

Homo œconomicus: A Key for Understanding Late Modernity Narcissism?

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Keywords

Culture · Depression · Foucault · *Homo œconomicus* · Narcissism · Values

Abstract

This paper describes the form that narcissism takes in contemporary society in the light of *Homo œconomicus* – a concept developed by philosopher Foucault to describe a key figure of late modernity: the entrepreneur of himself whose core values are utility (every action must be directed towards production) and optimization (what costs more than it produces is a dead branch to be cut). *Homo œconomicus* is the subject of so-called “achievement society.” Its imperative is summed up in the formula “You can!” that generates heavy constraints because it is introjected as “If I can, then I must!” and self-coercion is more fatal than hetero-coercion because no resistance can be put up against oneself. He is also the subject of the “society of the spectacle” in which a part of the world represents itself in front of the rest of the world and shows itself to be superior to it. The spectacle is not simply a set of images, but a type of social relationship between people mediated by images, generating alienation from oneself and from the Other. Using *Homo œconomicus* as a grid for understanding contemporary pathological forms of narcissism, I describe the values and the life-world of narcissistic persons including the ways they experience time, space,

others, and their own body. I finally suggest a therapeutic of this form of existence based on the recognition of its value-structure.

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Introduction

We need new grids of intelligibility for some forms of existence that manifest themselves on the contemporary scene. The object of this study is one of these grids that I will call “*Homo œconomicus*.” This concept can be traced back to philosopher and political economist Mill [1] as the individual who is concerned with himself solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end. More recently, philosopher Foucault [2] developed this concept to designate a form of existence very close to what the contemporary clinical theory calls “narcissism.” A thorough description of the life-world of *Homo œconomicus* will hopefully help us to understand the ways in which persons characterized by extreme individualism, lack of empathy for others, and need for admiration to compensate for their fragile self-esteem may find shelter in late modern culture’s shared values and social practices.

Foucault [2] defines *Homo œconomicus* as a new type of subject – the entrepreneur of himself, a key figure of neoliberal biopolitics, that is, of late modernity. Briefly, neoliberalism can be defined as an extreme form of free-market capitalism characterized by policies of economic liberalization, including deregulation and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector. An in-depth discussion of the political and economic necessities or processes that underlie the rise of *Homo œconomicus* is beyond the scope of this paper. It is also beyond the scope of this paper to offer a critique of market economics, its risks on the one side and any possible prospects on the Other. My purpose is only to enhance understanding of this form of existence highlighting its *values* and the basic structures of his life-world and contrasting them to the world- and value-structure that can be found in contemporary society.

The *Homo œconomicus* appears so intermingled with the spirit of our time that his practices coincide with the ethics embedded in the so-called “achievement society” (*Leistungsgesellschaft*) [3] of which we are part. For *Homo œconomicus*, productivity is the first duty: he is an individual subject to his own project of self-construction that acts as a subtle form of self-constriction and self-limitation. *Homo œconomicus* is the subject of the achievement society. His imperative is summed up in the formula “You can!” He is not a subject subjected to others but to his own project. He grows up believing that he is a project to be shaped, believing that he is free. The imperative “You can!” generates, however, heavy constraints, even more burdensome than the “You must!” one because it is introjected as “I can!”, and therefore in the binding formula “If I can, then I must!” Self-coercion is more fatal than hetero-coercion because no resistance can be put up against oneself. For the purposes of exploitation, the call for individual initiative is far more effective than whipping and commanding because self-exploitation is accompanied by a sense of freedom.

The Values of *Homo œconomicus*

Homo œconomicus is convinced that he is the entrepreneur of himself but also that he is his own capital and his own workforce. His knowledge, his skills, his fitness are all his capital, a capital to invest and to profit from; a capital to be given the shape of a project, to be transformed into the production of some form of commodities. It is intolerable not to have a project, not to plan every activity, including free time, towards the production of

something. *Otium* (leisure) is abolished; every moment must take the form of *negotium*, of a finalized action. Free time must produce energy to invest in work; a game must yield the development of some skill; a hobby must be the beginning of a career; sport must shape the body; a trip must make experiences memorable; fantasy must generate a concrete purpose; dream must become the starting point for planning.

