

SELF-ESTEEM VERSUS SELF-IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

We want to discuss in this very short and modest article about some human types. In order to do that we do not have to multiply the inherent human diversity and arrive at ten types as does Dexter Dias in his *The Ten Types of Human* [1]. Not that there would be something wrong with that, but it is, at least from our point of view, simpler to discuss only two types or rather directions. Even respecting all the findings of modern neurosciences or evolutionary psychology (presented by Dexter Dias in his very interesting book) we can reduce human psychological adaptation to two main directions, namely those reigned by self-importance and those oriented towards self-esteem. Both are necessary adaptations of humans to their environment, a medium that is predominantly social. And society, as we well know, is a great body in front of which the individual has to maintain oneself in order to survive, to live, to grow as a person and maybe even to be happy. In our modern and stressful world, always on the run, always pushing further and further into a progress that is already beyond comprehension, the idea of being happy sounds, we can feel it very clearly, kind of strange and out of place. But, of course, here intervenes the unilateral perspective of self-importance, the one heavily and intensely promoted by our unhinged way of postmodern life. And, fortunately or unfortunately, this unhinged and fastidious postmodern perspective is everywhere, even on the cover of the above-mentioned book. It says, on the cover: "Think Sapiens and triple it!" (Julia Hobsbawm). How can you "triple" a book? Or is it just about its meaning or the effect it has or had on the reader? Hard to say, after all, but it is totally and completely postmodern in its intention and perfectly adapted to our so ubiquitous self-importance. We feel already in advance: if we read Dias's book, we will be somehow (maybe miraculously?) multiplied, or at least tripled. Maybe, we should and could feel superior ("tripled", once we read the book) and, consequently, parade our self-importance in front of others. Who knows? Henceforth we will try to draw a line in order to distinguish between self-importance and the more rare and elusive capacity for or achievement of self-esteem.

Key words: self-importance, self-esteem, *persona*, false stroke, *ego*.

1. INTRODUCTION

*Napoleon went forth to seek virtue,
since she was not to be found, he got power.*
J.W. Goethe

Are we really lost, meaning lost as in the series “Lost”? Or, are we just lost to ourselves, systematically and systemically? That could be the question this article will try to tackle with.

There is nothing new if we say that the contemporary citizen of the world, or at least that of the western world, is not very well. Most of them are highly neurotic if not addicted to some item going from food to drugs, from gaming to crediting and so on, depressive, suicidal, or at least dependent on one or more offers as in the compulsory buying things they don't really need. They are lost indeed, but not on an island in the South Pacific. They are lost in the intricacies of modern life itself, in all its offers, temptations, and innumerable sources of alienation, in all its desperate loneliness and despair, in a society and a social fabric that inspires a systematic neuroticism (one that has become, in the meantime, ‘functional’). As long as it is only neurosis, as in the ‘normal’ everyday-like neurosis, it is not a very big problem – that is what is actually considered ‘normality’. For instance, it is not a problem to live on a constant and reiterated manic-depressive curve, or its ups and downs of every day: going to work, coming home, on and on, ad infinitum. Or the workdays and the celebrated and much awaited weekends. Or the annual worktime and the holydays planned in advance. That manic-depressiveness of the roller-coaster life is nowadays considered as being the norm and, as such, normality. The ups and downs mentioned above are so normal that nobody pays any attention to the fact that our society in all its dimensions is sickening people by pushing them into a ‘normalized’ manic-depressiveness. And, as long as such a bipolar-ness has to be compensated (and in most cases over-compensated) by buying and consuming, it becomes a desirable or at least ‘beneficial’ tendency, one that has to be maintained if not encouraged.

If that is normality, if something so degrading for the human spirit is considered normality, what is then pathology? Where does illness, as in psychological or psychiatric problems, begin?

For every therapist or psychotherapist, it should be very clear that:

One cannot touch or try to resolve psychological problems or the complicated issues of self-importance; and that is true for the therapist as well as for the clients of any strictly psychological therapy form. Why would that be so? We can discern many motives but, for the beginning we should discuss, in the following, the more important ones.

First of all, because self-importance makes you, more or less, the ‘number one’ and that is an existential position nobody can touch or even get close to it. From that superior position of ‘number one’, one sees the world of others at one’s feet, literally and figuratively speaking. Consequently, there are, from such a unilateral perspective, two categories of people: the number one, namely himself, and all ‘the others’ or the rest of them – anonymous, unimportant, negligible.

Secondly, because self-importance is, as the name itself already implies it, impervious or impermeable to discussion, questioning, rethinking, or ‘rewriting’ (psychotherapeutically). Self-importance is a closed territory, something like a fortress surrounded by high and impenetrable walls, surrounded also by a deep ditch of water nobody can pass.

