



## The Credibility of the Christian Life in the Contemporary Narcissistic Society

by Dr. James M. Houston  
Senior Fellow and Co-founder,  
C.S. Lewis Institute

*Part Two of a two-part series.  
Part One can be found in the Fall issue.*

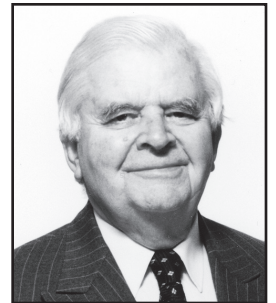
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As we continue the exploration of Narcissism begun in Part One, we need to first briefly note the roots of the current trends towards the exaggerated sense of autonomy, that spawns narcissism. This is necessary because Post-moderns are tempted to live in the solipsism of ‘authenticity’, which is one’s own appraisal of what is real and true. This implies that “I” alone exist, and the outside world exists only in my consciousness. The ideas of four key thinkers contribute to contemporary thinking about human autonomy.

### Philosophical Theories of Selfhood

When Rene Descartes (1596-1650) in the seventeenth century introduced the thesis, “I think therefore I am”, he was making a radical shift to situate moral sources within ourselves.<sup>1</sup> Instead of having an external referent as does Plato (in the Eternal Ideas) and Biblical faith (in the Creator), Descartes now builds upon human intelligence to construct reality from within one’s self, as the ‘thinker’. But he goes further, for likewise, morality comes from within the self, controlled by ‘reason’, to be used instrumentally. For a good Stoic, the rewards of the ‘good life’ are self-esteem, inner peace, self-control. For Descartes it is the moral value of being a ‘generous soul’. This did not mean ‘generosity’, in the sense of being open-handed to others, but more primitively being self-identified as ‘being honourable to oneself’. Being reasonable and being honourable went hand in hand. Such are the fruit of ‘the thinking self’. As Charles Taylor sums it up: “The Cartesian proof is no longer a search for an encounter with God within. It is no longer the way to an experi-

ence of everything in God. Rather what I now meet is myself: I achieve a clarity and a fullness of self-presence that was lacking before. But from what I find here reason bids me infer to a cause and transcendent guarantee, without which my now well-understood human powers couldn’t be as they are. The road to Deism is already open”<sup>2</sup>



*Dr. James M. Houston*

By ‘Deism’ is meant a necessary postulate for a transcendent principle. But calling him or it “god” does not imply any personal relationship with God. In fact it is the first step to atheism. That is why when religious/church people have no intimate personal relatedness to God, whether clergy or lay, the secular culture may easily force them to acknowledge that they should logically recognize themselves to be atheists.

With John Locke (1632-1704), knowledge is not genuine unless you develop it yourself. To reason Locke adds the need of freedom, to think detachedly, taking objectivity to unprecedented lengths. This includes self-detachment, to re-define ourselves introspectively, as an intelligent self. This is reified (i.e. making relationships into things; Latin “res” = thing), to generate a rational idealism of self-responsibility, to shape the self as interpreting the cosmos into an “I-IT” relationship. The Newtonian mechanistic universe is matched with an objectified, dehumanised self, seen only from a third-person perspective. Yet this was only unpackaged later, for socially Locke was a pious, socially attractive, kindly individual, who valued

his friends. Locke exemplifies the fact that we may not be inwardly, as we appear to be esteemed outwardly!

David Hume (1711-76) became immersed in all the sweep of Enlightenment legacy. He no longer believes in God, with no need of metaphysical foundations, and with the loss of a providential world. As a Neo-Lucretian, he can only make the best of it, in self-ingenuity, and with no fear of 'the gods' anymore. He is another Robinson Crusoe, who has to manage alone on his desert island, to make the utilitarian best of it all! Arbitrary things happen to us, so accept the best of it we can, living with a diminished sense of the self. All we find, argues Hume, is that we are just bundles of perceptions and associated thoughts. "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other... I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception".<sup>3</sup> Again, he was esteemed as a beloved friend. Adam Smith his literary executor eulogised after his death that Hume was "as near to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit".<sup>4</sup> Clerical friends as well as freethinkers agreed.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was the most radical of all the philosophers considered so far. Unlike them, he was also the most difficult man to get on with, destroying many friendships. In contrast to Pascal who looked into his inner self, only to find original sin in all its darkness, Rousseau looks inward to hear the voice of 'nature' assuring him he is full of natural goodness. 'The Fall' is not what we have done in rebellion against God, but what we have done to ourselves. The original impulse of 'nature' is good, not bad. 'Conscience' then speaks to us in the language of 'nature'.<sup>5</sup> "When man is content to be himself he is strong indeed".<sup>6</sup> One is only weak when you rely upon others! Thus Rousseau has the most 'modern' voice of all these thinkers, teaching that self-love is best for society, that like the hippies, the best people are those close to nature in rural life, and goodness springs from freedom, and the closer I am to myself the closer I am to the divine! Rousseau is then the antithesis of Augustine. Both have a spacious inner life, the one to be integrated and filled with the companionship of God, the other to be self-explored for radical autonomy.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was perhaps the greatest of all these philosophers. He is perturbed that morality was vanishing away, so 'the moral law' is an external requisite to which one needs to conform. He attempts to argue that acting rationally must therefore

