protagonist might retell the experience of not being heard many times. In each telling, they appear more precisely attentive, while the other person fits the prepared explanation more completely. This story may offer support and help name something important. Yet it is useful to notice whether facts that do not fit the chosen image remain within it. Otherwise, the search for a way forward starts serving the preservation of an already constructed portrait of the participants.

Checking our own account should not turn into self-humiliation. We do not need to discover the same fault in ourselves to have the right to a complaint. A narrower question is possible: what in my description concerns the event, and what concerns a generalisation? Was this the only such evening? Did I communicate that I wanted to talk? Did the behaviour change after I said so? These questions do not cancel the other person's responsibility. They help relate the conclusion to its material. Sometimes checking strengthens the original decision; sometimes it requires changing its grounds.

There is a particular dependence on the image of being reasonable. Someone wants so much to be the person who understands everything and judges nobody that they do not allow themselves to acknowledge incompatibility. They explain everything, patiently find possible accounts, and postpone a decision indefinitely. This posture, too, can become a fixed picture, although it outwardly resembles the opposite of self-absorption. This is a possible editorial reading, rather than a diagnosis of patient people. The useful question remains practical: does an explanation help me choose, or does it repeatedly return me to the impossibility of setting a limit?

Returning to oneself, in this context, means restoring access to action and revision rather than discovering a flawless inner face. Sometimes that involves acknowledging our own sharp response. Sometimes it means clarifying a request. Sometimes it means deciding not to participate further in a conversation where no clarification is considered. Its meaning depends on the facts rather than on how beautiful the chosen action looks in a self-narrative. An image becomes a tool when it permits the story to change. When change is forbidden, the tool starts doing the job of guarding our own reflection.

IX. A living relationship leaves room for something new

We can return to the opening scene with a more modest but more precise question. Instead of seeking a final name for a conversation partner, ask whether a conversation is possible here in which both people have room. The answer will emerge from events. One evening does not establish the entire future; many repetitions cannot repeatedly be declared accidental. Specific requests, available conditions, and actual responses matter. This is neither a tally of good deeds nor a concealed examination sheet. It is an attempt to understand whether the form of relationship a person needs exists.

Room for something new means that observation can influence the picture. A partner may return to the missed topic and listen. They may acknowledge its importance but ask for another time. They may turn the conversation back towards themselves again. Each sequence supplies different information. There is no need to promise in advance that patience will fix everything. Nor must the first failure become proof that communication is impossible. The scale of a decision is chosen according to the task and the behaviour already known, taking actual consequences and personal resources into account.

This question is open to the person who talked all evening as well. They can defend the image of an attentive partner with a lengthy explanation of their tiredness. Or they can respond to the unfinished situation: ask about the week, allow the other person to finish, and then clarify whether they understood correctly. The second action does not make someone definitively mature. It shows only that an independent voice has appeared in the conversation now. This small, limited piece of evidence sometimes matters more than a large self-narrative. It allows examination of the relationship to continue without requiring an immediate verdict on the whole personality.

The ancient image retains its force when it does not become a ready-made key to every person. It lets us ask where we encounter a real other and where we seek a perfectly coordinated reflection. But the answer comes from a specific life, rather than being extracted from a character's name. Myth helps reveal a tension; a clinical concept requires a separate assessment; a personal boundary addresses the conditions of our own participation. When those three jobs are distinguished, we can relinquish a coarse label while retaining firmness. An encounter remains open exactly as far as actual grounds for that openness exist.

What this means in practice

Choose one specific conversation if you wish to examine it. Write down what was said or done, how it affected you, and what generalisation you added later. A dossier is not required. It is enough to see whether your task concerns a missed topic, a repeated style of communication, a broken agreement, or incompatible conditions of contact. Different tasks require different decisions.

If an ordinary conversation is available, you can name one condition: let you finish, return to a topic, or refrain from particular comments. The other person retains the right to respond, and you retain the right to assess whether that response suits you. Decide beforehand what observation could change your explanation and what limit remains regardless of the explanation. This helps distinguish an examination from a hunt for confirmation.

The end of this reflection need not be reconciliation or separation. Its result may be a clarified request, less participation, a pause, or an understanding that information is still insufficient. In the opening scene, what matters is not the winning portrait but the possibility of finally talking about the missed week—or honestly acknowledging that the necessary room for it is absent here.

Key quotation

> *Plenty has made me poor.*

Ovid, Metamorphoses III, Narcissus episode, speech around verses 463–466; Henry Thomas Riley's 1851 translation, electronic text drawn from the 1893/1899 reprints at Project Gutenberg. Edition. The quotation belongs to the character's speech, rather than to a clinical definition or an authorial instruction to the reader.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Point of contact	Essential boundary
Ovid's image ↔ editorial reflection	The image invites a distinction between a reflection and an independent response.	The contemporary application is proposed by us; myth does not establish diagnosis.
James ↔ Ovid	A question about what happens after recognition.	Christian enactment of the word and literary tragedy have different grounds.
Epictetus ↔ contemporary feedback	Reputation and one's own action are not identical.	A Stoic prescription does not establish total control or independence from circumstances.
Clinical reference ↔ everyday language	A shared term needs its scale clarified.	Clinical criteria cannot be replaced by an unpleasant episode.
Personal reflection ↔ interpersonal boundary	We can examine an explanation and define conditions of participation.	Self-examination does not require accepting shared blame or abandoning protection.

These comparisons are confined to the stated questions. Historical influence, doctrinal unity, and the proposed exercise's effectiveness have not been demonstrated here.

Primary sources

1. Ovid. Metamorphoses III. Henry Thomas Riley's 1851 translation; the electronic text draws on 1893/1899 reprints. The Echo and Narcissus episodes and edition information were read. Riley's commentary is not presented as the ancient text; the entire volume was not read.

2. Epistle of James, 1:22–25, KJV. Only the specified passage was read. A religious normative framework, rather than a behavioural study.

3. Epictetus. Enchiridion §1. Elizabeth Carter's translation, Internet Classics Archive. The heading and §1 were read, with selected reading of §§4–17 as well. Only the distinction between reputation and one's own actions is used, rather than the entire Stoic corpus.

4. Mark Zimmerman. Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Merck Manual Professional. Authorship, the January 2026 update, definition, and diagnostic section were checked. A clinical reference, rather than primary research, the full DSM, or an assessment of the fictional participants.

The general international rights status of these particular electronic copies has not been established; UNKNOWN is retained. Bible Gateway labels KJV Public Domain; Project Gutenberg states its licence and territorial qualification. Complete source texts are not reproduced. Explicitly excluded Sujato/SuttaCentral translations were not used.

Tags

Narcissus, Ovid, Metamorphoses, Echo, reflection, myth, image, attribution, interpretation, self-description, reputation, feedback, conversation, listening, attention, autonomy, boundaries, diagnosis, clinical criteria, UNKNOWN, James, Christianity, Epictetus, Stoicism, fictional scene, observation, hypothesis, action, revision, relationships

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.