Even in the role of consumer, *Homo œconomicus* is a producer. What does he produce? His own satisfaction. As a consumer, he must be satisfied with what he has purchased. Ideally, all these products must be quantifiable, translatable into graphs and digits.

The ethical imperatives of *Homo œconomicus* are utility and optimization. “Utility” means that every action must be directed towards a purpose, therefore primarily to production. “Optimization” means that what costs more than it produces is a dead branch to be cut. Expenditure, that is, the use of time in non-productive activities, is prohibited. For *Homo œconomicus*, being is equivalent to producing by adapting to the existing and by optimizing it. Every aspect of the existing is managed as a performance according to the logic of cost-effectiveness. It is the triumph of *Realpolitik*: reality must be accepted as it is, not contested – however, provided that one undertakes to optimize it.

In the world of *Homo œconomicus*, there is no room for utopia since his purpose is not to change reality, let alone contest or revolutionize it – but only to optimize it. For him, it is a question of discovering the algorithm for turning the status quo into an advantageous project. For this reason, his conduct is sensitive to environmental changes to which he responds not randomly, but systematically. As such, he is a subject that is possible to direct, that is, to govern, modify, and manipulate the environment in which he lives.

The existence of *Homo œconomicus* is characterized by the spirit of enterprise, but every enterprise is inseparable from the possibility of risk. He dislikes risk. He aspires to a business, be it commercial, erotic, or of any other type, without the shadow of risk. *Homo œconomicus* would like to separate the profit from the useless, and the profit from the risk of loss, in order to produce.

No risk must escape the *Diktat* of optimization. This postmodern hero of the enterprise is by no means the champion of the spirit of risk. With good reason, the birth of this economy, which proclaims to love risk above all else, has been associated with the birth of insurance [4]. Foucault [2] recalls that the insurance institute was born, with the Lloyd’s of London, together with the colonial

company and the risks associated with it (shipwrecks, pirate attacks, deterioration of goods, etc.). The entrepreneur of himself insures himself from the sinking of his own project. This is especially true in the context in which the risk is supreme: the relationship with the Other. These insurance practices extend beyond the boundaries of *Homo œconomicus*' business and affect his private life. Not even Eros escapes the insurance rule. Each love affair is contractualized. The *longa manus* of this avoidance of risk is, in this case, the insurance contract, such as the prenuptial contracts stipulated to regulate the excess energy that Eros animates, a counterpart to the traditional contract that binds the couple "in good times and bad fate, until death do you part."

Homo œconomicus neither condemns nor denounces (he is too realistic to do so) but insures himself (or tries to do so) from Evil. Risk insurance can be a real insurance policy, or the contractualization of a relationship, or a logical algorithm to which a specific project is to be subjected in advance or in progress. Quite consistent with the ethos of *Homo œconomicus* – taking control of chance – is SWOT analysis (an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats), a technique developed in the field of management and organizational science [5] for the definition of strategies capable of favouring the achievement of objectives in contexts characterized by uncertainty and competitiveness. It is a dispassionate analysis of so-called "internal" and therefore controllable elements, such as strengths ("Do we know how to do?", "What do we do better than others?") and weaknesses ("Which parts of our project are not fully profitable?", "What makes us waste time/money?"), and "external" and uncontrollable elements, such as opportunities ("What are the objectives we are focusing on?", "Do we have the potential to reach new targets?") and threats ("What obstacles do we face?", "What do our competitors do that we don't?"). This analysis serves to set SMART goals (specific, measurable, available, relevant, time-based). Born as strategic planning in the business environment, it is adaptable to any type of decision-making process aimed at profit, therefore also to that type of business that in the achievement society is the individual life, if you want to separate the efficient energy that feeds a project and obeys Reason from the unproductive, passionate, turbulent, unleashed, unsettling, and dissipating one.

Procedures such as SWOT analysis, applied to the life-coaching or life-management of the entrepreneur of himself – in this world made up of algorithms, graphics, and acronyms, delude themselves into being able to separate

the principle of growth from the principle of dissipation. They try, in vain, to circumscribe the Evil (i.e., expenditure) inherent in this force, thus amputating it of its emanative principle (i.e., creative, contrary to the conservative and productive principle) [6].

