

FRACTURED FOUNDATIONS OF THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM AND ITS
PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my friend James Ziller who would have most likely disagreed with everything in it. I've never met someone with whom I've found to be so wrong so often or for whom I have had more respect. When I think of someone who has had no problem expressing their beliefs, he's the first person that comes to my mind. James, I hope you're still wrong, wherever you are.

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ABSTRACT

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Narcissism, cultural narcissism, and the culture of narcissism are interrelated. Cultural narcissism is both cause and consequence of the culture of narcissism. In turn, the culture of narcissism fosters narcissistic behavior. Narcissism has a primary and a secondary formulation. Primary narcissism does not acknowledge the separate existence of self and has two hallmarks: a longing to be free from longing and yearning for uniqueness. Pathological narcissism or secondary narcissism manifests as a reactive characterological regression toward primary narcissism that distorts healthy maturational development. This pathology can be a completely solipsistic mode of being, or it can be a partial denial or hostile rejection of object relations beyond the self. Pathological narcissism expresses itself on two extremes – either an experience of omnipotent self-unity or an experience of a lack of self-unity, both always susceptible to identity crisis

The cultural narcissist is an individual with the rational attitude of indifference about disclosing social, political, and cultural expressions in the public square unless it imminently affects the self. The result is non-expression from culture about cultural life unless the cultural narcissist is compelled to do so for self-gratification. This leads pathologically narcissistic behavior in collective groups and institutions which, in turn, reinforces the culture of narcissism. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is the essential philosophy of primary cultural narcissism, and this philosophy is the root cause of the culture of narcissism. The public philosophy holds two axioms: choice itself is the highest and only right and the privatization of the good. The enlightenment conception of reason and the epistemological premises that inform the public philosophy of the unencumbered self can serve as a justification for cultural narcissism. Hunter's method of cultural analysis can be applied to institutions to test for effects of culturally narcissistic behavior. If we assume that the culture of narcissism affects collective expressions than we can use this method to identify cultural non-expression resulting in extremist polarization. In chapter seven I will apply Hunter's method to – as an example of testing for pathological narcissistic behavior – American Christianity to briefly show how his cultural analysis can be used as an indicator of the culture of narcissism.

1. INTRODUCTION

I chose to write on this topic after becoming a teacher of introductory ethics courses at Texas State University-San Marcos. Every semester the vast majority of students enter the classroom without the most basic moral vocabulary or moral framework. They walk in with no apparent ability to frame the most elementary forms of logical argument much less the confidence to say that something is moral, good, bad, or evil. To even ask such questions seems to be a confrontation to their freedom, and most hesitate to express the simplest absolute moral claims, or any explicit moral claims at all.

In fact, my very first teaching experience set me on this path. When I was a graduate teaching assistant, the first thing I did in the classroom was pass out bluebooks, and I simply asked the students to write why they were here in this classroom and if it was a good thing. Three times, I read all the bluebooks for three sections of students, almost ninety student responses in total – and only one student employed any moral vocabulary at all suggesting that she was here for the right reasons – that she had a goal in mind, and that being here was good in itself. It was common for most students to have answers including lines like “...because it is required” and “...I have to get credit in this class to graduate.” Although I never specifically asked, it was also common for the students to assume that I was alluding to the motivations for their attending university. However, almost none thought about why they wanted to graduate, why the course was required and if it was justified, or expressed the ability to articulate non-instrumental

ends. Answers like these, of course, are not necessarily wrong, but there was a disturbing uniformity to them. What were uncommon were students' abilities to formulate a moral answer of any kind or to think about how their motivations for going to school may have broader implications about their lives in general or the lives of others. This distressed me at first – then it made me curious. I'm glad to say that answers towards the end of the semester are markedly different by-in-large, and that I love my chosen vocation for this very reason! But, I couldn't shake the notion that my students' readiness for moral non-expression beyond anything affecting them in their immediate experience is a larger cultural phenomenon of moral non-disclosure and absolutophobia.

Most students enter the semester with a base moral relativism or dismissive moral subjectivism. Most hesitate to say that the holocaust was immoral or that rape is categorically wrong. Most students would say that female circumcision is wrong if they were the ones forced to perform the procedure but then say that cultures themselves are the origin of all morality. Initially, most students can't explain the difference between choosing chocolate versus vanilla or choosing to murder versus choosing to not to murder. Some of this, of course, is due to the fact they have never been asked these questions so matter-of-factly. After all, aren't we all free, unique, and special? Who are we to make moral judgments, especially judgments about people or cultures? Expressing those judgments would surely be in violation of freedom or at least a claim from the pretense of knowledge, would it not? Who are we the living to tell others what to believe or how to live? In public schools, one supposedly learns the historical facts, but how can these questions be asked without reference to some comprehensive moral doctrine or system of beliefs that would surely be beyond the neutral purview of state schooling? I

couldn't help thinking that there was more to this phenomenon in my classroom than simple cultural and moral illiteracy, something deeper. It wasn't that they were not articulating any philosophy; it was as if they were almost uniformly articulating a debased one. It wasn't a temporary skepticism. This was something else entirely, some kind of public philosophy, a kind of morality that these students were expressing. I knew I wanted to get to the bottom of it. My father once said, "If you can't figure out where the smell is coming from, it's hard to wipe it off."

2. WHAT IS NARCISSISM?

In the United States, you are more likely to die on the way to the polling place than to have your vote change the outcome of any national election. There is even a website (<http://www.jeremyscheff.com/2012/09/vote-and-die/>) where you can enter your state, mode of transportation, and the number of miles to the polling place and it roughly calculates how many times more likely you are to die before your vote could tip a national election. In this sense, it's one thing to say that it's rational not to vote, but it is something completely different to conclude that there is no reason to participate in politics at all. Too often I hear people say, "I don't care about politics". I think both of these attitudes – that it is rational not to vote and furthermore that politics doesn't matter – are expressed more often today than they have in the past, not just concerning politics but concerning most of the issues of social and cultural life. This project is not about voting. I am concerned with these kinds of attitudes that often seem present in my discussions with everyday people all the time. It would be one thing to argue that people can make significant differences in local elections or that participating in politics generally is a possibility, but what is more troubling is the all too common dissolution with civic, political, social, and cultural participation and expression.

There is a presupposition at work here about the modern conception of reason and our obligations. What is it in this form of reasoning that concludes the deference to non-action in public life? Clearly it is based in prudence, self-interest, or egotism, but is it

more than that? I think so. There seems to be something lacking in our definition of reason that would allow us to come to the conclusion that one should care about politics in general, that we should not merely be concerned with ourselves and ours. It is still a cultural action to not express belief. I will not attempt, in this project to provide any answers for fixing these problems; I won't even fully argue that this is a problem or attempt to justify it, but this project is meant to illuminate the nature of this prevalent cultural attitude that I will call cultural narcissism.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch argues that after the 1960s a new public philosophy emerges which he calls the culture of narcissism. Lasch is careful in defining narcissism and dispels the myth of “using narcissism as a metaphor of the human condition.”¹ The word “narcissism” has commonly been employed as a term signifying a strong ego or connoting selfish behavior, but it is in fact quite the opposite. It is too easy to equate narcissism with “everything selfish and disagreeable” but to do so “mitigates against historical specificity” and it is based on subjective opinions. People are naturally self-interested, develop self-confidence, and self-absorption. It is too commonplace for merely using these human characteristics as any meaningful psychological diagnoses. To use narcissism as a metaphor of the human condition is anti-intellectual and dangerous.

Instead, Lasch describes narcissism in Freudian terms. Narcissism is rooted, not in super-ego, but originates in an undeveloped, disrupted, or infantile ego (or conception of self) and manifests pathologically as a self-perpetuating dynamic that is both a cause and

¹ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 31.

consequence of that condition. Thus, narcissism in the Freudian sense has a primary and secondary definition. Lasch quotes Freud writing that primary narcissism,

refers to the infantile illusion of omnipotence that precedes understanding of the crucial distinction between the self and its surroundings"... [P]rimary narcissism conforms quite closely to Freud's description of the death instinct as a longing for the complete cessation of tension, which seems to operate independently of the "pleasure principle" and follows a "backward path that leads to complete satisfaction." Narcissism in this sense is the longing to be free from longing... Since narcissism does not acknowledge the separate existence of self, it has no fear of death. Narcissus drowns in his own reflection, never understanding it is a reflection.²

Primary narcissism is rooted in the "pain of separation, which begins at birth, as the original source of human malaise," Lasch states. Therefore, primary narcissism, to a minimal extent, is present in all people. It can be said to be a natural condition of the ego and self. It is a necessary component of the human condition but is surely not sufficient. It is the condition defined by a "linidinal investment of the self as a precondition to object love,"³ and therefore object-attachment is never fully realized. Primary narcissism is tied to a yearning for uniqueness⁴ characterized by a vulnerable, and therefore anxious lack of being. Andrew P. Morrison identifies this well when he writes of narcissism in the first person,

If I am not the *only* person important (to me, in the transference, or to another, outside the therapeutic integration) I feel like I am nothing." This need for absolute uniqueness, to be the sole object of importance to someone else, symbolizes the essence of narcissistic yearning. At such moments, the patient is cast back to a state of primitive, perhaps primary, narcissism, where there can be no one other than the self, in a state of merger with the representation or function of the idealized, all-powerful "other"...[T]his moment of fantasized uniqueness is a clinically common occurrence in treatment, and does not necessarily reflect severe characterological pathology. However, it somehow captures the essence of what we regard as narcissism.⁵

² Ibid. 240-41.

³ Ibid. 36.

⁴ Andrew P. Morrison. *Essential Papers on Narcissism* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 3.

⁵ Ibid.

In this sense, primary narcissism is a necessary condition for critical judgment, for the mature self, and for object-relation to others. It is a temporary resting-place for skepticism and the reflection required for self-evaluation. It is a maturational landmark⁶ in development of a subject that can be healthy, but it cannot define one's self-identity lest the subject cannot escape the solipsistic nonrecognitional denial of the self and others. Thus, primary narcissism seems to have two hallmarks: a yearning for uniqueness and a longing to be free from longing.

Secondary Narcissism is a reactive regression toward primary narcissism as it “presuppose[s] a state of mind antecedent to any awareness of objects separate from the self.”⁷ Secondary narcissism is therefore pathological because it is a distortion of healthy psychological maturity. An infant is a good example of primary narcissism while Bernie Madoff would be a good example of secondary narcissism. Primary narcissism, in its purest form, is a nonrecognition of object-relations while secondary narcissism is a reactive unrecognition. It is not necessarily a complete nonrecognition of outside objects, but rather it is a withdrawal resulting in unrecognition. Secondary narcissism manifests as reactive characterological regressions to primary narcissism and maturational distortions barring healthy character development. Morrison writes,

This yearning to be unique has several important implications. First of all, from an ego (or self) perspective, it suggests that the self is all important, and the presence of any other, rivalrous individual is intolerable to a sense of well-being or self-esteem. Secondly, it implies an ego ideal of unyielding specialness, which is both objectively unrealistic, and unattainable... The need to share the stage with others may lead to an outpouring of aggression or retaliatory rage. The capacity to acknowledge the existence of another – to recognize or identify with the external object of its representation – is, at least

⁶ Ibid. 8.

⁷ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 240.

temporarily, banished. Self-cohesion is undermined, and fragmentation – as indicated by the sense of nothingness – seems imminent.⁸

Primary narcissism, though inescapably part of the human condition and psychological development, is no home for a healthy self. No matter how much an individual would like to find equilibrium, eliminate tension, or relieve the pain of separation, life in a world with others renders this actualization impossible. Secondary narcissism finds its expression, ultimately, as a pathological denial or hostile rejection to this reality. Morrison cites Nicolas Duruz discussing the expressions of pathological narcissism on two extremes: “(1) an experience of self-unity, supported by an unlimited feeling of omnipotence, without apparent internal tension; or (2) an experience of a lack of self-unity, which leads to an identity crisis where the individual no longer succeeds in saying ‘I.’”⁹ Pathological narcissism, from these two extremes can find various internal and external expressions, but they are always connected by a “grandiose entitlement, on the one hand, and a vulnerability to mortification, on the other”¹⁰ rooted in a debased assumption of absolute sovereignty and uniqueness.

Lasch writes,

...secondary narcissism – “attempts to annul the pain of disappointed love,” in the words of psychoanalyst Thomas Freeman, and to nullify the child’s rage against those who do not respond immediately to its needs – had convinced me that the concept of narcissism helped to describe a certain type of personality, one that had become more and more common in our time.¹¹

Secondary narcissism is, in the words of Freud, “love rejected turn[ed] back to itself as hatred” while primary narcissism (as in the myth of Narcissus) never allows for the understanding of object-relation-attachment or object love at all. Secondary narcissism is

⁸ Andrew P. Morrison. *Essential Papers on Narcissism* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 3.

⁹ Ibid. 8.

¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

¹¹ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 240.

a form of coping and denial; it's an avoidance of anxiety arising from ambiguity and the unknown; its expressions may be based on guilt, but they are always attempts at nullifying the pain of disappointment. The pathological narcissist may express an "outpouring of untamed aggression," "rage against the offending object," overwhelming grandiose behavior, shame and humiliation, a feeling of insignificance, or unworthiness.¹²

Manifestations of pathological (secondary) narcissism can be expressed as "dependence on the vicarious warmth provided by others combined with a fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied oral cravings. . . pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-depreciating humor."¹³ If the pathological narcissist appears overconfident or megalomaniacal it is from a place of insecure self-hood and atomized isolation, an expression of false stability susceptible to fracture and crisis. Primary narcissism is then the nonrecognition of other objects due to self-love while secondary narcissism is the withdrawal of the self from objects whether recognized or not.

¹² Andrew P. Morrison. *Essential Papers on Narcissism* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 3-4.

¹³ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 33.