Thirdly, because self-importance is something artificial and as such unnatural, it is not something oriented towards oneself and one’s own problems (in fact, there are none seen), but rather it is only a self-presenting or a showcase oriented towards the public, essentially to ‘the others’, in order to get something in exchange: applause, appraisal, validation, or whatever they can reflect on you in order to (re)enhance your self-importance.

Fourthly, everybody (or pretty much everybody) wants to be important (“someone important, like an actor”, as Cypher says in Matrix [2]), everybody wants to be somebody. The only problem is that there are so many ‘somebodies’, and every ‘somebody’ is so important that he or she cannot be ignored, put aside, or neglected, because everybody is desperately craving to be important, to shine, and to be in the first line, on a podium, or a pedestal. Consequently, no one will have the time, the disposition, or the attention needed to pay attention or to validate others. As such, the personal evolution of the individual is impeded, because, as George E. Vaillant indicates:

“Ego development reflects our ongoing striving to allow the self-diminishing sin of *projection* to evolve towards the self-expanding virtue of *empathy*. This process of ego development simultaneously involves self-deception and the growth of wisdom and creativity.” [3] (author’s underline).

But, if everyone is surrounded by the high walls of one’s own self-importance, the discussion about empathy is out of the question. Self-importance does not invite towards self-diminishing, on the contrary. In fact, beyond those high walls of one’s own importance there is nothing more to see, perceive, or understand, there only are ‘the others’, those who are supposed to validate and appreciate one’s own magnificence.

That is the narrow perspective from the inside of the wonderful castle of self-importance. However, if we look better to the surroundings, we will not see spectators there, ready to appreciate us, but rather other castles, pretty much as our own. Consequently, those ‘others’ have the same distorted view as ours, everyone from his or her own castle with their own high walls of self-importance. And, it is not easy to step out or to leave those protecting walls. That would be to take a leap of faith, and to grow, to abandon the childish projections and the constant need of being cared for, for the sake of evolution and self-development. Unfortunately, there is a very common misunderstanding about growing (physically and psychologically), adulthood, and continuous self-development. This misunderstanding, or rather misinterpretation, was very clearly exposed by M. Scott Peck in “The Road Less Travelled”:

“Growing up is the act of stepping from childhood into adulthood. Actually it is more of a fearful leap than a step, and it is a leap that many people never really take in their lifetimes. Though they may outwardly appear to be adults, even successful adults, perhaps the majority of ‘grown-ups’ remain until their death psychological children who have never truly separated themselves from their parents and the power that their parents have over them.” [4]

And, as we all know, it is not very easy to be a fully grown-up. It is not easy to bring into adulthood all your personality, all its levels, intricacies or the hidden and childish wants and whims of a very basic, but totally insufficient, maladaptive, and unilateral ‘pleasure principle’ – not from the position of self-importance any way.

2. HOW DOES SELF-IMPORTANCE LOOK LIKE?

We should recognise, once and for all, the complete artificiality and falsity of the construct called ‘self-importance’ and realize that it is, at least à la longue, an untenable existential position. It is one that can bring not only a lot of problems in the life of an individual, but also, pain, suffering, and even illness, psychological or physical. But then, we could ask, how is it that so many of our contemporary citizens are living their lives under the powerful umbrella of self-importance? How is it that such a pernicious existential *modus operandi* has an almost total power over millions and millions? Couldn’t we discern here some sort of inconsistency between the vast majority of the same psychological frame of mind (adopted as a survival mechanism) and the crooked and deceiving logic involved in it? How is it that so many people live under the magical spell of self-importance? Or, how can so many people live under the influence, or even the coercion, of an artificial creation of the human psychology? Why would that be so? And, is it just a psychological problem or rather a socio-psychological one? It

seems that there is more involved here than meets the eye because, as Jordan Peterson indicates:

“If you are a miserable and disorganized fool, producing chaos wherever you go, it is tremendously painful to recognise yourself—and to see the enormity of the job ahead of you. It is very difficult to replace delusional identification with the persona with clear-headed apprehension of the real (and insufficient) individual personality. This clearer vision or conception is something attained at no small cost (and this says nothing about the cost of transforming that conception into action). [5]

Maybe, some help to understand or to solve this problem, we may extract from that interesting concept of ‘plastic strokes’, or counterfeit strokes as conceived by the Transactional Analysis. And when we say “plastic strokes” we also mean it quite literally, because we are living in a civilization of plastic, surrounded (smothered) by cheap plastic that comes in all shapes and colours and has displaced most of the natural materials humans were accustomed to for millennia. In addition, plastic is so versatile, it can be moulded in any form or shape, and can be easily imprinted with whatever is needed to attract our attention, to grab our mind and, ultimately, to sell a product. Plastic, as such, is the perfect modern tool our society has invented to promote its crooked values and to sell its commercial paradigm to millions and millions of people. Plastic is, in fact, the perfect metaphor for a society that has dislodged itself from the natural and plunged, head first, into the artificiality and the virtuality of the new millennium.