A World without the Other

The world of *Homo œconomicus* witnesses what happens when we try to separate the positive from the negative. At the expense, first and foremost, of the relationship with the Other. The otherness of the Other, which is often a source of disturbance and jeopardizes one's own project and one's own identity, must be positivized: the Other must be a consumer good and the relationship with the Other a performance. The Other is reduced to a mirror or complement of the Self. Either it is similar (and therefore immediately consumable), or it must be easily assimilated, that is, its otherness must be posited as a complement to one's own Self in order to better realize one's project. Otherwise the Other must be eliminated as an obstacle. This brings to the "vanishing of the Other" [3] – Eros is positivized in a formula for enjoyment. Banned from all negativity, Eros – which is a relationship with the Other that is placed apart from performance and power – must only produce pleasant feelings.

A desire that coincides with the Other is like a sun which, having reached its zenith, overlooks its object and does not cast any shadow. It is only by accepting the shadow of one's desire that we can contribute to the reversal that characterizes the love relationship: the non-satisfaction of one's desire ceases to be a curse and is transformed into the glory of recognizing the Other's desire. *Homo œconomicus* believes that the distance of desire from its satisfaction is his failure and not his greatness; his weight and not his brightness. Yet, this failure is the only possibility for my desire to escape from its sameness, from the Hell of eternal repetition. The glory of my desire for the Other is letting the Other be, staying in the shadows, going unnoticed, eclipsing myself as a subject. If the subject exerts himself as an act of power, he performs an act that nails him to himself, while at the same time nailing the Other to be his object [7].

This circular machine of self-isolation from the Other is immersed in the *society of the spectacle*. According to Debord [8], the spectacle is not simply a set of images, but a type of social relationship between people mediated by images. The spectacle is the opposite of dialogue because in it communication is one-sided, going univocally from

the public figure to the multitude of his admirers. In the spectacle, a part of the world represents itself in front of the rest of the world and shows itself to be superior to it. What binds the spectators to the spectacle is the desire to become a spectacle themselves. The spectacularized world is a world without shadow – enormous, indisputable, and inaccessible positivity, which responds to the rule “What is good appears, and what appears is good.” The viewer becomes progressively alienated to the advantage of the contemplated object: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he passively accepts to recognize himself in the dominant images, the less he understands his own existence and desire. The more his life is identified with the spectacularized product, the more he is separated from his own life. Everything that was directly experienced has moved away in a representation. His gestures are no longer his own but of someone else who represents them to him. The spectacle is everywhere. It is what escapes self-reflection, which is the reconsideration and correction of one’s own deeds.

Homo œconomicus fully coincides with the subject of the *society of the spectacle*. The spectacle is itself alienation from oneself and from the Other. The concrete embodiment of this alienation is the *star (vedette)* [8]: a spectacular representation of the living human, specialist in apparent experience. *Stars* exist to represent a type of lifestyle and worldview, in an immediately graspable way, therefore without shadows or complicated nuances, so that the viewer can identify or dis-identify himself – naturally without deepening his analysis too much. The star is a prototype, sometimes a caricature, a character, which is the flat representation of a flesh-and-blood three-dimensional person. Alienating for the viewer, who is passively reflected in it, the star is in turn alienated, since by passing through the spectacle as a model of identification, it has renounced any autonomous quality, finally identifying itself with the general law of obedience to the laws of the spectacle. Building on and extending Debord’s analysis, the star can be seen as a mask built on the removal of contradictions, the personification of opinion (*doxa*) as opposed to the laborious, patient and dialogical search for truth, the absolutization of a choice “without ifs and buts” – therefore without thought. Ultimately, the star is a representation of the Other that responds to the need to avoid the risk of dialogue and to optimize the elaboration of a viewpoint: the most convenient way for *Homo œconomicus* to have a viewpoint is to say that he is a fan of this or that star that he will never meet in his life.

A Space without Distance and Intimacy

As the otherness of the Other falls, the space between oneself and the Other also changes. In the world of *Homo œconomicus*, the Other must be at hand, ready to be used and appropriated. Hence, desire is outlawed because it feeds itself off of what is not at hand. Objective distance – the geometrical space separating oneself from the other – is abolished as unproductive. In the lived space of *Homo œconomicus*, the place of proximity is taken by the absence of distance, in the name of the principle of usefulness. Only what is close can be put to fruit profitably and in the shortest possible time. Also, in this case, it is a centrifugal space, but its purpose is to bring the Other closer to one’s own centre of power in order to better use it. The absence of distance is the optimal space for those who are striving for results. Also, distance would feed the imaginative component of desire – fantasy – as well as the sense of loneliness and the frustration of one’s own omnipotence induced by the absence of the Other.