3. WHAT IS CULTURAL NARCISSISM?

Cultural Narcissism is not necessarily the pathological narcissism one would find in an individual, though it may inculcate the prevalence of individual pathological narcissism and narcissistic behavior. Lasch writes,

Psychoanalysis deals with individuals, not with groups. Efforts to generalize clinical findings to collective behavior always encounter the difficulty that groups have a life of their own. The collective mind, if there is such a thing, reflects the needs of the group as a whole, not the psychic needs of the individual, which in fact have to be subordinated to the demands of collective living. Indeed it is precisely the subjection of individuals to the group that psychoanalytic theory, through a study of its psychic repercussions, promises to clarify... Every society reproduces its culture – its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience – in the individual, in the form of personality. As Durkheim said, personality is the individual socialized.¹⁴

Culture and an individual's personality have a reflexive relationship. Both affect each other. Of course, if the nation was full of pathologically narcissistic personalities the culture would reflect this. And, in turn, a culture of narcissism may lead to narcissistic behavior and nurture narcissistic individuals. In defining cultural narcissism, it is important to distinguish the difference between *pathological narcissism* (found in the individual) from *cultural narcissism*. Cultural narcissism has to be expressed by individuals, but it manifests as non-expression from the cultural attitude of not caring about disclosing cultural expressions or beliefs to the public or in public. The culture of narcissism finds its expression as non-expression from individuals in the public square. This makes testing for it difficult.

¹⁴ Ibid. 33-34.

The culture of narcissism can serve as a safe-haven for the pathological narcissist and for narcissistic individual behavior, but the *cultural narcissist* – from the attitude of indifferent cultural non-expression – fosters pathological behavior from collective groups and institutions. The culture of narcissism is perpetuated from many factors and is surely multi-causal, but it is ultimately from a lack of social expression or a cultural “void from within”¹⁵ that leads to pathological collective, social, cultural, political, and institutional behavior. Lasch writes of the void within quoting Swami Muktanada saying, “The inner void, however, persists: ‘the experience of inner emptiness, the frightening feeling that at some level of existence I’m nobody, that my identity has collapsed and deep down, no one’s there.’”¹⁶ Just as pathological narcissism in the individual is rooted in the void within, so too is the prevailing culture of narcissism. If cultures can be said to express themselves or have an identity of their own, even in a metaphorical sense, one could say that our culture is expressing itself from an internal void, to a great degree, not expressing itself at all. Pathological narcissism in an individual is expressed in behavior from a sense of worthlessness, and the cultural narcissist finds her expression as non-expression toward social life because she doesn’t care, she doesn’t believe that it matters, and it doesn’t appear to affect her or her sense of self.

The prevalence of cultural narcissism seems to be evident and is discussed by scholars with more and more frequency. Christopher Lasch, Michael Sandel, Francis Canavan, Tom Wolfe¹⁷, Jim Houghan, Jean Twenge, and other contemporary critics are all noticing similar cultural trends in America – in which people seem to be publically

¹⁵ Ibid. 21-24.

¹⁶ Ibid. 24-25.

¹⁷ Tom Wolfe. “The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening,” *New West*, August 30, 1976, 27-48.

expressing themselves with more self-absorbed behavior and with a narrowed and disconnected worldview.

Twenge, in her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, focusses her analysis of cultural trends on young Americans born after the 1970s.¹⁸ She argues that the language used in self-help books, in therapy, in the way we are told to raise children, and in the all too familiar aphorisms since the 1970s all point to an entitled and debased sense of uniqueness and specialness that promotes an unconditional self-esteem¹⁹ for no particular reason.²⁰ She cites studies finding increasing frequency and employment of ‘me and I’ language in the news and mass media²¹ and the prevalence of commercial and political slogans like “an army of one”.²² People’s ready acceptance of phrases and common advice like “First of all, you have to love yourself before you can love others”²³ or “Be Your Own Best Friend”²⁴ or “Just be yourself” or “believe in yourself” or “anything is possible”²⁵ leads to incoherent lines of thought and devastating attitudes in our youth. Twenge asserts, “These aphorisms don’t seem absurd to us even when, sometimes they are.”²⁶ The commonality here is that all these maxims share an ascendant predominance of self-focus prior to incorporations of others for relations. Twenge writes, “GenMe’s focus on the needs of the individual is not necessarily self-absorbed or isolationist; instead, it’s a way of moving through the world beholden to few social rules

¹⁸ Jean M. Twenge. *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 56.

²¹ *Ibid.* 51.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.* 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 92.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 50.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and with the unshakable belief that you're important."²⁷ This attitude is one that allies itself with willful ignorance all too easily as people are no longer obligated to logic, others, consequences of any kind, or merit before adhering unquestioningly to the belief of self-importance and the inherent dessert of self-esteem. The hash-tag philosophical maxims from GenMe serve as a way of rejecting critical thought and thwarting responsibility.

The cultural fallout is readily apparent. For example, the unprecedented frequency of divorce rates might have a direct correlation to these attitudes. Twenge writes, "[N]arcissists – people who really love themselves – are not good at getting along with others... It's difficult to adapt to another person's needs when you're used to putting your own needs first and doing things your own way."²⁸ She cites a host of other examples and trends like increasing single-parent households,²⁹ the obsession with appearance,³⁰ the extension of psychological adolescence,³¹ the increase in materialistic attitudes,³² the changing trends in sexual behavior,³³ and the high rates of depression.³⁴ It makes perfect sense. If a sense of self-esteem is rooted in mere existence and there is no way to improve or diminish it, and it is ultimately meaningless. Is it any shock, that if we assume the supremacy of self-worth over others that our relations with others will deteriorate, or if we assume absolute uniqueness – that everyone is special – then no one is special in turn? Feeling good about oneself, no matter what kind of performance³⁵, should not

²⁷ Ibid. 49.

²⁸ Ibid. 92-93.

²⁹ Ibid. 93-94.

³⁰ Ibid. 95.

³¹ Ibid. 97-99.

³² Ibid. 100-101.

³³ Ibid. 159-179.

³⁴ Ibid. 212.

³⁵ Ibid. 53.

shock anyone if it leads to declining performance. Twenge cites John Hewitt, from his book *The Myth of Self-Esteem*, writing that students, “look and act like what the [self-esteem] theories say they should look and act like... They tend to act as though they have worthy and good inner essences, regardless of what people say or how they behave, that they deserve recognition and attention from others, and their unique individual needs should be considered first and foremost.”³⁶ She concludes with some advice: “Forget about self-esteem and concentrate more on self-control and self-discipline. ... Self-esteem is an outcome, not a cause. ... Children develop true self-esteem from behaving well and accomplishing things.”³⁷

After focusing on the Americans born post-1970s, Twenge broadens her scope in analyzing and finding evidence for the causes and consequences of the culture of narcissism for all ages. She coins the term “narcissistic epidemic” in her book, *The Narcissist Epidemic: Living in an Age of Entitlement*, to apply to a cultural disease that is spreading with great frequency, writing, “Like a disease, narcissism is caused by certain factors, spreads through particular channels, appears as various symptoms, and might be halted by preventative measures and cures. Narcissism is a psychocultural affliction rather than a physical disease, but the model fits remarkably well.”³⁸ She finds that there are various causes of the epidemic. Among them, are the ways parents raise their children,³⁹ the backlash of the self-esteem movement,⁴⁰ the cult of celebrity,⁴¹ new social

³⁶ Ibid. 65.

³⁷ Ibid. 66.

³⁸ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *Living in the Age of Entitlement: The Narcissism Epidemic* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 2.

³⁹ Ibid. 73-88.

⁴⁰ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 13-15.

⁴¹ Ibid. 21-22.

technologies and networks,⁴² the culture of excess and affluence,⁴³ and the environment of materialism and overconsumption.⁴⁴ She argues that television viewing –the kinds of programs on television, the commercials, and the images commonly shown – is both cause and consequence of narcissistic culture.⁴⁵ In the last chapter of her book, Twenge says that the culture of narcissism will most likely contribute to the fracturing of U.S. economic foundations, to the failure of corporations and bailouts, to individuals taking on too much debt, and to the shredding of the social fabric from egotism and incivility.⁴⁶

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in his prologue, “The Theory Behind The Dictionary: Cultural Literacy and Education”, delivers several arguments relevant of the culture of narcissism. The book, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, is a national bestseller and “has been acclaimed for identifying and defining the core body of knowledge that no literate American should be without.”⁴⁷ Cultural literacy seems to be a disposition of broadly shared background knowledge that is not entirely sufficient for “the attainment of an educated person”⁴⁸ but is a necessary condition for becoming educated – for understanding one’s self, and for being a full participant in larger culture. Hirsch notes that empirical evidence has shown declining cultural literacy since 1965⁴⁹ and predicates

⁴² Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *Living in the Age of Entitlement: The Narcissism Epidemic* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 189, 90-107.

⁴³ Ibid. 56. Also see J. R. Slosar. *The Culture of Excess: How American Lost Self-Control and Why We Need to Redefine Success* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2009).

⁴⁴ Ibid. 160-179.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 123, 141, 290, 174, 154-55, 157, 158, 96-98, 184, 219, 135.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 303.

⁴⁷ E. D. Hirsch. *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), Cover.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Xv.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Xi.

that cultural literacy is “important in holding together the social fabric of the nation.”⁵⁰

His main argument is

...that true literacy depends on knowledge of *specific* information that is taken for granted in our public discourse. My emphasis on background information makes my book an attack on all formal and technical approaches to teaching language arts. Reading and writing are not simply acts of decoding and encoding but rather acts of communication. The literal words we speak and read and write are just the tip of the iceberg in communication... We have learned that successful reading also requires a knowledge of shared, taken-for-granted information that is not set down on the page.⁵¹

There is a “not-so-obvious reason for the high correlation between reading ability and learning ability,”⁵² says Hirsch. Reading ability is not a generalized skill, but it is inherently connected to the *subject matter* of the reading, leaving implicit variability in individual comprehension. “To have a good general reading ability, you need to know about a lot of things,”⁵³ and even having a broad vocabulary requires “knowledge in a wide range of subjects.”⁵⁴ Learning ability, on the same hand, is correlated to this knowledge. A person who knows more, learns faster. “...the easiest way to learn something new is to associate it with something we already know,”⁵⁵ Hirsch asserts. Reading ability and learning ability both depend on broad and specific prior knowledge.

The ability to reason, Hirsch says, is not only a technical skill but also an act of communication. Reading involves communication between the writer and the reader. For the reader to comprehend effectively there must be “more than a knowledge of the individual words.”⁵⁶ Implicit meanings come from communication reliant on shared

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. Xii.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Xiii.

knowledge. Hirsch's aim is to "impart this content"⁵⁷ for social improvement, and without this, the unity and effectiveness of the nation will remain in decline. "...[T]he content of this background knowledge is not a mystery, and can be taught systematically to all our students. ... Thus, 96 percent of literate culture is undisputed territory, and, most striking of all, 80 percent of literate culture has been in use for more than a hundred years!,"⁵⁸ Hirsch states.

Causes of the decline come from the teaching of skills-oriented material. Reading, writing, and communication are taught as though it "could be perfected independently of specific literate content."⁵⁹ There are two paradoxes identified by Hirsch. First:

...[T]he social goals of liberalism *require* educational conservatism. We only make social and economic progress by teaching everyone to read and communicate, which means teaching myths and facts that are predominately traditional. Those who evade this inherent conservatism of literacy in the name of multicultural anti-elitism are in effect elitists of an extreme sort.⁶⁰

Secondly, "broad, shallow knowledge is the best route to deep knowledge."⁶¹ Cultural literacy is admittedly shallow, while true education is deep, and the "real test of any educational idea is its usefulness."⁶² Hirsch finally asserts, "True literacy has always opened doors – not just to deep knowledge and economic success, but also to other people and other cultures."⁶³

Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* echoes the concerns of Hirsch. He writes in chapter six of his

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Xiv.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Xv

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

book entitled, “Schooling and the New Illiteracy”⁶⁴, that there is a common “spread of stupefaction” in America. He notes that cultural literacy is in unprecedented decline (1979), that the democratization of education has had a depreciating effect on basic academic standards and grades across the board, and that an “atrophy of competence” comes to define American education systems. Lasch explains that modern society has produced “new forms of illiteracy,” as well. He writes further, “People increasingly find themselves unable to use language with ease and precision, to recall the basic facts of their country’s history, to make logical deductions, to understand any but the most rudimentary written texts, or even grasp their constitutional rights.”⁶⁵

Hirsch and Lasch agree that the problem of cultural illiteracy doesn’t end with ignorance, but it also creates an environment of cultural stupefaction. Lasch cites study after study showing decline in the “basic intellectual skills” of Americans. He notes that formal test scores in both math and English have decreased substantially from 1966-1976⁶⁶ and showed no signs of slowing down. Textbooks have been simplified for students who, “do to [faculty] complaints that a new generation of students, are raised on television, movies, and what one educator calls “the antilanguage assumptions of our culture,” find our existing textbooks unintelligible.”⁶⁷ Private and public universities alike find themselves having to offer more remedial English classes for student populations who are increasingly becoming unilingual, only speaking English. Lasch writes,

Such studies merely confirm what everyone knows who has taught high school or college students in the last ten or fifteen years. Even at the top schools in the country, students' ability to use their own language, their

⁶⁴ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 125.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 128.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

knowledge of foreign languages, their reasoning powers, their stock of historical information and their knowledge of the major literary classics have all undergone a relentless process of deterioration.⁶⁸

Education in America is suffering from a lacking ability to justify what pedagogical is better than others. Furthermore, the nature of government neutrality renders a new form of stupification.

Stephen Prothero's book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*, seems to be an extension of Lasch's project in light of The Hirsch Argument. As Hirsch argues about the problem of cultural literacy, Prothero argues about religious literacy, writing about the paradox of decline:

Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. They are Protestants who can't name the four Gospels, Catholics who can't name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can't name the five books of Moses. Atheists may be as rare in America as Jesus-loving politicians are in Europe, but here faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates.⁶⁹

Prothero makes the point that religious literacy is integral to a liberal education and that you "need religious literacy in order to be an effective citizen."⁷⁰ It is both necessary for cultural literacy and for responsible citizenship as a major factor in the education of American Democracy.

Prothero writes,

Today religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy, and certainly more dangerous. Religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil. Whereas ignorance of the term Achilles' Heel may cause us to become confused about the outcome of a Super Bowl game or a

⁶⁸ Ibid. 129.