be to act morally. This we can do by acting on principles, uniquely as human beings. Unlike Rousseau, Kant has a lively sense of the difference between good and evil, yet he assumes that to be 'rational' is to be in quest of universal benevolence.

This Kantian ideal of having faith in ourselves to become more civilised, was idealized by Woodrow Wilson. His dream was to elect philosopher kings, as the ambassadors to the League of Nations. Their mandate was to rule the civilized world in a culture of the elite. Instead, there has been the eruption of mass cultures, false ideologies, and now in reaction an intensification of individualism, such as we have never witnessed before in the history of mankind.

## The Conflicts of the Modern Individualist

Among the many conflicts of the modern world, we shall select three of particular relevance to narcissism today.

### 1. *The Challenge of Autonomy*

Without tracing further the growth of ideas about human autonomy, we are all aware that our Western culture is now broadly founded upon individualism. Its secularism is now expressive of "the fear of the Other". Since Nietzsche, secularists have assumed that to admit of God is to forfeit freedom. Since Sartre the further 'fear of the other' is that the other human being has also become my enemy. When 'otherness' becomes pathological, then ethnic, sexual, economic, social, and handicap differences, all become compounded to isolate oneself as living with a label of 'difference'! Then all differences become divisions, rather than sources of richer community and communion. The resultant contemporary Western self, states the British sociologist, Anthony Giddens "is frail, brittle, fractured, and fragmented".<sup>7</sup> He was not delving as deeply as we have traced, but when cities become more 'throughways' than community meeting points, then 'difference' intensifies the urban alienation.

### 2. *The Challenge of the Instrumental Self*

A second source of conflict lies in the Cartesian rationality of the self. Instrumentality reached its fulfilment in the Victorian bourgeois self, leading the Industrial Revolution. Religion became increasingly circumscribed, so that for the working class the fac-

tory now took precedence over the church. Everything was now thought to be reducible to knowledge, to be understandable and 'fixed'. The unknown lay in the external now exploring the interior life in a unique way. Freud did this with his technique of psychoanalysis to free the ego from impulsive behaviour thought to dwell in the mysterious 'unconscious'. In the postwar disenchantment with psychoanalysis as a pseudo-science, a new theory was promoted to absorb the war capacity of mass production, "the Empty Self", and "the Optional Life-style". As Philip Cushman notes: "the lifestyle solution is advertising's cure for the empty self".<sup>8</sup> It became a salesman's strategy! Such depletion of the self as we have seen has intensified our narcissistic culture in many ways.

But its breakdown became expressive of the "therapeutic ethos". As Philip Rieff observed, a fundamental change of focus had occurred when "a sense of well-being has become an end, rather than a by-product of striving after some superior communal end" to create "an intensely private sense of well-being".<sup>9</sup> This has significantly promoted the narcissism we now deplore in the ingestion of self-psychology. The sixties' adage that "you are what you eat", is truer than we may be aware. The bewilderment is that some therapists will tell you about four hundred and sixty different menus being offered!<sup>10</sup>

### 3. *The Challenge of Dementia*

From a very different angle the challenge of ageing and the rapidly increasing incidence of brain diseases such as Dementia and Alzheimers' threaten a quarter or even a third of the older generation with the loss of memory. Our society has become so intensely professionalized that the threat to 'losing our minds' is as terrifying as leprosy was in the past to a tribal or strongly communal way of life; to be cast out as 'unclean' was worse than the disease itself. Now Dementia is being recognized as the alienation of mind. It is indisputable that some loss of personal identity is inevitable, but are there more enduring traits still not lost? If so, then the philosophical theories discussed earlier about definitions of the self, come under scrutiny with new urgency. For if one accepts the Cartesian-Lockean meaning of the self, then the victim of Dementia is left stranded in an inert condition, and the whole health care of such patients lacks any motive to face the challenge of such debilitating illness.<sup>11</sup> Awareness of one's identity may vanish with the disease, but others can still step forward to be the memory for the

one so afflicted, who still remains a self. Indeed, their loving care can enhance their own sense of self, to continue to share with the other, crippled by the disease.