Apparently as a paradox, together with objective distance, closeness is also eliminated. Feeling emotionally too close to the other is felt as a harbinger of intimacy. Intimacy is a relation with a person that cannot be appropriated [9], involving the sharing of inner experience, a kind of at-oneness in which both partners feel a sense of connectedness and a shared understanding [10]. Intimacy is therefore antagonist of usefulness because in intimacy, the Other cannot be a consumer good. The time of intimacy is unproductive, it does not translate into something that can be mastered. Intimacy only produces itself or, unexpectedly, it produces a shock in *Homo œconomicus* because it can show a perturbing profile of himself.

For this reason, the place of intimacy is taken by privacy, that is, the right that *Homo œconomicus* claims to regulate access to the parts of himself that he wants to keep hidden, to aspects of his own Self that he does not want to put into play. The purpose is to regulate contact with the Other exclusively on the basis of one’s own desire. The space of privacy is a centrifugal space, aimed at keeping the Other at a distance from one’s own centre of power.

Time: Optimization of the Total Present

The time of *Homo œconomicus* is the time of optimization, aimed at rationalizing and minimizing waste. The goal is to break down the limits of time. Speed-dating is a meeting organized between people who meet in rotation

for about 5 min, which should be enough time to get an idea of what kind of person you are in front of. The aim is to meet and get to know as many people as possible in the shortest possible time. At the end of the meetings, the participants give the organizers a list with the names of the people with whom they would like to “deepen” their knowledge.

Time in the world of *Homo oeconomicus* is a total present, but not in the sense of the intensive instant of the borderline, shapeless, and metamorphic [11]. The present is here useable time, instead [12]. *Homo oeconomicus* lives in the time of the internet, that is, in the illusion that all information is immediately available. The internet offers an illusion of knowledge, and therefore of control over reality and planning, which in reality is little more than access to information and its consumption. The media (from Facebook to Wikipedia) try in every way to give the form of immediacy to time.

Consumption answers to the same logic of instantaneity. The consumer economy thrives on perpetual dissatisfaction (hence, ultimately, unhappiness); a dissatisfaction that the consumer society manages to positivize, transforming it into a new need. Customer-satisfaction services, best understood as a branch of marketing, rather than providing satisfaction, must ensure that the customer continues to yearn for yet unfulfilled needs, that new expectations are created. A completely satisfied customer is a customer who stops buying, consuming, discarding old products for newer ones.

Body: An Image to Be Manipulated and Admired

Homo oeconomicus uses his own body as a business card, shown to arouse the admiration of the Other. The current infatuation with the different modes of body consciousness is a symptom of the considerable narcissistic component of contemporary Western culture [13]. The body is not posited as indiscernible from the Self, but as an *attribute* of the Self. It is an attribute to be released, or instead to be investigated and treated technically, or to be built in the image and likeness of socially popular models. It is a type of relationship between the Self and the body in which the body is extroverted and becomes an *image*. The relationship between Self and body is mediated by sight. I am seen therefore I am: my body exists as long as it is *seen* – and especially *seen by others*. “We resign ourselves to seeing each other through the eyes of others,” writes Sartre [14]. *Homo oeconomicus* is called to take a position vis-à-vis his own body, to choose it. By choosing

his own body he chooses – or rather: he believes he is choosing – his own identity. In this search for an identity through the manipulation of one’s own body, *Homo oeconomicus* does not have the body-that-I am as a point of reference, but more and more, and in an increasingly dizzying way, the body-for-the-Other [14].

It follows that not having an efficient and beautiful body is an individual fault and a social shame. Biotechnologies (from the softer ones like fitness to the hard ones like cosmetic surgery) are applications of that ethics that sees the body as a task, as a material to be given a social shape.

The Decompensation of *Homo oeconomicus*

Despite being maximally adapted and adaptable, *Homo oeconomicus* is nevertheless vulnerable because, in his economy, self-construction becomes self-constriction [3]. Both gratification and feelings of guilt and shame can derive from self-restraint. Failure of his own project is the main source of frustration. If he fails, he is solely responsible for his own failure. The individual of the achievement society can only attribute to himself both the responsibility for his project and the inability to carry it out. The extreme individualism of the achievement society makes impossible both forgiveness (by whom?) and atonement (by doing what, if not resubmitting to the *Diktat* of the performance?).