⁶⁹ Stephen Prothero. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 9.

statewide election, ignorance about Christian crusades and Muslim martyrdom can be literally lethal.⁷¹

To only note cultural and religious illiteracy would be only to note the consequences or symptoms of the problem, but the problem is rooted much deeper than simple education. It is rooted in our more and more prevalent cultural attitudes. Cultural narcissism as a philosophy (discussed later) is a direct cause of cultural and religious illiteracy required for rational thought and democracy to function.

Many of these causes and consequences of the culture of narcissism are echoes and continuations of the work of Christopher Lasch. Twenge, Hirsch, and Prothero do justice and good work in finding empirical evidence for these things. To some extent, the existence of the culture of narcissism simply cannot be denied. Lasch defines the culture of narcissism as the normalization of pathological narcissism into culture. He explores the origins of the culture of narcissism from a historical method and suggests, like Tom Wolfe, that it is the third great awakening in America.⁷² He identifies one of the hallmark attitudes of cultural narcissism:

To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning sense of historical time...⁷³

Lasch believes that many of the cultural trends and political malaises of our time are rooted in a collective disposition from a lack of confidence.⁷⁴ We are witnessing an unprecedented cultural phenomenon of non-expression from society manifesting in a culture lacking in being, with no recognition of anything or anyone before the present

⁷¹ Ibid. 4.

⁷² Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 5.

⁷³ Ibid. 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid. xiii.

self. Lasch argues that from the passion to live for yourself, the culture of narcissism is marked by a “Waning sense of historical time,” but at the same time a “‘sense of an ending,’ which has given shape to so much of the twentieth-century literature, now pervades the popular imagination as well.”⁷⁵ When peoples’ horizons are narrowed to immediate gratifications and worldviews confined to the self, people lose a sense of the past and its importance. Identity becomes an anxious ever-quest for meaning in an overbearing and confusing reality.

In the same sense that primary narcissism is rooted in the desire for equilibrium, the longing for not longing, the quest for certainty, or the cessation of tension, cultural narcissism is tied to indifference for the quest of social consensus, for perspective collective identity, or cultural meaning. Lasch writes,

The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence. Superficially relaxed and tolerant, he finds little use for dogmas of racial and ethnic purity but at the same time forfeits the security of group loyalties and regards everyone as a rival for the favors conferred by a paternalistic state... Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy. Hence he repudiates the competitive ideologies that flourished at an earlier stage of capitalist development and distrusts even their limited expression in sports and games. He extols cooperation and teamwork while harboring deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for the rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself... [H]e demands immediate gratification and lives in a restless, perpetual unsatisfied desire. The narcissist has no interest in the future because, in part, he has so little interest in the past. He finds it difficult to internalize happy associations or create a store of loving memories with which to face the latter part of his life, which under the best of conditions always brings sadness and pain. In a narcissistic society – a society that gives increasing prominence and encouragement to narcissistic traits – the cultural devaluation of the past reflects not only on the poverty of the prevailing

⁷⁵ Ibid. 3.

ideologies, which have lost their grip on reality and abandoned the attempt to master it, but the poverty of the narcissist's inner life.⁷⁶

The cultural narcissist anxiously stumbles through life, removing herself from any seemingly less-than-obligatory projects of society, from the ties that bind, and from notions of duty, civic responsibility, or virtue. The cultural narcissist can easily hide behind ready-made slogans of the day and behind a false tolerance that amounts to dismissiveness instead of understanding or disagreement. She is so unburdened by the past and all ideological or historical restraints that life itself appears only as the actualization of individual choice in a meaningless universe with nothing prior to choice or any hope for coherency thereafter. Life and meaning become absurd for her. She feels no guilt because, after all, how could anything be her fault? Any disclosures of cultural absolutes become means to the end of an insatiable and instant self-gratification. The culture of narcissism and the cultural narcissist have a reciprocal relationship – both, to some degree cause and consequence of one another – in which not disclosing cultural expression because it doesn't matter is both rooted and resulting in the perpetuation of this public philosophy. Furthermore, if the self is supreme, sovereign, and the standardization of the good, this can be said to be a rational position.

Lasch quotes Alexis de Tocqueville writing,

They imagined, according to Tocqueville, that “their whole destiny is in their own hands.” Social conditions in the United States, Tocqueville wrote, severed the tie that formerly united one generation to another. “The woof of time is every instant broken and the track of generation effaced. Those who went before are soon forgotten; those who will come after, no one has any idea: the interest of man is confined to those in close propinquity to himself.”⁷⁷

Another quote from Tocqueville makes a good conjoiner:

⁷⁶ Ibid. xvi-xvii.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 9.

...I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself, and though he still may have a family, one can at least say that he has not got a fatherland.”⁷⁸

If we are to buy at full-price the public philosophies of future-full pastlessness as the modern existentialists insist, as our common political rhetoric symptomizes, it becomes increasingly difficult to heed the old and tired warnings that a “sense of endless possibilities” will lie in direct opposition to a sense of wonder, that the auguries of self-love can only nurture an “inability to feel”.⁷⁹ Without a tied sense of past or essential frame of reference, identity is hard-struck for any vision of a distant future, hope, or any confidence in possibilities that await. Nietzsche wrote about the *horror vacui* asserting, “However, *the fact that* generally the ascetic ideal has meant so much to human beings is an expression of the basic fact of the human will, its *horror vacui* [*horror of a vacuum*]. *It requires a goal*—and it prefers to will *nothingness* than *not* to will.”⁸⁰ Nietzsche rejects prevailing notions of morality suggesting that they are merely forms of power either by the masters or slaves. Faced with a meaningless existence and possibly no way of proving existence beyond the present self at all, many turn to ascetic ideals grounded in bodily materialism.

The trajectory of modern reason has shown a confrontation with the absurd. To a great degree – despite the most optimistic of enlightenment hopes – grounding morality is a question left open-ended or abandoned completely. People naturally fear nothingness or

⁷⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2000), 691-92.

⁷⁹ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 11.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1967), 97.

a vacuum of meaning and this drives them to anxiously fill the void with some disclosure of absolutes. For the cultural narcissist these absolute expressions merely take form insofar as they affect themselves, and their anxiety is paramount, at all times susceptible to fracture and instability. An irony of the human condition is that one chooses to persist in being through disclosing absolutes either in action or temporary belief; we have to act with the assumption of intent, purpose, or goals. Even choosing not to act or choosing not to believe is still a choice. It is only from individuals who express these absolutes publically, that checks on absolute and arbitrary collective power can hope to be maintained. What the current American culture is witnessing is not individuals filling the vacuum with from the *horror vacui* or actually taking a position about the question of the absurd or grounding meaning in life, but American culture has succumb to the culturally narcissistic attitude (from common-persons and intellectual elites alike) of the *indifference vacui* or indifference to a vacuum.

If you're a rational person then you're supposed to accept the *horror vacui*. The only rational response to this for people who instinctually don't believe this conclusion: that experience comes before essence, that God is dead, or that we live in a meaningless universe, is for them to be indifferent about questions of the good, to not disclose value with others, to not express their beliefs in public because they recognize that their beliefs are ultimately unfounded, and maybe they can't be justified at all. This is the normal response in our culture. Nobody assumes that everyone thinks it all the way through. It would be ludicrous to think that most people walk around in moral crisis believing what the political and philosophical elites espouse. For our cultural expressions, the expressions from of our institutions, our construction and understanding of liberalism,

and the arguments about our most basic beliefs to be left so profoundly unresolved is to leave one prevailing digressive logical attitude: a feeling of hopelessness and pathetic indifference. The rational response for rational people is to not care about facing questions of the absurd or to not disclose cultural expressions. It is better to live life concerned only with oneself, merely concerned with how one's own disclosures of the good affect one's own life, because that's the only thing that can make sense. This leaves a cultural void within.

We are witnessing progressions of the soft despotism that Tocqueville warned us about – atomized individuals hesitant to recognize or disclose any social values, individuals sitting behind ready-made values – a new kind of self-imposed slavery eroding the social conditions needed for democracy to function. This cultural fashion and cult of unconscious nonconformity leading to non-expression about public life, leaves the individual defenceless against those few cultural narcissists who are incentivized by their own self-interest to disclose cultural expression be it public officials or intellectual elites. Furthermore, it leaves public policy in the hands of those few who are incentivized to make their positions as extreme as possible for their own sake. To live for yourself first at all times combined with assuming absolute uniqueness renders meaning in life and relations with others a mere subjective preference. Just as narcissism has a primary and secondary formulation so too does cultural narcissism. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is primary cultural narcissism. Insofar as our collective cultural expressions are affected by this public philosophy, they can be said to be pathological.

4. PRIMARY CULTURAL NARCISSISM: THE PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY OF THE UNENCUMBERED SELF

The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is the essential expression of primary cultural narcissism. It is the root cause and serves as a popular justification of the culture of narcissism. In his book, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, Michael Sandel coins the term "unencumbered self".⁸¹ Other writers have written on the topic on similar lines with different terms⁸², but I will adopt Sandel's language and refer to *the anthropology of the unencumbered self* as a philosophical conception of identity and personhood, the *public philosophy of the unencumbered self* as this conception of identity expresses itself culturally to society at large, and the *liberalism of the unencumbered self* as it manifests through political institutionalization. Sandel argues that public philosophy of the unencumbered self seems to be the predominant expression of contemporary political culture, that it results in a cultural anxiety, and that it manifests institutionally as the liberalism of the unencumbered self. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is based on a particular anthropology or way of understanding human beings.

⁸¹ Michael Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 13, 80, 82.

⁸² Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham,, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 5, 42, 70, 102, 103, 131, & 133. Francis Canavan writes about "individualist liberalism".

Sandel writes, “At a time when democratic ideals seem ascendant abroad, there is reason to wonder whether we have lost possession of them at home. Our public life is rife with discontent. Americans do not believe that they have much say in how they are governed and do not trust the government to do the right thing... our politics is beset with anxiety and frustration.”⁸³ Two major concerns lie at the heart of America’s democratic discontents:

One is the fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives. The other is the sense that, from family to neighborhood to nation, the moral fabric of community is unraveling around us. These two fears – for the loss of self-government and the erosion of community – together define the anxiety of the age. It is an anxiety that the prevailing political agenda has failed to answer or even address.⁸⁴

At the heart of America’s discontents is an anxiety – that we are no longer in control of governing ourselves or that our communal identity is now in crisis – and this anxiety has led to the predominant cultural attitude of discontent, frustration, and dissolution.

Sandel writes, “By public philosophy, I mean the political theory implicit in our practice, the assumptions about citizenship and freedom that inform our public life.”⁸⁵ He points out that political philosophy deals in theory which can estrange us from the external world, however, political philosophy is a necessity for meaning and understanding in social life. He asserts in the preface to his book,

But if political philosophy is unrealizable in one sense, it is unavoidable in another. This is the sense in which philosophy inhabits the world from the start; our practices and institutions are embodiments of theory – of rights and obligations, citizenship and freedom, democracy and law. Political institutions are not simply instruments that implement ideas independently conceived; they are themselves embodiments of ideas. For all we may resist such ultimate questions as the meaning of justice and the nature of the good life, what we

⁸³ Michael Sandel. *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 4.

cannot escape is that we live some answer to these questions – we live some *theory* – all the time.⁸⁶

One of the insights here is that institutions are embodiments of political theories and philosophies. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self finds its most ardently defended and defiantly unquestioned expression as a particular anthropology and particular form of liberalism. That is, it is expressed in the way we understand human beings and in the way we construct our political institutions. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self has at least two maxims: choice is the highest good as an end in itself, and one should be neutral on matters of the good life.

The anthropology of the unencumbered self is a conception of the human person as isolated, atomized, autonomous, and completely unobligated to anything prior to or outside of the realm of choice. This, of course, assumes that the individual is absolutely sovereign, and it infers the supremacy of the self. If there are to be any responsibilities at all, they are merely those self-willed or those to which the individual has contractually consented to voluntarily. The self is therefore unencumbered. This anthropology is informed by and reinforces the public philosophy of the unencumbered self.

Sandel doesn't refer to the anthropology of the unencumbered self in terms of narcissism, but if we understand primary narcissism as an incoherent conception of the self that can never be realized, then the anthropology of the unencumbered self fits the bill and can help explain the anxiety of the age. Individuals – understanding their identities and selves as unencumbered, neutral on the good life, and absolutely free – will set up political institutions to this end. Furthermore, this conception of identity

⁸⁶ Ibid. Preface.

perpetuates a debased public philosophy rooted in isolated individualism from the unresolvable nature of modern philosophy and ethics.

Both John Stuart Mill's Utilitarianism and Kantian Deontology inform the liberalism of the unencumbered self. Sandel writes,

Although the two sides disagree about how government should act in respect to individual choice, both assume that freedom consists in the capacity of persons to choose their values and ends. So familiar is this vision of freedom that it seems a permanent feature of the American political and constitutional tradition. But Americans have not always understood freedom in this way. As a reigning public philosophy, the version of liberalism that informs our present debates is a recent arrival, a development of the last forty or fifty years.⁸⁷

This new expression of liberalism is a contrast and rejection of republicanism. In republican theory "liberty depends on sharing in self-government", writes Sandel. But furthermore, it requires dialogue in deliberative democracy and any interlocutor in dialogue has to come to the table with more than the simple ability of being able to choose ends. Republican theory sets knowledge as a prerequisite for effective democratic participation; it requires "a sense of belonging" and "certain qualities of character, or civic virtue" before choice can have any meaning. It incorporates the past into future decisions, and it assumes that we are tied to each other and that what we are more than what we choose to be.⁸⁸ The republican tradition therefore "cannot be neutral toward the values and ends its citizens espouse."⁸⁹ Sandel concludes, that the liberalism of the unencumbered self "conceives persons as free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they have not chosen."⁹⁰ When asked deep questions about the ontology of being or for ethical methodology people may express their views based on

⁸⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 5-6.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 6.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

comprehensive moral and religious doctrines⁹¹, but the ability, vocabulary, and prevalence of raising such issues are waning.