As Paul Ricoeur points out, there are two sources of identity, *idem* or sameness, and *ipse* or selfhood.<sup>12</sup> The former asks the question, 'what am I?', while the latter asks, "Who am I?" The philosophers we previously discussed dwelt only on the first issue, of what is common to all humans, but they lost sight of selfhood, as a unique person. The dementia patient may lose *idem* but not *ipse*, whereas the healthy person has no separation between them. Both sameness and oneness/uniqueness, are integrated to varying degrees as expressive of one's identity. But the day is not far away when for pragmatic reasons, such as health costs, the temptation may become irresistible to advocate euthanasia for dementia patients, if only *idem*, and not also *ipse* is recognized!

### A Christian Conclusion

We are being challenged then by profound issues. Narcissism is globally reflective of deep-rooted fallacies about the human identity. Since it is expressive of 'original sin', it seems too inherent to expect a resolution. So some humanists now advocate that we view human identity and psychotherapy as moral discourse, seeking the historical perspective of "a hermeneutical alternative".<sup>13</sup> By this they mean that we should trace historically throughout our global cultures, the diversified sources of the self, in a kaleidoscope of identities. Liberal Jews now may advocate this, since the impasse of an Israeli identity reflects a Babel of voices as to who is a contemporary Jew – traditional or Westernized? Indeed, many of the world's conflicts today, are over issues of identity: Jew and Arab, Taliban and Afghan, Terrorist and Western, even 'Liberal' and 'Evangelical'. In all cases 'sameness' and 'oneness' are not in balance.

At a terrible cost, secularism has taken human identity out of God's hands as our Creator, in the attempt, freely or rebelliously, to create our own human understanding of ourselves. The divine affirmation of the human, as made in the image of God, is a far more exalted view of being human than we can ever conceive otherwise. Even Christians, when they accept a "professional" identity as to how they live and relate, make a terrible betrayal of what it is to be "in Christ".<sup>14</sup> Only there, is there the harmony and symmetry of being both "like Christ", and yet truly one's self.

This reflects on the mystery of the Trinity, that in God there is both oneness and yet difference. The Fa-

ther is not to be confused with the other two 'Persons', the Son and the Holy Spirit. Truly the Self is Other. As John Zizoulas has explored so profoundly, 'otherness' should be constitutive of the human being, in being, in having freedom, as well as in immortality. As members of Christ's body, the church, we have a new creation by baptism. Jesus has told us, "if the Son shall make you free, you are free indeed" (Jn. 8:36). Likewise, in Christ we have the assurance of the resurrection (Cor.15:16-19). So for the church Fathers, "God as the Other par excellence, is the 'object' of endless desire – a desire that knows no satiety – but at the same time the ultimate destination of desire, is rest".<sup>15</sup> For the 'desire' is mutual, God's desire for us to be with him (Jn. 17:24), as well as our desire to be with Him, in eternal communion.

## Notes

1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 143
2. *Ibid*, p. 157
3. Hume, p. 252
4. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (Chicago, London: 1974, vol. 8) p.1193
5. Charles Taylor, pp. 357-58
6. *Ibid*, p. 359
7. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Later Modern Age*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 169
8. Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995) p. 84
9. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 261
10. Ernesto Spinelli, *Demystifying Therapy*, (London: Constable, 1994, p. 25. He cites the text of Jeremy Holmes and Richard Lindley, *The Values of Psychotherapy*, 1989, for some 460 diverse forms of therapy.
11. Jennifer Radden and Joan M. Fordyce, "Into the Darkness: Losing Identity with Dementia", in *Dementia: Mind, Meaning, and the Person*, Edit. Julian C. Hughes, Stephen J. Louw, Steven R. Sabat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.76
12. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, Chicago: the Chicago University Press, 1992), p.2
13. Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America*, pp. 279-331
14. E. Stanley Jones, *In Christ*
15. John Zizoulas, *Communion and Otherness*, edit. Paul McPartlan, (London: T.& T. Clark, 2006) p. 51

**Dr. James M. Houston** is retired Board of Governors' Professor of Spiritual Theology, Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. In 1976, Dr. Houston co-founded the C.S. Lewis Institute and serves as Senior Fellow. He received his M.A. from the University of Edinburgh and M.A., B.Sc., and D.Phil. degrees from Oxford University. Jim and his wife Rita make their home in Vancouver.

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8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301 • Springfield, VA 22151  
703/914-5602  
www.cslewisinstitute.org

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