It is an irremediable failure of the being-able-to-do (“I can”), therefore of the being-able-to-be (“I am”), since *being* is totally identified with *doing*. Being is equivalent to doing, in the sense of giving shape to oneself as a project. The symptom of this failure is a state of psychic insolvency, rather than a real depression (in the traditional sense of the term).

It is easy to identify the root of this state of psychic insolvency in a practice that would totally banish the negative, although it is an integral part, together with the positive, of the horizon of existence. Failure is exclusively intolerable negativity, not the shadow of the positive, its inseparable and necessary complement.

Thus, the symptom of *Homo oeconomicus* is insolvency, that is, exhaustion, failure, loss of the project, the impossibility of the “I can!” This distinguishes his decompensation from the characteristic symptoms of other forms of depression.

Let’s consider the traditional depression, also known as “melancholy” [15], which develops from a vulnerable anthropological configuration subjected to the impera-

tive “You must!” The cornerstones of the vulnerable existence of *typus melancholicus* are orderliness (the fixation on harmony in interpersonal relationships), conscientiousness (the need to prevent feelings of guilt and attributions of guilt by others), heteronomy (the exaggerated receptivity of an external norm), and intolerance to ambiguity (the inability to perceive the emotional and cognitive complexity of an object, person or situation). This vulnerable configuration lives in the static dimension of conservative time, in accordance with a finite perspective of options that limits the opening towards the other-from-self, trying to avoid getting involved in the dialectic of identity, limiting itself to being-the-same. It strategically falls back on an identity thing (such as role identity, rather than a real personal identity), a type of reified and a priori identity, which does not require to be built day by day, under the stimulus (or the threat) of otherness [16]. In this sense, *typus melancholicus* experiences the other-by-itself as a source of nullification and not as a bearer of a *quid novi*, as an opening to other existential projects. The otherness of the event is experienced as a source of discord as it arises unexpectedly and endangers the stability of his habitual and repetitive way of being. Change is experienced not as a potentially positive transformation phase but as an antechamber of the loss of identity. By avoiding confrontation with otherness, it follows that the identity of *typus melancholicus* is restricted to being-the-same, that is, to hyper-identification with one’s own identity *idem* [17].

The symptom of this form of existence subjugated to the “You must!” imperative is loss, which now declines variously in guilt as a loss of moral innocence, in ruin as a loss of economic resources, and in hypochondria, that is, in the anguish of the loss of physical health. Clearly, these are symptoms of a very different order from the impossibility of power, the failure of power experienced as irremediable that characterizes the crisis of *Homo oeconomicus*, whose categorical imperative is “I can!” The “I can” is at the origin of peculiar bulimia [18]: the pathologically insatiable hunger of producing, of consuming pleasure, of acquiring information. The attempt to reach one’s own identity through the accumulation of all that is assimilable is the other side of the coin of the “anorexic” practice of avoiding the Other aimed at circumscribing one’s own identity while preserving it from the threat of the Other – accumulation of the Same and avoidance of the Other. In this bulimic practice, the destructive pressure comes from within; *Homo oeconomicus* ends up being suffocated by himself. Devoted to production, rather than conservation, *Homo oeconomicus* gorges itself –

the point of obesity, dizziness, heart attack. The excess of goods that it produces and purchases accumulates as fat in a body that amasses it until it becomes a shapeless mass. Thus, paradoxically, his phobia of the formless, that is, the phobia of the Other as a source of waste, doubt, indefiniteness and, finally, negativity, leads *Homo oeconomicus* to a shapeless destiny. Only the Other as a dialectical counterpart could delimit it by giving it form. Lacking the Other as a source of dialectical tension, the Other as a limiting factor, rather than growing up, *Homo oeconomicus* just grows to become a shapeless and undifferentiated mass – of achievements, commodities, properties, etc.