Kantian thought serves as a major influence of the unencumbered self. For Kant, reason gives persons intrinsic worth. It is not just reason, but a pure practical reason that is striped from all consequences, emotions, inclinations, desires, or biographical and empirical concerns that provides ethical methodology. This Kantian rationality is what makes personhood have meaning⁹², and it is the shared quality of human beings as moral agents in order that they may be moral agents as ends in themselves. Ultimately, it is this reason, called autonomy, which can raise human freedom above and beyond our very natures and destinies; it dichotomizes what is right from what is good.⁹³ Sandel writes,

As John Rawls writes in *A Theory of Justice*, “Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override...The rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests.” So Kantian liberals need an account of rights that does not depend on utilitarian considerations. More than this, they need an account that does not depend on any particular conception of the good, that does not presuppose the superiority of one way of life over others. Only a justification neutral among ends could preserve the liberal resolve not to favor any particular ends or impose on its citizens a preferred way of life.⁹⁴

The only “justification neutral among persons” seen as ends in themselves is choice itself, with both the moral worth of persons and the moral worth of choice, in a vacuum, isolated, atomized, untethered and unblemished by the world or anyone in it; both and persons have infinite, intrinsic, and unbound moral worth requiring respect, awe, and dignity with duty implicit.

⁹¹ Steven D. Smith. *The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010)

⁹² Michael Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

⁹³ Ibid. 10.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 10.

Now, freedom as autonomy ascends as the highest and only right. When Sandel talks about the *right above the good* it is from the Kantian frame that this becomes possible. Right is the good beyond and outside any particular. This Kantian insight gives rise and justification to the idea of government neutrality on moral matters of the good, except those that can be shown to be categorically universal. In other words, rights should be upheld but all other matters concerning the good should be excluded in the consideration of public affairs and public policy. Sandel writes about the emerging public philosophy saying,

Its central idea is that government should be neutral toward the moral and religious views it citizens espouse. Since people disagree about the best way to live, government should not affirm in the law any particular vision of the good life. Instead it should provide a framework of rights that respects persons as free and independent selves, capable of choosing their own values and ends. Since this liberalism asserts the priority of fair procedures over particular ends, the public life that it informs shall be called the procedural republic.⁹⁵

The procedural republic does not require any framework dependent on any particular system of the good. Furthermore, any moral claims as such become irrelevant in the public square and in public debate. The procedural republic is a theory of public life that asserts “priority of fair procedures over particular ends.”⁹⁶

It is both republican and liberal thought that dominate modern democracy. The idea that we can have popular sovereignty and individual rights at the same time can be understood (as a vast overgeneralization) in modern terms as the divide between Utilitarian and Kantian liberalisms. Both Mill and Kant wanted to uphold individual rights, but they did so for very different reasons and their procedural republics are justified with different methodologies. What is important is to realize that both modern

⁹⁵ Ibid. 4.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

justifications hold the “idea that freedom consists in our capacity to choose our own ends” and that this idea finds its “prominent expression in our politics and law”⁹⁷, writes Sandel. Neutrality is central to its public philosophy.

Beyond Kantian liberalism and apparently more widely accepted, is what Sandel calls minimalist liberalism.⁹⁸ He writes,

Some political philosophers argue that the case for neutrality can be detached from the Kantian conception of the person. The case for liberalism, they argue, is political, not philosophical or metaphysical, and so does not depend on controversial claims about the nature of the self. The priority of the right over the good is not the application of politics to Kantian moral philosophy, but a practical response to the familiar fact that people in modern democratic societies typically disagree about the good. Since this defense of neutrality does not depend on a Kantian conception of the person, but instead “stays on the surface, philosophically speaking,” it might be described as a minimalist liberalism. Minimalist liberals acknowledge that we may sometimes be claimed by our moral and religious obligations unrelated to a choice. But they insist that we set these obligations aside when we enter the public realm, that we bracket our moral and religious convictions when deliberating about politics and law.⁹⁹

Minimalist liberals defend government neutrality on the basis of what has come to be known more generally as the knowledge problem¹⁰⁰ - that it is impossible to know particular morality with certainty or that it is impossible for reasonable people to agree about ontological issues of being, therefore, one should be neutral in the public square because of this ignorance. The knowledge problem argument is held as an axiom in the public philosophy of the unencumbered self.

It is important to note that Utilitarians like Bentham and Mill place no judgment on the value of actions other than those based on perceptions of actors. In other words, the only way that something has value is if it has demand from someone. Though there

⁹⁷ Ibid. 5.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 17-20.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Friedrich A. Hayek. “The Use of Knowledge in Society” *American Economic Review* XXXV, No. 4., 519-530.

may be competent judges, they can never be said to be fully competent. Mill's Utilitarianism can only escape Bentham's claim that all values can be aggregated to a single standard (usually money) by claiming that competent judges will choose higher qualitative values when associated with both higher and lower values. Certain truth may be evolutionary or unrealizable. But this still leaves people's uncertain perceptions as the arbiters of temporary truths, and it fails to account for anything beyond choice. Mill asserts that the individual is sovereign¹⁰¹ but at the same time a social being.¹⁰² The only way for Bentham to assign the correct qualitative value on things is to have an omnipotent power that, at least for the foreseeable future, is an unrealizable dream that results in an anxious uncertainty. Furthermore, it would place the value of the individual as a sacrificial animal under the value of the collective. The unencumbered self rejects that notion outright. Sandel writes of Mill saying,

The only freedom which deserves the name," writes Mill in *On Liberty*, "is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it." He adds that his argument does not depend on any notion of abstract right, only on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."¹⁰³

It is because we cannot claim to absolutely know the value of others' pursuits that one should be non-judgmental toward them. This lends itself well to the notion that the government should be neutral toward any expressions of the good life. We simply can't prove what particular things are good or bad for people, and therefore, we should not make arbitrary collective rulings about them. Sandel points out that both Kantian liberals

¹⁰¹ John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty* (New York: Simon and Brown, 1859), 15.

¹⁰² John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism* (London: Logmans, Green, Reader, and Dryer, 1871), 50.

¹⁰³ Michael Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 8.

and Utilitarians both believe that moral worth of actions hinges on the primacy of choice, saying “We are ‘self-originating sources of valid claims.’”¹⁰⁴

At the offset, Kantian Deontology and Utilitarianism are mutually exclusive theories and their ethical methodologies cannot work in harmony. A Rule-Utilitarianism that holds rules as universal or absolute would be like a water buffalo who attempts to eat the theoretical conception of a perfect circle for the gratification of itself or the collective. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self, holding choice and neutrality as absolutes, can adhere to neither Kantian deontology or Utilitarianism as comprehensive doctrines. It seems to claim on the one hand, that we have hedonistic pursuits struggling to deny Bentham’s claims that nothing has intrinsic worth (including humans) and on the other hand, that we are atomistic autonomous persons worthy of respect. This public philosophy is incoherent on its face and represents the unresolvable nature that modern debates exemplify. It adds to the cultural anxiety and indifference of our time. It should be a sign that modern ethics can only propose theories that answer questions about *how to act* with no concern about how to be, who we are, or any moral ties antecedent to choice¹⁰⁵ as if we existed as only a single choice outside of time, only concerned with a single act that could be answered with either a one or a zero. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self leaves a sky-hook mentality in the minds of the unresolved resulting in untethered public debate with no groundings of foundations beyond subjective assertions tantamount to appetitive rights-claims based on shortsighted wants, one versus the other.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 15.

The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is some bastardized form of cherry-picking from the unresolved nature of Kantian and Utilitarian theories. We see this all the time from both intellectual elites and laypersons alike. It is all too common for even ethicists to put on their Kant hats to answer some questions and then their Utilitarian hats to answer others. In our everyday conversations, people argue that we have inalienable individual rights while at the same time argue for policy reforms for efficiency and pragmatic utility. All the while, people guard themselves and their personal lives from any claims of obligations to others. They are free after all, from particular judgments about how to live, from the responsibility to judge anyone or anything, or from any critical judgments. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self takes choice and neutrality about particular conceptions of the good as absolutes. I believe this is the essential expression of primary cultural narcissism. It is the root cause and serves as a popular justification of the culture of narcissism. The liberalism of the unencumbered self with choice itself as the highest political good and government neutrality as the ascendant political ideal, lends itself well to the cultural expression, “I have absolute and unobligated freedom as an autonomized self and I should not disclose cultural beliefs in the public square.” For instance how often do we hear people conflate “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” with the idea that we should refrain from disclosing these claims because they deal in the realm of particulars or at least that we should recognize the fact that these things cannot be proven with certainty and should not be expressed?

Should it be any surprise that the public philosophy of the unencumbered self is both cause and consequence of the culture of narcissism? If we understand cultural

narcissism to be the rational attitude of indifference about disclosing social, political, and cultural expressions in the public square unless it immediately affects the self, then the public philosophy of the unencumbered self should be seen as the culture of narcissism's instructing master. If we hold government neutrality as a maxim it becomes easy to see how this could have a direct effect on cultural attitudes toward disclosing expressions.¹⁰⁶ Primary narcissism as not recognizing the separate existence of the self is reinforced by the belief that we are atomized selves with no obligations. The connection between our modern quest for certainty and primary narcissism's longing to be free from longing cannot be overstated. Just as the narcissist finds identity in herself alone, the cultural narcissist, informed by this public philosophy can find comfort in the fact that personal beliefs, no matter how debased and susceptible to fracture, are now beyond reproach. But the public philosophy of the unencumbered self's denial of particular moral values, or the outright rejection of any hope for discovering moral values objectively, lends itself to the public disposition that expressing cultural beliefs to others is ultimately a fruitless project and a waste of time. She believes what she believes while others believe what they believe, and both can be right. She would dare the critic to prove *ad ignorantiam* any absolute disclosure that may affect her; why not? Who's to judge? At any point the cultural narcissist can employ her one and only right, to go to hell in her own way.¹⁰⁷ The public philosophy of the unencumbered self, therefore, reinforces the attitude of cultural worthlessness with the norm of non-expression and is the essential philosophical

¹⁰⁶ Canavan refers the privatization of the good, asserting, "... accepting the doctrine of the ultimacy of the individual, with the result that every man becomes the sole judge of his own good." Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 65.

¹⁰⁷ Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 123.

expression of cultural narcissism. If any cultural expressions are to be made and disclosed at all, they can at once, be dismissed as an irrational overstatement and a confrontation to individual freedom.

From this point I could write about how the adoption of a combination of both of these enlightenment liberal theories cause problems in modern democracy, and I could discuss the erosions of democratic preconditions necessary for the survival of democracy itself.¹⁰⁸ I could speak of the institutional problems of paralysis,¹⁰⁹ how this alters the historical understanding of constitutional interpretation,¹¹⁰ how it fosters psychopathological cultural attitudes,¹¹¹ how it distorts rights-theory into the abyss of incoherency,¹¹² how it distorts pluralistic agreements concerning religious belief,¹¹³ how it leads to a false tolerance,¹¹⁴ how it undermines public debate, how it inculcates a sensed loss of community,¹¹⁵ how it places the individual against the overarching state, how it contributes to the expansion of the state, how it fosters a cult of consumerism,¹¹⁶ or how it fails as a public philosophy generally. To be clear here I am identifying the main cause of cultural narcissism and will not go through all the various consequences. I'm not attempting to criticize Utilitarianism, Kantian deontology, or reject the idea of

¹⁰⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America* (New York: HarperCollins Books, 2000).

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Rauch. "Demosclerosis" *National Journal* September 5, 1992.

¹¹⁰ Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 27-44.

¹¹¹ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 31-50.

¹¹² Mary Ann Glendon. *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Debate* (New York: Free Press, 1991)

¹¹³ Will Herberg. *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) Also see Philip Hamburger. *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁴ J. Budziszewski. *True Tolerance: Liberalism and the Necessity of Judgment* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008).

¹¹⁵ Robert Nisbet. *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). Also see Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

¹¹⁶ Gary Cross. *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

government neutrality. I'm only concerned with showing that primary cultural narcissism – that is, the purest theory of cultural narcissism – takes form as the public philosophy of the unencumbered self which affects the way we understand ourselves and construct our political institutions. It has two hallmarks: choice is the highest good as an end in itself, and one should be neutral on matters of the good life. Both primary narcissism in an individual and primary cultural narcissism are rooted in anxiety from unresolved foundations. Secondary narcissism is pathological as it is incoherent and leads to undesirable behavior. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is the primary cause of cultural narcissism; the consequences of it in our collective institutional behavior and political structures are pathological. The understanding of reason in Modernity seems to justify primary cultural narcissism and the public philosophy of the unencumbered self.

5. THE GEOMETRIC IDENTITY CRISIS: LIBERTY AS CERTAINTY AND THE ANXIETY OF THE AGE

Cultural narcissism can be seen as a rational disposition. But how can this be? The enlightenment period redefines reason requiring a new epistemology. Differing conceptions of reason mark the dividing line between ancient and modern philosophy and political thought. The Enlightenment is the defining period for the paradigmatic shift in intellectual traditions. Reason changed in meaning and method; it then required a new epistemology to justify its existence. This new science was proposed to solve the ills of politics and morality forever with incontrovertible certainty. In the end, the children of previous hopes were devoured by their mother, the new methods of knowledge, and, the once optimistic Enlightenment Liberals, gave way to new traditions of moral skepticism and ethical subjectivism.

The most important aspect in understanding *Enlightenment Liberalism* as a distinctive intellectual tradition is its propagation of a particular public philosophy from *mathematical understanding of reason*. Many authors have identified this, and have employed terms like “liberal reason”,¹¹⁷ “technical reason”, “instrumental reason”, “Enlightenment conception of reason”,¹¹⁸ “Enlightenment rationalism”,¹¹⁹ “modern

¹¹⁷ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 22.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 20.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 19.

reason”,¹²⁰ “*logos*-rationality”,¹²¹ “modern liberalism”,¹²² “the liberal doctrine”,¹²³ “liberal rationalism”,¹²⁴ and so on. For the purposes of this chapter I will connote this conception of “*reason*” with quotation marks so as not to confuse it with *Reason*, and the proponents and intellectuals in this tradition will be referred to as *Enlightenment Liberals* (ex: Bacon, Newton, Locke, Descartes, D’Alembert, Condillac, Helvetius, Bentham, Mill, Kant, Nietzsche etc.). “Reason” as the defining hallmark of Enlightenment Liberalism is a rejection and a reaction to Reason of the ancient scholastic tradition.

Aristotle thought the mind has an ability to categorize knowledge from an abstractive capacity. Aristotelian Reason, sometimes referred to as “a noetic conception of reason” or “a teleological understanding of reason” identifies categorical knowledge from *telos* or the end of a thing. From this end, the nature of things can be revealed, essences derived, and the good measured. This philosophy was seen by Enlightenment Liberals as an erroneous methodology based on epistemological failure. The ancient Reason was self-interestedly *a priori* and superstitious, advanced by empty verbiage and misleading language, lacked right method, and therefore, fallaciously obtained and maintained secure foundations.¹²⁵ It, too easily, was subject to political authority¹²⁶ and threatened autonomous minds.¹²⁷

Enlightenment Liberals armed themselves with a new conception of “reason” to provide for “secure” and “firm” philosophical foundations. They had freed themselves,

¹²⁰ Ibid. 54.

¹²¹ Ibid. 70-71.

¹²² Peter Berkowitz. *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 35.

¹²³ Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 3.

¹²⁴ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 25-42.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 26.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 27.

disentangled themselves,¹²⁸ and liberated “reason” from the spell of words.¹²⁹ They cleared the rubbish of Scholasticism, and “reason” was to be proven with certitude and the bondage of ambiguity had to be bracketed from its method. Spragens writes,

A major reason that Scholastic natural philosophy was “rather a dream than science” in the eyes of such figures as Hobbes and Descartes was its faulty theory of motion, inherited from Aristotle ...“actualization of potentiality” ...natural philosophy universal was now to be understood internally, and the Aristotelian complex of final, formal, efficient, and material causes was to be reduced to the latter two.¹³⁰

Ends, essence, and potential cannot be calculated from the old way. There is no room for a teleological understanding of reality, metaphysical realism, noetic Aristotelian theory, “deep structure,”¹³¹ or “intelligible essences,”¹³² and there is no need to face the “issue of classification of particulars under general categories”.¹³³ Theories of recognitional fact became outmoded.

Certainty requires fact to be derived in the narrowed field of utility and causation.

“Reason” was now conceived as a “geometric spirit”.¹³⁴ Spragens writes,

The hope was based principally on the striking intellectual breakthrough produced by the application of mathematical methods and modes of analysis to thitherto intractable problems. The discoveries of scientists such as Galileo, Kepler, and Newton were produced by way of numbers rather than words. Mathematics and geometry produced precision, clarity and certainty and thereby became not only the ideal by which the sciences should approach but the principle means for reaching it. The entire age was, as Aubrey wrote of Hobbes, “in love with geometry.”¹³⁵

¹²⁸ Ibid. 29.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 28.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 25.

¹³¹ Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 39.

¹³² Ibid. 31-32.

¹³³ Ibid. 36.

¹³⁴ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 31.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 30.

Though the quest for a unified language failed because of practical and pragmatic reasons in normalizing its use,¹³⁶ “reason” had found its new identity as a mathematical understanding; it was free from outmoded *form* and championed certainty as its hallmark.¹³⁷

The “quest for secure foundations”¹³⁸ led to the need for a new epistemology. Enlightenment Liberals faced the problem of justifying this new methodology for “real knowledge”¹³⁹. This new epistemology has at least three distinct parts in its dynamic. The first is *epistemological nominalism*. Hobbes recognized this in these two quotes from *Leviathan*:

Of Names, some are *Proper*, and singular to one only thing, as *Peter, John, This man, this Tree*; and some are *Common* to many things, *Man, Horse, Tree*—every of which, though but one name, is nevertheless the name of divers particular things; in respect of all which together it is called an *Universal*, there being nothing in the world Universal but Names; for the things named are every one of them Individual and Singular.¹⁴⁰

For REASON, in this sense, is nothing but *Reckoning* (that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the Consequences of general names agreed upon for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts; I say *marking* them when we reckon by ourselves, and *signifying*, when we demonstrate, or approve our reckonings to other men.¹⁴¹

Locke had similar conclusions in his *Essay* when he wrote,

The nature of species, as formed by us. And that the species of things to us are nothing but the ranking them under distinct names, according to the complex ideas in us, and not according to precise, distinct, real essences in them, is plain from hence:- That we find many of the individuals that are ranked into one sort, called by one common name, and so received as being of one species, have yet qualities, depending on their real constitutions, as far

¹³⁶ Ibid. 32.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 44.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 34-40.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 43 reference to Hegel.

¹⁴⁰ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* Penguin Books 1985, 102.

¹⁴¹ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* Penguin Books 1985, 110.

different one from another as from others from which they are accounted to differ specifically.¹⁴²

Francis Canavan explains that William of Okham first exemplified nominalist theory saying that “universals are logical terms by which the human mind groups beings that are unified, not by common natures, but by similarities that suffice to admit classing them under common names.”¹⁴³ The problem of universals found its answer. Categorical knowledge, contrary to ancient conceptions, was merely a human construction – a dialectical symbology from minds *tabula rasa* – free from innate ideas.¹⁴⁴ Our knowledge of species or of kinds of things comes from the common attributes of body, not the natures of essence. “Only individual things exist”¹⁴⁵ and nothing has commonality outside of our symbolic perceptions. All things in life, and all persons, exist in the realm of the particular.

The second part in the shared epistemology of Enlightenment Liberalism is “*Simple and Secure Foundations*”.¹⁴⁶ Spragens explains, “If a system of knowledge is to be stable and trustworthy, it must be well grounded. It must, the rationalists believed, rest on something solid. And, continued the analysis, this sure foundation was precisely what was lacking in the previous philosophy.”¹⁴⁷ Condillac wrote in the Introduction to his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, that it was Locke “who had the ‘honour of

¹⁴² John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2012), 36.

¹⁴³ Francis Canavan. *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 15.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 21. Spragens shows that both the Empiricists (Locke) and Rationalists (Descartes) subscribed to some degree of this conclusion. Locke is explicit on the matter and Spragens quotes Descartes saying that he “never said or thought that the mind has ideas that are innate, in any other sense than that it has a faculty for thinking such ideas.”

¹⁴⁵ Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham,, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 16.

¹⁴⁶ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 34-40.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 35.

being the first to demonstrate ... that all our knowledge is derived from the senses.”¹⁴⁸

Knowledge, now resided securely within the sphere of sensorium, and the method of achieving specific “first principles”¹⁴⁹ from which to structure any discerned truth was to be developed from “*esprit simpliste*”¹⁵⁰ or “emphasis on the simplicity of the world and on the ideas that reflect it”.¹⁵¹ Spragens quotes D’Alembert writing that nature can be known

...by that art of reducing, as much as that may be possible, a large number of phenomena to a single one that can be regarded as their principle [because] there are but few arts or sciences whose propositions or rules cannot be reduced top some simple notions and arranged in such a close order that their chain of connection will nowhere be interrupted.¹⁵²

The new epistemology had answered the problem of foundations with the “minimal parts”¹⁵³ of “clear and distinct ideas”.¹⁵⁴

The third part is *epistemological manicheanism*. The epistemology of Enlightenment Liberalism has narrowed knowledge to sensory data from autonomous minds and axioms of truth to constructions from simple and clear ideas. With “certainty as the hallmark for true science”¹⁵⁵ from a “mathematicizing”¹⁵⁶ of “reason”, knowledge can be defined as certainty within these accepted principles. Spragens writes,

In a word, men could now be certain of their knowledge. They would no longer be merely speculating about truth, like their predecessors; they could now possess the truth. As Hegel put it, the time now had come for philosophy to “give up the name love of knowledge” and become “real knowledge”... At least, certainty was possible as long as the natural limits of the human

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 37.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 38 reference to Hobbes.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 37.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid. 38.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 38 reference to Descartes

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 36 reference to Locke

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 44.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 30.

understanding were understood and respected. The full theme of positive reason, then, could be said to be “certainty within limits.”¹⁵⁷

Certainty within limits is not what distinctively defines epistemological manicheanism. This realization by itself can come from the previous two parts of Enlightenment Liberalism’s epistemology. It is the absolutized Gnostic¹⁵⁸ acceptance that knowledge can only come within these premises and the serious intolerance to any other suggestion, insight, or inclination that makes it a distinctive characteristic. It is the unquestionable assumption that “we should not occupy ourselves with any object about which we are unable to have a certitude equal to that of arithmetical and geometrical demonstrations.”¹⁵⁹ Spragens writes,

In its relation to the human understanding the world was divided in two. On one side lay the kingdom of light, the land of the intelligible. In it, all was transparent and comprehensible with certitude. On the other side lay the kingdom of darkness, the land of the unintelligible. In it, all was impenetrable to the best efforts of the human kind... This dichotomizing approach to the problems of epistemology has become deeply entrenched in the modern sensibility. What is known we suppose, is what is unequivocally and explicitly true, demonstrable, verifiable, proved. Anything else is “opinion,” where each may have his say, and where one statement is of equal worth or worthlessness with any other. We begin our epistemological debates with these either-or premises.¹⁶⁰

Locke attempted to find the limits or horizon that “sets the bounds between the enlightened and the dark parts of things; between what is and what is not comprehensible by us.”¹⁶¹ As the intellectual tradition of Enlightenment Liberalism progressed the limits set forth converted to dogma.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 43.

¹⁵⁸ Eric Voegelin writes about Modern Gnostic Truth saying, “The discovery of new truth is not an advancement of psychological knowledge in the immanentist sense; one would rather have to say that the psyche itself has found a new center in man at which he experiences himself as open toward transcendental reality... These experiences come to be the source of a new authority.” Eric Voegelin. *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1968), 67.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 44.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 45.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 46.

The early Enlightenment Liberals were hardly short on optimism. With the backdrop of the new epistemology and the absolute dogmatic vigor of the new science, all knowledge was thought to fall within the “natural light”.¹⁶² It was the unanimous decree of the period, the “firm belief in the unity of all knowledge. If all the sciences are part of a seamless web, then a method appropriate to one science will be appropriate to them all, and discoveries in one arena will have direct implications in others.”¹⁶³ “Reason” was considered a political force,¹⁶⁴ and all political ills were due to philosophical error that could now be therapeutically cured once and for all from the progress of light.¹⁶⁵ As if that was not confident enough, the new standard of “reason” reached its altered paramount. Spragens shows the progression of this, writing,

Modern reason began its political career as a dynamic new method with profound practical possibilities. Within two centuries it achieved its own apotheosis. For Descartes, reason was a potent tool. For Locke, it was a natural light that shone to light man’s way in a world that exceeded his comprehension. For Condorcet, reason was an epic hero. It took on a life of its own in his chronicle of the progress of the human mind. Reason became a dramatic persona... We may talk as if it had purposes of its own, because it does have its own autonomous end – an end that will be realized. Reason is not a tool of men; men are the tools of Reason. We don’t use it; it uses us.¹⁶⁶

Enlightenment Liberals were not only optimistic about achieving more perfect politics from dissemination of their new discoveries, they also believed that “the new reason was capable of apprehending moral ‘facts’ as well.”¹⁶⁷ Spragens asserts,

“Enlightenment” meant a great deal more than simply being informed about the everyday facts of politics. It represented also an anticipated revolution in the area of moral knowledge. “Enlightenment” meant not only the spread of truth but the accessibility of Truth with a capital “T”. It stood not only for the radical quantitative extension of empirical knowledge but also for a radical

¹⁶² Ibid. 36. reference to Descartes.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 52.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 54, 55.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 58.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 55. The last three sentences are in reference to Hegel.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 58.

qualitative breakthrough in the capacity to ascertain normative truths... Knowledge was a unity; moral knowledge was thus to be attainable with the same certainty, clarity, and distinctness, the same firm foundations and simplicity as the rest. Moral knowledge, in other words, fell within the charmed circle of epistemological manicheanism. It fell within the realm of light.¹⁶⁸

This new goal of “reason can be termed “moral Newtonianism”¹⁶⁹ which sought a unified theory of morality attempting to recover moral laws analogous to the law of gravity in physics. In the beginning, the hope of the new moral science or moral Newtonianism was expected to reaffirm accepted moral truths in *substance* and conclusion but it would be derived from the new *form* and right method.¹⁷⁰ Moral Newtonianism hoped to “possess both the intuitive certitude of Aristotelian *noēsis* and the practical force of Aristotelian *phronēsis*. The possibilities of such a combination seemed almost endless.”¹⁷¹ With the new-found power to gain True Knowledge and practical wisdom, the historical questions in morality and politics could finally be solved once and for all.

Enlightenment moral Newtonianism was doomed to fail from the beginning.

Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue* writes that

...the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelians was to eliminate and notion of man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*. Since the whole point of ethics—both as a theoretical and practical discipline—is to enable man to pass from his present state to his true end, the elimination of and notion essential human nature and with it the abandonment of any notion of *telos* leaves behind a moral scheme composed of two remaining elements whose relationship becomes quite unclear. There is on the one hand a certain content for morality: as set of injunctions deprived of their teleological context. There is on the other hand a certain view of untutored-human-nature-as-it-is... Hence, the eighteenth-century moral philosophers engaged in what was an inevitably unsuccessful project; for they did indeed attempt to find a rational basis for their moral beliefs in a particular understanding of human nature, while inheriting a set of moral injunctions on the one hand and a

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 61.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 66.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 40.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 55.

conception of human nature on the other that which had been expressly designed to be discrepant with each other.¹⁷²

The “moral injunctions” are the moral beliefs that the Enlightenment Liberals wanted to prove with their new method, but this was impossible because rejection of *telos* is exactly the rejection of any notion of the good. From this, it is impossible to have any standard of measurement of what makes a good person (man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*). Any valuation of this kind is impossible from a moral science limited to mere reckoning, sensorial data, nominalism, and the rejection of *telos*. Spragens notes,

The significance of the methodological self-consciousness of the adherents of modern reason... was that it represented the attempt to specify the appropriate means of exploring the new non-finite, specialized, exteriorized universe of *res extensa* or “body.”¹⁷³

From the starting point of “body” and mathematical reason, one can only achieve procedural and epistemological “control over nature”¹⁷⁴ as it is descriptively, and no normative prescription can be derived. This seems to be the irony of liberal “reason”. Once we place experience before essence the quest for certainty becomes a shadowy adventure indeed. Who can deny the death of God if all we can prove are standards of controlling matter with no reason for doing so?