The decompensation of *Homo oeconomicus* also differs from that of the borderline person. This form of existence, marked by the imperative “I want!”, is fascinated by expenditure, intensity, insubordination, and excess. At the heart of the borderline person’s drama lies the harrowing experience of the Other, which is needed as a source of recognition [11]. Recognition is the value that drives borderline existence. It opens the doors to relational hell, perhaps the most ferocious we can imagine – a searing hell of desire, expectation, anger, humiliation, disappointment, love, hate, desire for revenge, despair. Failed recognition by the Other makes the presence of the Self impossible. The absence of the Other is the reason for feelings of non-recognition and a desperate loss of the Self. The absent Other, or the Other who does not give his entire Self, is an Other who abandons.

Borderline depression is indeed characterized by feelings of abandonment – a wound caused by the traumatic distancing of the Other and the consequent loss of one’s Self. It is the betrayal of the Other, his escape from the intensity in which the borderline person wants to involve him at all costs that brings with it the feeling of abandonment as emptying, spleen, despair, *tædium vitæ*, impotent and persecutory anger. The failure of this desire for the Other devoted to unconditional adhesion to the value of sensation, to the need of catastrophe for the genesis and the affirmation of the intensity of sensation itself, whose imperative is to get in touch with the violence of sensation, is attributed by the borderline person to the betrayal, cowardice, and wickedness of the Other or, sometimes, the cynical and cheating Destiny is blamed, which opposes the realization of his desire.

Homo oeconomicus, on the other hand, does not attribute his failure to the Other, nor to Destiny: the project is his, the imperative that requires him to realize it is his, the inability to make it happen is his. His symptom is enveloped in a kind of brain fog, daze, paralysis of the self-reflective function, which prolongs the shadow that has al-

ways enveloped his interest in self-awareness – characterized by total oblivion, total inertia in seeking the meaning of his own crisis, that is, of both his historical matrix and the new existential direction he could open up.

And finally, the so-called neurotic depression is also different from the decomposition of *Homo œconomicus*. *Homo neuroticus*, whose paradoxical imperative is “I cannot!”, is the form of existence that more than any other perceives human finitude as a prohibition, even more than as an impossibility. *Homo neuroticus* is the child of which Sartre speaks [19], who, despite having grown to the point of looking beyond his parents’ heads, prefers to remain bound by prohibition, duty, and obligation, rather than come to terms with the abyss of freedom – that is, with loneliness and nothingness, which would open wide if he looks above his parents’ shoulders. His submissive desire can only enjoy in his own submission. He does not accept the legitimacy of the ban, but at the same time, he does not admit the sovereignty of his desire, that is, the bond that binds him to it. *Homo neuroticus* escapes both the responsibility of satisfying his desire and the responsibility of leaving it unsatisfied. His depression is dominated by the conflict between desire and the danger of desire itself. He is under the checkmate of frustration and demoralization that are the result of his cry of pain: “I cannot be able!” It is the expression of the impasse of desire, that is, already submissive desire that aims to communicate, through the depressive symptom – whose icon is the bowed head that does not dare to look over the shoulder of the father – one’s own submission [19].

Contrary to neurotic depression, which typically takes a chronic and creeping course, the decompensation of *Homo œconomicus* is generally short-lived and consists of a vertical, catastrophic collapse. Getting sick is a waste of time – there is no time to get sick, as there is no time to heal. He asks to be treated as fast as possible in order to return back to his previous style of life – which brought him to collapse. Care is also subject to the logic of performance and production. *Homo œconomicus* makes the finitude of human, physical, moral, and material resources an accident of human existence, denying that it is an integral part of it. He cannot think of his symptom as the necessary implication of his vulnerable existence, as well as the intrinsic vulnerability to *humana condicio* – instead conceiving it as contingent. Evil, disease, like any other form of negativity, are not, for *Homo œconomicus*, opportunities for reflection and rethinking, but rather a kind of accident to get rid of immediately, definitively, radically.

A Case Study

Before concluding this paper, I would like to provide a case study illustrative of the *Homo œconomicus*’ philosophy of life. It is taken from *Suits*, the famous American TV series that debuted on the small screen in 2011. Harvey Specter, the protagonist of *Suits*, is one of the most famous and established lawyers in New York. One can easily find in the internet several websites dedicated to Harvey’s successful professional life, and apparently, thousands of fans and admirers have taken inspiration from him to “play it big.” These websites include his famous quotes but also information about his suits, haircut, what would it cost to live his life, etc.