It is from this stark and ironic realization that the later Enlightenment Liberals came to adopt the conclusions of some form of technocracy or value noncognitivism. The Is-Ought dichotomy, identifications of a “value-neutral” science, and articulations of emotive ethics that were initially overlooked became apparent and needed.¹⁷⁵ “Reason”

¹⁷² Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Third Edition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 54-55.

¹⁷³ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 58.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 61.

was like having the key to physics, jamming it into the door of metaphysics and wondering why the door stays shut. Eventually, “reason” combined with epistemological manicheanism determined that there is nothing behind the door because it was impossible to prove from within its own existential conception. Spragens writes,

The norms ascertained by scientific reason were not the traditional values of the classical and Christian tradition. They were instead of order that had been trimmed down substantially – conceptions of majority interest rather than common good, of pleasure rather than happiness, of utility or equilibrium or smooth functioning rather than justice... [the] solution to the perceived instability of the original moral-sciences idea was to push moral conceptions outside the circle of reason altogether. Those that took this route realized that no normative conceptions could, in the first place, ever measure up to the stringent standards the new epistemology had set for “real knowledge” ... The real problem, in short, was that a thoroughgoing empiricist epistemology – given the implicit model of sensation – was incapable of coming up with any moral “facts”... What happens, given this line of thought, is a complete dissolution of the concept of “moral knowledge”... It is “neutralist” in the sense that it depicts real knowledge as “value-neutral.”¹⁷⁶

Since “real knowledge” is value-neutral, it follows that moral claims were by definition “value noncognitivist”¹⁷⁷ because moral truths could not be discovered through “reason”.

An individual simply can’t prove the *why* of things from the premises of materialist causation.

Methodological individualism is the view that politics can be justified only with reference to the rights and claims of individuals. The individual becomes the fundamental unit of analysis, as opposed to the polis, community, the common good, or social classes. Because the individual is the simplest unit to philosophically reconstruct society, it becomes the foundation for analysis. Nominalism effectively eliminates natural law

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 200.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 201.

because nothing exists beyond itself in the particular,¹⁷⁸ and from the parameters of Enlightenment Liberal epistemology, the individual becomes the standard of measurement for society. Social Contract Theories come from this beginning, but what we find is that the original principles that the theoreticians use to construct their theories are arbitrary preferential foundations. Unger identifies this as “the principle of arbitrary desire”¹⁷⁹ stating that desires are arbitrary from the perspective of “reason”. Desires can be treated as facts or ends but never both, and liberal psychology has to justify them as either empirical psychology or ethics.¹⁸⁰ “Reason” becomes the process of ordering prudential¹⁸¹ causation to achieve the arbitrary desire. Unger writes, “The choice of the ends themselves is the work of desire and therefore arbitrary.”¹⁸²

Enlightenment Liberalism’s quest for secure foundations found “truths” with no value or direction. If there is no end or nature to man or government, standardizations of good cannot be determined. This leaves theories of politics in the realm self-interest which has resulted in theories of group-interest liberalism, pure collaboration of factions,¹⁸³ or a politic of competing individual wills. Rights can no longer be corresponded with any objective duty or element other than choice (choice itself can’t be justified). Rights claims of individuals do not correspond with any truth and consensus is left to the test of power. The “paradox of the Age of Reason” is that it has led to “political irrationalism”¹⁸⁴ in the name of “reason” itself.

¹⁷⁸ Francis Canavan, *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience* (Lanham,, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995), 19.

¹⁷⁹ Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 42.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 43.

¹⁸¹ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* Penguin Books 1985, 183.

¹⁸² Roberto Mangabeira Unger. *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 44.

¹⁸³ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 298.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 39.

Positivism became an intellectual consequence. If morality couldn't be proven by the scientific method, then it was irrelevant. Relativist theories of democracy also came to the fore. The Rawlsian sub-man argument, for instance—that people have consensually accepted the “goods” of freedom, equality, and fairness, therefore no more justification for them is necessary—seems an insufficient explanation for the ethicist. Even freedom itself is left unjustified as a goal. There are arguments based in cultural relativism arguing that moral matters are merely subjective to the identity of one's culture and therefore no more explanation is required. The nominalistic conclusions would have one accept that society is an “aggregation of individuals united temporarily for reasons of self interest” and any “good” chosen for society or politics is simply a reflection of subjective preferences by the commonwealth, historically particular culture, or an individual.

Michael Sandel quotes Aristotle when he wrote,

any polis which is truly so called, and is not merely one in name, must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise, a political association sinks into a mere alliance, which only differs in space from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another. Otherwise, too, law becomes a mere covenant – or (in the phrase of the Sophist Lycophron) ‘a guarantor of men's rights against one another’ – instead of being, as it should be, a rule of life which will make the members of a polis good and just.¹⁸⁵

For the ancients, the good life and the good society needed grounding in philosophical intelligence.¹⁸⁶ It's as if the sun was thrown from outside of the cave to the inside, and objects previously making shadows on the wall are clear and definable only if they're inside as well. People are still in their designated positions, and with the lights turned on

¹⁸⁵ Michael Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 7.

¹⁸⁶ Thomas A. Spragens. *The Irony of Liberal Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 48-49.

so bright, the wall itself is all that remains in vision. In the end, what we find is Hobbes' natural moral and political vacuum reigning triumphant as the conclusion to modern political theory, no matter all the attempts to prevent this acknowledgment. But there is silver lining on the horizon that Locke defines, and for those who know Reason with any notion of understanding or imagination, for those with any ontological conception that includes associations with others, they find Hobbes to be correct only from the atomized view of selfhood through this "reason".

If we buy at full price the premise of epistemological nominalism, one has to conclude that individuals are all particular and special. As soon as the premise of simple and secure foundations is made the sphere of sensorium becomes the origin and starting point for any systematic modal logic or rational analysis to begin. It is to conclude that any certain hope for securing foundations has to begin in the material world, the body, therefore excluding notions of universal rationality as a pure form. The enlightenment epistemology still suffers from the problem of foundations because whatever sensorium or simplest thing chosen as a starting point cannot be justified and remains arbitrarily chosen. With acceptance of the premise of epistemological manicheanism, certainty in the moral sphere becomes unintelligible. It is only we, our present selves, that exist with any certainty in a materialistic and amoral universe. It should lead the intellectual to conclude that, at least to some extent, enlightenment "reason" is one of the main contributing factors of the culture of narcissism.

If the starting point is that nothing beyond the particular self exists then it is only the present self that remains, and justifying communities, belonging, stability, or obligations to others becomes problematic. Universal rationality, as a defense for saying

that we're all connected somehow, contributes to the idea of neutrality amongst particulars, and if nominalism is correct then persons and all of our expressions are damned to the realm of the particular. Just as enlightenment liberals have removed Aristotelian teleology from their epistemology the public philosophy of the unencumbered self has stripped any sense of duty from Kantian Deontology. The unresolved attempt to combine Utilitarianism and Kantian Deontology has made it all too easy for the public philosophy of the unencumbered self to choose whatever theory satisfies their particular subjective wants. The move that most enlightenment liberals have made to secure simple foundations rejects Cartesian and Kantian rationalism with their starting point in the realm of materialism. From this starting point categorical obligations lose their grounding and cease to exist.

This could leave some to justify the anthropology of the unencumbered self, that all of our expressions mere choices and arbitrary preferences that cannot be justified, implemented on others, or suggest non-voluntary obligations. Enlightenment "reason" combined with its epistemology seems to lead to the question of the absurd and if any objective morality is expressed it is done so without proof. If we can only disclose those few certain things with which we have "real knowledge", we are left only with the anthropology of the unencumbered self, unattached and unobligated. Therefore, it is "rational" for the enlightenment liberal not to disclose herself in the public square. Enlightenment reason informed by this epistemology justifies cultural narcissism, and "reason" itself compels a culture of narcissism. There seems to be no obligation, responsibility or duty to disclose cultural expressions unless an individual feels like doing so. As her best defense the cultural narcissist can be seen as a scientist without the ability

to justify *why* she is making a hypothesis. The cultural narcissist expresses herself culturally with non-expression unless she is incentivized to do otherwise.

The quest for certainty seems to be directly tied to primary narcissism's longing to be free from longing. It can be a healthy position and needed for maturational development. Just as it can be healthy to engage in self-evaluation, skepticism about morality can be a good thing. As Kant concludes, "Thus scepticism is a resting place for reason, in which it may reflect on its dogmatical wanderings and gain some knowledge of the region in which it happens to be, that it may pursue its way with greater certainty; but it cannot be its permanent dwelling-place. It must take up its abode only in the region of complete certitude, whether this relates to the cognition of objects themselves, or to the limits which bound all our cognition."¹⁸⁷ If the narcissist regressed to a full state of primary narcissism they would be a complete solipsist. Therefore narcissism can be a temporary state in which one can reflect on reason and gain understanding, but to persist in primary narcissism would relegate all cognition to the self understood as all things.

For the narcissist, stability in identity comes in two extremes, either an experience of complete worthlessness or omnipotent sense of self-unity both always susceptible to identity crisis. From the fallout of enlightenment "reason's" project, one could reasonably ask if there is any meaning in life at all or if we simply appear to persist in a purposeless reality. When faced with the question of the absurd from these premises it seems there are three possible conclusions – to accept an absurd reality and act from a lack of being so that there may be being, to reject the absurd by appealing to objective morality outside of the realm of choice, or to be rationally indifferent about the question altogether. Not

¹⁸⁷ Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Bell and Daldy, York Street, Covent Garden, 1872), 463.

making a choice is still a choice, and it seems to be the one that most people make given the options. If “reason” combined with enlightenment epistemology is correct then any claim for objective moral truth is always susceptible to fracture, and at the same time, the absurd cannot allow for any normative insight other than choice itself if one chooses to live at all. I think most cultural elites (those who disclose cultural expressions to mass audiences) who have thought these premises through to this conclusion; they simply decide not to decide in the public square. Most people do not think all these things through and probably reject “reason” because it does not make sense to them and does not appear to apply directly to their life-activity. It is probably healthier to focus on their own lives and not concern themselves with the origins of value and meaning to this extent. Why should they concern themselves with attempts at grand consistencies or even hope for them? Indifference to the question of the absurd may be the ultimate “rational” expression.

6. HUNTER'S CULTURAL ANALYSIS AND POLARIZATION

So far we have explored definitions of narcissism and cultural narcissism. I have argued that the anthropology of the unencumbered self and the liberalism of the unencumbered self appear to be the prevailing public philosophy expressed in American culture. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self can be rationally justified by presumptions from within the enlightenment tradition for both intellectuals and the mass public. I have argued further that the acceptance or deference to the public philosophy of the unencumbered self is the primary cause of cultural narcissism. From the works of Twenge, Lasch, and others it is difficult to reject the conclusion that America is experiencing trends toward the culture of narcissism. However, it is important to realize that the aforementioned authors use different methods for showing these trends. In Twenge's first book, *Generation Me*, she finds empirical evidence from surveys, trending cultural language and expressions, and other data suggesting cultural narcissism in Americans born after the 1970s. In her second book, *The Narcissist Epidemic*, she broadens the scope of her inquiry to larger cultural trends. In Lasch's book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, he articulates a historical analysis into the psychology of American culture. There seem to be several methods for testing the effects of the culture of narcissism: 1. Taking popular surveys of individuals to identify narcissistic expressions, 2. gathering empirical evidence for narcissistic trends in culture, or 3. comparing current cultural attitudes and expressions to those of the past.

In the following chapters I will adopt James Davison Hunter's method of cultural analysis and argue that testing for polarization in cultural expressions can serve as an indicator for where the culture of narcissism is affecting our religious, political, social, and institutional expressions and behavior. I want to argue that the cultural narcissist – longing for stability in an anxious quest for certainty of meaning and left with the rational choices of improvable objective cultural expressions, the acceptance of the absurd, or the choice of rational indifference to cultural matters – tends to choose non-expression in cultural disclosures. In popularized cultural issues this leads to a largely indifferent cultural mass middle. Of course one of the oldest questions concerning democracy is whether the people will be responsible enough to govern themselves, and this question may not always be a direct concern for cultural narcissism. But if it is true that the culture of narcissism is gaining trending prominence then this possible problem for democracy will become amplified. Insofar as indifferent non-expression becomes the cultural norm of polarization in our mass cultural expressions, the problem will become more visibly pronounced. The trend of mass cultural polarization is directly correlated with the epidemic of the cultural narcissism. Testing for these trends can serve as an indicator for how the culture of narcissism is affecting our collective beliefs and behaviors. Where there is a polarization articulated by elites in mass culture it is most likely a result of the culture of narcissism.

Hunter argued in his book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, that “there was a battle raging between the orthodox, committed to ‘an external, definable and transcendent authority,’ and the progressives, ‘defined by the spirit of the modern age, a

spirit of rationalism and subjectivism.”¹⁸⁸ Current American cultural and political debates appear to be dividing into two uncompromising camps – the orthodox and the progressives. Hunter notes that issues like abortions, gay rights, gun control, and others are expressed by two distinct forms of rhetoric that are gaining more prevalence. He concludes that the popular issues concerning fundamental belief, though seemingly disparate, are in fact tied together, and that the public discourse is expressed in ways different than the past. When looking into who is engaged in the debate, he argues that by-in-large, it is political activists¹⁸⁹ setting the agenda with the mass populous rather uninterested.¹⁹⁰ Therefore it is the intellectual elites and their cultural expressions that contribute most to America’s culture war. He writes,

The development and articulation of more elaborate systems of meaning and the vocabularies that make them coherent are more or less exclusively the realm of the elites. They are the ones who provide the concepts, supply the grammar, and explicate the logic of public discussion. They are the ones who define and redefine the meaning of public symbols and provide the legitimating or delegitimizing narratives of public figures or events. In all these ways and for all these reasons, it is they and the strategically placed institutions they serve that come to frame the terms of the public discussion.¹⁹¹

It is from “social dissensus” that the activists can “constitute the white-hot core of difference and dissensus.” Ultimately it is because the activist is disproportionately incentivized and motivated to do so.¹⁹² Average Americans are left on the sidelines, probably somewhere in the middle, but Hunter argues “this does not mean that there are no politically significant cleavages in the culture – or in popular opinion, as it turns

¹⁸⁸ James Davison Hunter and Allan Wolfe. *Is There a Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life (Pew Forum Dialogue Series on Religion and Public Life)*(New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 27.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 12, 19.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 28.

¹⁹² Ibid. 26-27.

out.”¹⁹³ So many thinkers in the past have warned that silent majorities transfer power to the tyrannical, that only the expressions of individuals can check manifestations of absolute power.

The culture of narcissism is marked by an indifferent mass middle with extremism on either side. It is the polarized camps of orthodox and progressives – with their elites leaning toward objective moral dogmas or the absurd – that sets the stage for the culture war. By-in-large American culture has bought at full price the premises of enlightenment liberalism’s epistemology, and if we can generalize the various expressions of mass culture into one overarching expression, it is one of conflict between these two uncompromising visions. Of course this division leads to cultural anxiety which only serves to perpetuate the rational disposition of cultural non-expression by most individuals. We can ask ourselves, what if everyone became a cultural narcissist overnight? What would that look like? What would happen to our cultural debate, and how would our collective institutions begin behaving? The answer would be that no one would engage in disclosing cultural expression unless incentivized to do so for immediate gratification. Aside from the collapse of democracy, this would lead to the intellectual and political classes as the only disclosers of cultural claims while most people would focus on themselves and their own lives. The total cultural narcissist thesis would leave a world in which the majority of people are completely estranged from participating in cultural and political debate. Only those whose vocations that rely on cultural expression would have any incentive to partake in the debate, and the debate itself would radically shift in both directions toward the absurd or the traditionalists. No one is arguing that

¹⁹³ Ibid. 24.

everyone is or ever will be total cultural narcissists, but this trend is exactly what Hunter identifies, and it is becoming more pronounced.

Hunter notes that the predominant way of evaluating culture up to the late 1970s was to consider the norms and values of society that “are composed of the attitudes and opinions, beliefs, and moral preferences of individuals. Culture, then, is the sum total of attitudes, values and opinions of the individuals making up a society.”¹⁹⁴ He goes further saying that this view is “inadequate by itself to account for the complexity of culture. Surveys evidence important social analysis, but alone they are insufficient to explain the intricacies of social life.”¹⁹⁵ The way Hunter evaluates culture emphasizes the

...patterns of culture, its institutional dimensions, its production within organizations, the artifacts it produced, the resources mobilized behind it, the elites who wielded disproportionate influence in articulating the guiding narratives, and so on. It also gave impetus to understanding public symbols and rituals, public discourse, the unspoken structures of authority, and how all of these things relate to the formation of collective identity and to the public philosophies and shared narratives that legitimate its claims... the special interest organizations, [religious] denominations, political parties, foundations, competing media outlets, professional associations, and the elites whose ideals, interests, and actions give all these organizations direction and leadership.¹⁹⁶

It is not sufficient to catalogue people’s opinions, expressed preferences, and behavior alone to account for cultural analysis; one has to investigate the roots and reasons for them. In fact, to stay at this level of cultural analysis is to stay within the geometric frame of enlightenment “reason” – like a physician who only treats obvious symptoms, never looking for the cause. The relationship between American public expression and culture can best be explained by examining the foundations and trends of American political thought, the reforms of religious changes in pluralism, the external pressures, the

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 18.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 19.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 19-21.

intellectual ideologies in the context of the time, the adaptations and developments of institutions, and the history of public policy and political movements. It is only from this conceptions of cultural analysis that the culture war can show a clear and distinct polarization. “It explains”, Hunter writes, “among other things, how it is that our public discourse becomes disembodied from (and hence larger than and independent of) the individual voices that give it expression. In this way it explains how our public discourse becomes more polarized than Americans as people are.”¹⁹⁷

The culture war is marked by difference in society’s quest for consensus. It is a cultural conflict that defines the age. Hunter defines cultural conflict as,

...political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding. The end to which these hostilities tend is the domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all others... They are not merely attitudes that can change on a whim but basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness by the people who live by them.¹⁹⁸

Hunter says that the term culture war is a “metaphor, and the appropriateness of any metaphor is measured by how well it fits the subject it describes. To those who engage in this conflict – the activists who are involved in the divisions and the citizens who get caught up in its logic – this is just the right metaphor.”¹⁹⁹ The social sciences tend to miss the larger picture and ignore this kind of cultural analysis. He points out,

In this case, the denial of difference is a denial of the particularities in social ontologies that define these normative communities. The ideals, practices, and sources of moral authority that constitute collective identity and solidarity are simply ignored. In social life these are by no means the only differences between groups, communities, and societies, but they are, perhaps, the deepest differences – differences that often enough engender hatred and hostility. For the social sciences, this is not merely a lapse but a missed opportunity. Indeed,

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 21.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 42.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 35.

on the international scene, we in America and the West are paying a price for our longstanding blindness to these deep normative differences.²⁰⁰

The fact that the mass public is usually politically inconsequential²⁰¹ because the combatants of the culture war are a small percentage of the whole²⁰² should not be ignored by the cultural analyst and the fact that “war efforts are frequently geared toward mobilizing the ambivalent masses”²⁰³ should not be ignored by the political scientist. Hunter took heed of these trends and analyzed culture in this way, and found “the majority of Americans were not self-conscious partisans actively committed to one side or the other but rather constituted a soft middle that tended one way or inclined toward another.”²⁰⁴

Hunter and Marsden are both concerned with America’s pluralistic beliefs that come to define a consensual public philosophy. George M. Marsden focuses his book, *Religion and American Culture* (1990), on the topics of Protestantism, secularization, and pluralism throughout United States’ history with themes of natural paradoxes in the extremely religious and diversified culture of America. Marsden writes, “The United States is not simply one culture, just as it is not based on one religion. Rather, it is an amalgamation of many subcultures. At the same time, however, almost all of the subcultures do eventually take on common American traits, so that in a sense, there is also one common American culture.”²⁰⁵ How is it possible that citizens of an overwhelmingly religious country like America can know so little about their own religions? How is it possible to be so secularized and so religious at the same time? If one

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 35-36.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 32.

²⁰² Ibid. 31.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 33.

²⁰⁵ George M. Marsden. *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing co., 2000), 6.

uses Hunter's approach of cultural analysis to America's history of religious pluralism, one will see at least three main shifts in religious belief systems that have influenced political culture and vice versa.

7. THE CULTURE WARS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MEASURING THE CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

Hunter explains that there have been at least three major culture wars in America. The first can be identified with the colonists of America who were diverse under an umbrella of a common Protestantism. The dissention, distrust, and resentment between them was resolved with the agreement to “forge a new vision that would inform all the major institutions of public life.”²⁰⁶ The solution that was derived in public life was a lowest-common-denominator Protestantism to inform society. Marsden explains that American cultural identity before 1865 was predominantly defined by white majority Protestantism. The settlers of America created a democratic society based on Protestant religious views that opposed major religious institutions in England after the Reformation. Puritanism strived to correct what they perceived as wrong in the Church of England, making a “City on hill,” meaning that their society would be made to coincide with moral laws established by God’s Word and Covenants as an example to the world for a model society. This cultural ethos resonates through the foundation of government, religion, and culture to the present day. The emergence of Pre-Civil War Christian denominations were from mostly middle-class persons with 85% of the reforms having

²⁰⁶ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 69.

some connection to Protestant evangelicalism, and the majority of the reforms had to do with the “ongoing Puritan spirit of civic responsibility.”²⁰⁷

According to Hunter the second major American culture war begins in the 1830s²⁰⁸ with the considerable influx and immigration of Catholics and Jews. Marsden, on the other hand, sees the shift starting in 1865 with the end of the Civil War²⁰⁹, but by either account, it was around that time that a major shift in American public philosophy occurred. The Catholic and Jewish population explosion disrupted the balance of the common Protestantism regulating society. As the immigrants became successful, they were no longer quiet about living in a nation defined with them as outsiders. The consequential outcome for public life was more religious tolerance, a redefinition, an amalgamation of pluralistic influences, a leveling, to a Judeo-Christian national consensus. It became a deeply biblical ethos by the commonalities between the three faiths.

This consensus did not last long. It is safe to say that by the 1960s the new culture war had emerged. There was a rise of new faiths, secularism, and a waning of denominational loyalties. Hunter writes, “Religious and cultural pluralism expanded after the war, as religious traditions native to Asia and the Middle East began to appear in the United States in greater numbers.”²¹⁰ Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Mormons became more prevalent after World War II, and furthermore, there were more diverse “sectarian

²⁰⁷ George M. Marsden. *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing co., 2000), 108.

²⁰⁸ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 69.

²⁰⁹ George M. Marsden. *Religion and American Culture* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing co., 2000), 108.

²¹⁰ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 73.

expressions of traditional faiths.”²¹¹ There were more faiths and even more divisions of them.

There were more secularists, people who claimed to have no religious affiliation. By 1952 secularists comprised 2 percent of the population, and by roughly 1990, 11 percent. Hunter writes,

[H]uman well-being becomes the ultimate standard by which moral judgments and policy decisions are grounded, and the paramount aim to which all human endeavor aspires. Particularly prominent in this general orientation are the ethical themes of autonomy and freedom, especially as expressed in the notion of individual or minority self-determination.²¹²

Secularism was the fastest growing community of “moral conviction in America” when Hunter was writing in 1979. These new lines in a culture war cross ecclesiastical and theological divisions. They are passionate stances taken on political issues, and because they are based on fundamental beliefs, there is no room for compromise.

The new culture war is an ongoing cultural conflict to shape the culture of America, to mold its character. Hunter explains, “The most recent expansion of pluralism signifies the collapse of the long-standing Judeo-Christian consensus in American public life.”²¹³ The ongoing conflict is a “rudimentary realignment of pluralist diversity.”²¹⁴

Hunter writes,

[T]he culture war emerges over fundamentally different conceptions of moral authority, over different ideas and beliefs about truth, the good obligation to one another, the nature of community and so on. It is, therefore, cultural conflict at its deepest level... This is a conflict over how we are to order our lives together. This means that the conflict is inevitably expressed as a clash over national life itself... what America is really all about... [W]e come to see that the contemporary culture war is ultimately a struggle over national identity – over the meaning of America, who we have been in the past, who

²¹¹ Ibid. 74.

²¹² Ibid. 76.

²¹³ Ibid. 76.

²¹⁴ Ibid. 77.

we are now, and perhaps most important, who we, as a nation, will aspire to become in the new millennium.²¹⁵

The new culture war has an impact on almost all American social institutions: family, education, law, politics etc.²¹⁶ In it, people use different criterion to determine good, bad, right, and wrong. There are different understandings of moral authority. Different valuations of meaning are applied to the same words, the same world. People cannot effectively argue or even express their disagreements. It should be no surprise that this realignment of pluralistic diversity has drastically altered our national dialogue, our public school systems, and as a result under a secular society, our cultural and religious literacy rates. Without basic knowledge politics becomes gridlocked, the public feels that they can't change it, and they can't successfully convey political proposals even if they gathered enough gumption to do so. At the root, and most divisive, is the dichotomy of what he terms *progressivism* versus *orthodoxy*.

History is understood in different ways by the orthodox and progressives. An orthodox understanding of the founding of America tends to emphasize biblical tradition. America's birth comes from *divine will* and is an "embodiment of Providential wisdom."²¹⁷ It is founded by an ordained God with Christian principles and ideas. The government is based on biblical principles with an authority granted *by* God. On the other hand, Hunter asserts, "Those on the progressive side of the cultural divide rarely, if ever, attribute America's origins to the actions of a Supreme Being. The National Education Association, for example, insists that "when the Founding Fathers drafted the Constitution with its Bill of Rights, they explicitly designed it to guarantee a secular,

²¹⁵ Christopher Lasch. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 49-51.

²¹⁶ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 50-51.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* 109.

humanistic state.”²¹⁸ They find the American mind “by its nature and tradition, skeptical, irreverent, pluralistic, and relativistic”.²¹⁹ America, in this conception, is founded in a secular vision.

Orthodox and progressives have different understandings of freedom and justice. An orthodox understanding emphasizes a free society without despotism; “freedom of a society to govern itself – what philosopher Charles Taylor called “civic freedom””.²²⁰ This conception of freedom stresses economic self-determination and free enterprise, and it reserves the right to “pursue economic gain without government interference... the right to own property, to work hard, to achieve, to earn, and to win.”²²¹ These beliefs are grounded on the notion that they come from the bible and the Word of God. Hunter writes, “Justice is generally defined in terms of the Judeo-Christian standards of moral righteousness.”²²² It is defined by biblical morality.

Progressive conceptions of freedom and justice are understood in terms of individual freedom and equality. The Constitution and Bill of Rights are not absolutes given by God or rooted in Nature, but the Constitution is a living document open to a changing and evolving society. Law is an expression of human rationality, not a theocentric reflection of objective truth by God. The conception of freedom on the progressive side of the cultural divide is individualistic liberal freedom in a *negative sense*. It is a “condition in which the individual is granted immunity from interference by others in his life, either by state or church or by other individuals.”²²³ Justice is

²¹⁸ Ibid. 113.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid. 110.

²²¹ Ibid. 111.

²²² Ibid. 112.

²²³ Ibid. 114.

understood as equality and fairness, a prevention of social inequities and embracement of diversity. It is the responsibility of government to promote compassionate public policies to ensure fairness. Hunter concludes, “Where *cultural conservatives* tend to *define freedom economically* (as individual economic initiative) and *justice socially* (as righteous living), *progressives* tend to *define freedom socially* (as individual rights) and *justice economically* (as equity).”²²⁴

There are different orthodox and progressive understandings of moral authority, fundamental assumptions about divinity, metaphysics, existence, ethics, epistemology, and how to order our lives. “[A]ll individuals ground their views of the world within some conception of moral authority”,²²⁵ Hunter writes. All people have unproven presuppositions, but what unites and divides people’s opinions of public issues most essentially and “unites the orthodox and the progressive across tradition and divides the orthodox and progressive within tradition are different formulations of moral authority.”²²⁶ Moral authority is crucial to understanding the divide.