Apparently cynical and ruthless, Harvey is not without his moral principles. He shows extreme loyalty to people who have shown the same to him. Although he seems to hate working in a team, he will have to hire a secretary, Donna Paulsen, who at work takes care of all the bureaucratic stuff and becomes a kind of *emotional prosthesis* to him (and, at the end, his wife), and an associate, Mike Ross, who will soon become his right-hand and *protégé*. Donna and Mike are absolutely loyal to him, and consequently he to them. “Loyalty demands loyalty” is one of his principles. His *do ut des* philosophy is encapsulated in the following sentence: “Don’t stick your neck out for people who wouldn’t do the same for you.” When someone is a loyal partner to him, (s)he becomes literally a part of his Self: “Ever loved someone so much, you would do anything for them? Yeah, well make that someone yourself and do whatever the hell you want.”

He thinks he is able to suppress and control his emotional reactions (e.g., raising his voice) – “Don’t raise your voice, improve your argument” – and count on rationality to “improve the argument” and winning the discussion while staying collected. Here are other sentences about his views on emotions: “I’m against having emotions, not against using them” (i.e., manipulating others if necessary), “I could be drinking a juice box and still kick your ass,” “Kill them with success. Bury them with a smile.”

All is about winning: “I win. That’s what I do,” “That’s the difference between you and me. You wanna lose small, I wanna win big.” In order to win, one must be flexible and adaptive – “You want to change your life? Change the way you think,” “Win a no-win situation by rewriting the rules” – and work extremely hard – “The only time ‘success’ comes before ‘work’ is in the dictionary.”

Winning is valuable since it brings success – “Work until you no longer have to introduce yourself” – and is

the means to escalate an independent social position and a visible and well-established identity – “97% of people who gave up are employed by the 3% who never gave up.” Caring and winning seem to be mutually exclusive: “I’m not about caring, I’m about winning.”

In a nutshell: the Other is either an enemy to be eliminated or a loyal partner who joins your own project becoming a part of yourself. Emotions should not interfere with this project whose purpose is not dreaming but winning. Winning is a valuable goal since it brings success, and success is the only way to being independent and having a respected identity. Yet, not even a hero of self-reliance and independence like Harvey Specter can manage without the Other and be entirely loyal to his extreme individualistic principles.

Clinical Directions

The purpose of this paper is to provide a grid of understanding of a form of existence deeply embedded in the late modern individualistic world. *Homo oeconomicus* is the dominant type mode of subjectivity in contemporary society where the subject shares the individualist values of neoliberal capitalism. According to this set of values, the subject needs to be the entrepreneur of himself. This mode of subjectification, I suggest, is reflected in contemporary forms of pathological narcissism.

In an iconic evolutionary case study, a black form of the peppered moth rapidly took over in industrial parts of the UK during the 1800s, as soot blackened the tree trunks and walls of its habitat. The black insects, being able to better camouflage themselves, thus managed to escape their predators. As we cannot say that air pollution at the time of first industrial revolution “caused” the change in colour of this insect, we cannot say that changes in late-modern society have “caused” an increase in narcissism. Rather, societal changes may have “selected” narcissism as a way for individuals to adapt to the changed environment.

The basic characteristics of narcissistic people (e.g., extreme reference to others for self-definition and self-esteem, lack of empathy and of interpersonal intimacy) may not have substantially changed over the last few decades – perhaps with the exception of a decrease of importance so-called phallic-narcissistic features consisting in the exaggeration of one’s sexual image and concern for this image. What seems to have changed is the ability of these characteristics to make these individuals indistinguishable from the background of the environment in which

they live. Narcissistic traits have gradually acquired an increasingly *mimetic* potential. Thus, narcissism from a niche phenomenon may have become a mass phenomenon, transforming itself into an idealized model and into a value in itself. From a mere psychopathological category, narcissism has become a powerful, although hardly attainable, defense mechanism for the masses aimed at acquiring a public “image” of oneself that compensates for a weak sense of self, rather than aimed at seducing with intentions of a sexual nature. Human vulnerability seeks a form through which to acquire some consistency, a social role in which to find a semblance of identity, a shell in which to protect and hide itself. In our time, narcissism seems to serve this purpose. Yet, unlike the moth, the paradox of narcissism is that in order to protect oneself from predators, one must become as *visible* as possible.