The orthodox communities appeal to a common commitment to transcendence. Hunter describes this as “a dynamic reality that is independent of, prior to, and more powerful than human experience.”²²⁷ There is a supernatural authority that is revealed through sacred texts, and morality is true and definable under God. Based on this conception certain truths are non-negotiable and affect opinions held about issues in public life. Different religions and denominations may have disagreements, but the orthodox seek moral truths with an objective standard.

²²⁴ Ibid. 115.

²²⁵ Ibid. 119.

²²⁶ Ibid. 120.

²²⁷ Ibid.

The Progressives base their moral authority in “the symbolization of historical faiths and philosophical traditions”²²⁸ but view it in a way that is compatible with historical change.”²²⁹ Morality is not something to be discovered but something that is invented. It is a rational derivation of rules for people to get along and be happy. It is a human invention that is adaptable to new circumstances, can change and develop, and is a reflection of contemporary experience. It is conditional and relative.

This divide is at the heart of the culture war, and it is unlikely there will soon be a settlement. These beliefs have polarized two separate worlds made by two distinct cultural systems. Hunter asserts, “The reality of politics and public policy in a democracy is, for better or worse, compromise born out of public discussion and debate.”²³⁰ But people on different sides of this culture war have different conceptions of reality that employ a fundamentally different moral vocabulary, different conceptions of being and purpose. The non-negotiable nature of their languages leaves debate impossible. Activists participating in the culture war can only talk *past* each other.

Primary cultural narcissism finds its expression as the public philosophy of the unencumbered self. Pathological cultural narcissism is analogous to the pathological narcissism that you find in an individual. Just as pathological narcissism is a regression to primary narcissism, pathological cultural narcissism is a regression to the public philosophy of the unencumbered self. Insofar as collective expressions are affected by the culture of narcissism they can be said to be exhibition pathological cultural narcissism. Pathological narcissism results in undesired behavior from a sense of self-unity or a sense

²²⁸ Ibid. 122.

²²⁹ Ibid. 123.

²³⁰ Ibid. 129.

of worthlessness. Pathological cultural narcissism results in undesired behavior²³¹ from collective institutions. Pathological cultural narcissism finds its expression as popular non-expression with the agenda-setting extremes of rational subjectivism or traditional objective moral values on either side. Polarization of this kind happens from the uncaring mass middle and void within. Testing for the prevalence of the culture of narcissism is therefore a difficult task. How is the cultural analyst supposed to measure cultural non-expression? If you survey for it you have already defeated yourself. It would be fun to test all the individual congressmen for narcissism for example, but this does not provide substantive test for mass culture. Others have used survey data from individuals or measured trends in normative behavior, but Hunter's method is important because if it is applied to popularized issues over time, non-expression can be measured by the degree of polarization evidenced. In this way Hunter's cultural analysis can be used to measure how much affect the culture of narcissism has had on collective behavior and belief.

One example of how the culture of narcissism affects a major social institution are the observable trends in American Christianity. I want to be clear that I am not saying that Christians, secularists, atheists, or any denomination is inherently narcissist, but Christianity is the most popular religion in America and makes the ideal sample for applying Hunter's analysis and seeing if it is becoming more polarized. In this way one can hypothesize that the culture of narcissism is affecting Christian belief and Christian institutions in America. If it is true that the culture of narcissism is becoming more prevalent then Christian belief in America, a subject often written about and studied,

²³¹ I am referring here to Sandel's two fears. Michael Sandel. *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.

should show trends of the culture of narcissism's effects. My goal here is not to provide exhaustive evidence on the matter but to merely begin showing how it could be done.

When evaluating the current trends in American Christianity three trends become evident. First, one has to take notice of the progression of secularization. Christianity in America is losing membership to secularism and atheism. Second, the only denomination experiencing significant growth is Non-Denominationalism and Christian Unspecified. Third, there are minor trends of growth in the charismatic forms of Christianity. The American Religious Identification Survey of 2008 (ARIS)²³², from 54,461 respondents, found that from 1990 to 2008 Americans claiming to be Christian declined from 86% to 76%. The researchers Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar found that membership in Christian denominations were in steady decline over this period ranging from anywhere from 0.0% – 5.8% and on the whole, non-Catholic Christian sects declined a total of 9.0%. Catholicism declined 1.2%. But there are three exceptions: 1). Pentecostal Unspecified grew 0.6%. 2). Evangelical/Born Again Christians grew 0.6%. 3). Most anomalous, Non-Denominational Christians and Christians Unspecified grew by 6.0%. One will notice that the decline in Christian belief in America has slowed considerably compared to the 1990s. For our purposes it is even more telling that Christians are by vast margins becoming more Non-Denominational or to a much lesser extent Evangelical and Pentecostal.

Thomas Ross investigates attachment theory in his paper, "Attachment and Religious Beliefs – Attachment Styles in Evangelical Christians." He argues that attachment to God can be measured analogously, as a psychologist might measure

²³² Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. "[AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION SURVEY \(ARIS\) 2008](#)" (PDF). Hartford, Connecticut, USA: Trinity College. Retrieved 2009-04-01.

attachment processes in a parent-child relationship.²³³ People may substitute their bad attachment experiences with an alternative source (God) for emotional and psychological security. Ross's hypothesis tests a person's perception of self against their attachment modes. Interestingly, Ross discovers that the Evangelical Christians had high scores of over 80% secure attachment styles.²³⁴ He notes that this is 20% higher than the population average (58% autonomous attachment classifications, van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenberg, 1996).²³⁵ Ross concludes, "It is likely that individuals claiming to be born-again have established a close relationship with God as an attachment figure, influencing the perception of real interpersonal relationships... support the compensation hypothesis in that God as a good and caring father figure compensates for experience of individual insufficiency or weakness."²³⁶ It has been shown elsewhere in an interdenominational study that spirituality has a positive correlation with healthy narcissism or a healthy sense of self, especially among people over 50.²³⁷ The church members tested high in categories of greed for praise and admiration, longing for ideal self-object, inferiority, and symbiotic self-protection. This is a far cry from evidence that Evangelicals, Charismatic, or any denominations are inherently more narcissistic, but it is evidence that narcissists can readily find shelter in Charismatic religious communities of high attachment styles.

Hunter's cultural analysis can be used to test if the culture of narcissism is affecting Christian belief in America. Cultural narcissism as a rational disposition leads

²³³ Thomas Ross. "Attachment and Religious Beliefs – Attachment Styles in Evangelical Christians," *Journal of Health and Religion* 46 (2007): 75.

²³⁴ Ibid. 79.

²³⁵ Ibid. 81.

²³⁶ Ibid. 81-82.

²³⁷ Paul Wink, Michele Dillon, and Kristen Fay. "Spiritual Seeking, Narcissism, and Psychotherapy: How Are They Related?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (June, 2005): 155.

to three generalized actors in the culture war: the absurdist, the traditionalist, or the ambivalent middle-man. On a facial examination of the trending data we see that secularism is growing in large numbers, that within Christianity there is a significant increase non-denominationalism, and that Charismatic forms of Christianity are slightly growing while all other denominations are in decline. Could it be true that secularists are more inclined to progressivist rational subjectivism, that non-denominationalists tend to be culturally non-expressive, or that Charismatic Christians are inclined to strongly defend traditional beliefs? Given proper research parameters, Hunter's method could be used to determine the nature of belief institutions in America and to what degree they're polarized. A successful application of Hunter's method to cultural narcissism within Christianity could be expanded to better map the political and social polarization within America.

I think Hunter does well in describing the current state of political affairs. It is because the attitude of cultural narcissism is becoming more and more present (informed by the public philosophy of the unencumbered self) that the political debates are estranged and disconnected for the public. This gives rise to the feelings that Sandel described – that we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives. In this way the culture of narcissism perpetuates itself as it is both cause and consequence of its own condition. People recognize the fact that they are left out of the public debate and so, in turn, choose not to care or not to culturally express themselves, but it is exactly this attitude that is responsible in the first place. The polarization of our cultural expressions would not be as prevalent without the culture of narcissism. As the culture of narcissism progresses, political polarization increases. This results in pathological institutions,

extremely biased media, but most importantly, the dynamism of the culture of narcissism itself.

Hunter's cultural analysis is so important for understanding the culture of narcissism. The other methods of showing how much the culture of narcissism is spreading or how it is becoming normalized into culture are disparate micro-analyses that can only be connected with each other by saying that the various trends are happening simultaneously. Hunter's method provides the cultural analyst (and potentially the social scientist as well) with a framework and means for testing non-expression by mass culture in cultural issues. In this way, institutions, political parties, competing businesses dealing with cultural issues,²³⁸ political movements, and religious faiths and denominations can all be tested for cultural narcissism over time on a grand scale.

²³⁸ David Callahan. *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead* (New York: A Harvest Book, 2004).

8. CONCLUSION

Primary cultural narcissism as the public philosophy of the unencumbered self is both cause and consequence of the culture of narcissism. Narcissism has a primary and secondary definition. Primary narcissism has the two hallmarks of a longing to be free from longing and a yearning for uniqueness. Secondary narcissism is pathological and a regression toward primary narcissism. It expresses itself in the individual as either an experience of omnipotent self-unity or an experience of fragmented worthlessness.

Cultural narcissism is a rational attitude of non-expression in the public square unless the individual is incentivized to do so for immediate gratification. Cultural narcissism is the logical conclusion of the culture of narcissism and the culture of narcissism is the logical conclusion of cultural narcissism and both are connected in that they lead on to the other.

Cultural narcissism finds its expression as non-expression in the public square. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self is the purest expression of cultural narcissism. Therefore it can be understood as primary cultural narcissism. The public philosophy of the unencumbered self has two defining hallmarks – one should be neutral about particular matters of the good life in cultural expression and choice itself is the highest and only right. It manifests in anthropology of the unencumbered self and the liberalism of the unencumbered self, both based on fractured and incoherent foundations. Just as primary narcissism in the individual can't possibly satisfy the longing to be free from longing or the yearning for absolute uniqueness, much less the combination of the two

together, the public philosophy of the unencumbered self is characterized by its inability to homogenize the ideals of absolute choice and public moral neutrality. The individual identity is fractured just as the political institutions anxiously resting on debased foundations. This leads to a cultural sense of anxiety from the unresolved nature of mutually exclusive theories.

Primary cultural narcissism is a rational disposition and can be justified in enlightenment “reason”. Commonly accepted enlightenment epistemological premises define “reason” in a geometric conception, including nominalism, and ultimately, the project ends up searching for simple and secure foundations in materialism. All this is combined with epistemological manicheanism – holding as an absolute that if something cannot be proven with certainty that it is simply not true. This leads the liberalism of the unencumbered self to find justification in the ends of absolute choice and government neutrality. Holding these political ideals leads the mass culture to believe that they should not culturally express themselves in the particular or express ideas about the good life. Holding these truths is thought to be the definitive answer for all ills, but the attitude of cultural narcissism ends with the individual in a state of moral noncognitivism. Furthermore, enlightenment reason combined with its epistemology cannot justify any reason for why an individual should be obligated to anything beyond, outside, or antecedent to choice. The cultural narcissist is an unencumbered self. This realization leads to three possible conclusions concerning cultural matters – that it’s absurd, that holding objective moral truths are improvable, or that these matters are best left to the elites and it is better to concern oneself with one’s own particular life. With cultural narcissism as the norm, activists and cultural elites set the agenda for public debate and

deliberation. Most political issues become estranged from the majority of individuals. The result is a further justification for the rational attitude of the culture of narcissism.

Many have written on the topic of the culture of narcissism and used methods for evidencing certain malaises consequences, and cultural trends. It's hard to deny that the culture of narcissism is a current phenomenon or that it's becoming more prevalent. Hunter identifies a way of showing polarization in mass culture. This polarization relies on an ambivalent mass middle or cultural void from within, and where there is polarization it is likely that the culture of narcissism is having an effect. In this way Hunter provides another method for testing where and to what degree the culture of narcissism is affecting cultural expressions and collective institutions. Hunter argues that at least three culture wars have taken place in defining American pluralistic belief. The current culture war is defined by a division between the orthodox and progressives. This is directly tied to enlightenment epistemology's conclusions that the absurd or groundlessly adhering to objective moral truths seem to be the only options when fully thought out. The possibilities for applying Hunter's cultural analysis in testing for the culture of narcissism abound. I used American Christianity as a cursory example of how it could begin to be applied. It could be employed on any popularized issue that deals with cultural belief, major political issues, samples of private associations, political movements, corporate structures, or collective institutions. If Hunter's cultural analysis was applied with more frequency in the social sciences, understanding the extent of the culture of narcissism – its growth and consequences – would become identifiable and measurable.

The implications of the culture of narcissism are profound. As long as the unencumbered self is rationally justifiable there may be no reason to vote, no reason to care or participate in politics, or no reason to have moral obligations to others. It should be no wonder why students come to the classroom at the beginning of the semester seeming to uniformly express a dismissive subjectivism or ethical relativism with no experience from state schooling using logical or moral arguments. Furthermore, it should be no surprise that students can't seem to recall or integrate basic cultural and religious facts. The potential consequences of the culture of narcissism should be of great concern. It leads to the erosion of democratic social conditions required for democracy to function, to political and institutional paralysis and stagnation, to rights theory thrown into the abyss of incoherency, to the degradation and disconnection of public debate,²³⁹ to the inability of most Americans to actualize political volition, to the absence of goals in the quest for social consensus, to the potential of moral nihilism, to a collapse of intellectual horizons, to a cult of non-conformity, to the expansion of the state, to the inability of cultural progress, to one polarized group dominating the other,²⁴⁰ to an inability to feel, and to the absolutization of power.²⁴¹ If there is a silver lining it is that these trends are not set in stone and the fact that culture has accepted this public philosophy so quickly and to such an extent is evidence that it can be changed. By utilizing the knowledge gained in a further understanding of the culture of narcissism the current trends can be altered, and in turn, it may inform a re-evaluation of the way we understand Reason.

²³⁹ David T. Canon, John J. Coleman, and Kenneth R Mayer. *Faultlines: Debating the Issues in American Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 2004).

²⁴⁰ Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler. *Authoritarianism & Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge: Camnridge University Press, 2009).

²⁴¹ Bertrand de Jouvenel. *On Power: The Natural History of Its Growth* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1945).

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