Throughout this paper, we explored the life-world and the values of *Homo oeconomicus* as a way to grasp similar features in the existence of narcissistic persons. Psychodynamic literature has greatly contributed to the clinic of narcissism [20]. It makes a distinction between overt and covert narcissism. The first subtype is characterized by the direct expression of exhibitionism, self-importance, and preoccupation with receiving admiration from others. Covert narcissism is in contrast characterized by hypersensitivity, insecurity, self-indulgence, conceit, and arrogance in interpersonal relationships. Exploitativeness and sense of entitlement seem to represent a psychopathological core that is common both to overt and covert subtypes of pathological narcissism [21]. Assessing the value-structure of narcissistic persons can help to make sense of the core of what we may call the “narcissistic spectrum” and to pinpoint the differences between its different subtypes.

From a phenomenological-dynamic perspective [22, 23], unfolding the life-world and the value-structure of a patient are fundamental steps in the clinical process. There is an axiological dimension in psychopathological conditions. This axiological dimension is a component of human suffering that descriptive psychopathology (and even more so, clinical psychiatry) has often disregarded [24]. The neglect of the value system of persons suffering from psychopathological conditions contributes to seeing them merely as people who bear pathological experiences, beliefs, and abnormal personality traits. This may have a stigmatizing effect on them and contribute to judging some of these people’s actions as simply wrong, dysfunctional, meaningless, and incomprehensible.

The values of narcissistic persons basically include utility (every action must be directed towards the production of something), optimization (what costs more than it produces is a dead branch to be cut) – seemingly connected to exploitativeness, sense of entitlement, arrogance, and conceit. They also include spectacularization (someone represents itself in front of the rest of the world and shows itself to be superior to it) – related to exhibitionism, self-importance, and preoccupation with receiving admiration from others. Another obligation is taking control of chance in contexts characterized by uncertainty and competitiveness – probably linked to hypersensitivity and insecurity. Every aspect of the existing, including how to relate with others, deal with space, spend time, and take care of one's body, is managed according to the logic of utility-optimization-spectacularization. Not even love can escape this logic. This produces a world without the Other, a space without distance and intimacy, a time as the optimization of a total present, and a body as an image to be manipulated. All these features help to comprehend the basic personality traits of narcissistic patients.

Being aware of the values of narcissistic patients is an essential prerequisite to understand their behaviour and to establish an effective therapeutic relationship with them. The values of narcissistic persons may have serious implications for the transference-countertransference relationship. For instance, the narcissistic patient may try to convince the clinician to become a provider of techniques to improve his or her performances, rather than asking him to be a companion or interlocutor whose task is helping him or her to achieve self-understanding, self-knowledge, and self-acquaintance. Also, the narcissistic patient's manipulative or seductive behaviour, aiming at taking control of the therapeutic relationship, may enhance in the clinician's non-therapeutic forms of emotional entanglement. Also, the clinician's ideological approval or disapproval of the patient's values (utility, optimization, and spectacularization) may produce collusion or collision with the patient, rather than enhance true therapeutic dialogue based on the capacity to alter previ-

ously stated positions and to promote an exchange of perspectives. Last but not least, the narcissistic patient's refusal of intimacy – that is of the sharing of one's own inner experience with the Other [25] – may irritate the clinician and thus severely hamper the therapeutic relationship if the clinician is not aware that an intimate conversation with the narcissistic patient should be patiently and cautiously constructed.

Whatever each clinician may think and feel about the values of the narcissistic person, good therapeutic practices are based on the patient's values acknowledgement. The practice that derives from this supports the patient in the search for insight, understanding of one's own and of the other's values, resilience, and development of self-management abilities – rather than merely focusing on symptom assessment and reduction [26, 27]. Also, this practice enhances value-pluralism, that is, an idea of care that aims at a relation of coexistence and reciprocal recognition.

Acknowledgement

I am extremely grateful to my daughter Alice with whom I thoroughly enjoyed watching *Suits* and discussing Harvey Specter's deeds. She is the one who suggested to me, not without a hint of sympathy, that he is an ideal exemplar of *Homo oeconomicus*.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to be disclosed (including employment, consultancies, honoraria, stock ownership and options, expert testimony, grants or patents received or pending, royalties, or nonfinancial relationships personal, political, or professional) that may have potentially influenced the writing of the manuscript.

Funding Sources

The author has no funding relevant to this study.

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