The equation of self-importance, although very captivating, is a fake, an artificial creation of someone who is not capable or not able to access the rather more practical approach of another equation (a completely different existential paradigm), namely that of self-esteem. Given its artificiality, self-importance has to be put in place, maintained, and constantly re-erected in order to hide what it actually is. But what is it hiding? Is it maybe the artificiality of itself, in order for nobody to see the falsity of the ‘face-lift’, or the falseness of the construct? Need those efforts to be probably doubled because one must hide its artificiality from oneself, in the first place? Or, the efforts and the great amount of psychic energy involved in maintaining such an artificiality are even greater because of the fear to be discovered and consequently exposed as a fake? Maybe all these aspects and probably even more is involved in the so complicated problematic of self-importance. No matter how much or how many of these complications and subliminal computations are involved, one thing is sure: self-importance, as a life-position – an existential option as it is –, does not allow very much freedom to the individual, because, as Carl Rogers mentions, speaking about the individual:

“He discovers how much of his life is guided by what he thinks he *should* be, not by what he *is*. Often he discovers that he exists only in response to the demands of others, that he seems to have no *self* of his own, that he is only trying

to think, and feel, and behave in the way that others believe he *ought* to think, and feel, and behave.” [6] (author’s underline)

Consequently, we may say that self-importance is like a monopoly put on the person, one that does not allow any stepping out of a preestablished behavioural pattern. Sonner or later, the individual will arrive at the clear and unmistakable conclusion, one that imposes itself upon his soul, that: “that’s it, and there’s nothing I can do about it!”. Therefore, one has no other option or alternative left open to orient oneself towards another existential paradigm. Tragically, self-importance, once it is adopted (or rather when it adopts and imposes itself on the individual), it arrests the individual in a sophisticated cage, the bars of which are made of all the items self-importance constantly needs in order to show off. In the end, it is all about the firm enclosed character of any paradigm, namely a construct defined by, contained in, and confined to its own borders. In fact, it is right there, at its borders or personal periphery, that the paradigm of self-importance is the most active and impressive. There it must shine, because there it must be all the presentation and bragging. The existential paradigm of self-importance is not defined from the interior, from the *self*, its artificiality and falseness become even more obvious when one looks at the empty interior, a psychological waste land. The self-importance paradigm is a socio-psychological construct, a mask one can acquire and adopt from the many shops of self-adulteration opened 24/7 in the economy of systematic human alienation. As Erich Fromm emphasized:

“It is the function of the social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social pattern, but one of *wanting to act as they have to act* and at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture. In other words, it is the social character’s function *to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society.*” [7] (author’s underline).

What is an individual in such a great social machinery? What is a person worth in this “purpose of the continued functioning of this society”? Is the answer to such a provocative question in the “social character’s function to mold and channel human energy” in a very precise direction or with a very poignant purpose? Because if so, we can see how empty the waste land of the modern person truly is. And, more so, how ubiquitous the external moulding process is, a moulding needed by society in order to function, but a moulding that impedes on the growth, development, or evolution of the individual. Engulfed by socially oriented and coined standards, with an a priori double-binding structure, on the one hand moulding and defining, and, on the other hand, enhancing a false sense of importance, the individual finds himself in an inescapable schizophrenogenic situation. Because, at least after the Palo Alto school of systemic family therapy, that is the result of any paradoxical injunctions, as double bindings normally tend

to be. The only reasonable refuge from paradoxical injunctions or situations is in the more comforting space offered by a psychotic decoupling from the world. It is sufficient to look how people are talking *to* their cell phones – while they have the impression that they talk to someone on the other end of the line – or having the strong impression that whatever they see in their little screen has to be real. Once we realize that, we inevitably arrive at the conclusion that they must be decoupled, most of the time, from reality in order to indulge in that sort of virtual involvement offered by the ubiquitous and inescapable screens.

On the other hand, if we look from their side to the same phenomenon, we should also take into account the mirror function of that magical little screen. What one can permanently see in the reflection of that wonderful little screen is one's own image – a perfect little pool for every contemporary Narcissus. More than that, this image of oneself is continuously feed by: 'likes', 'emojis', 'shares', and a constant and everlasting communicational stream of exchanges between all those 'other' mirroring narcissus-es on the parade of our contemporary world. As such, we can totally agree with Dan Lyons when he specifies:

“Technology should be a tool in the service of mankind, but sometimes it seems that humans are made subordinate to technology. And sometimes new technology that is supposed to make us more efficient or more productive instead slows us down and drives us nuts.” And, just to conclude about the little screens, he continues: “Thanks to technology, we work longer hours, tethered to mobile devices and the ubiquitous Internet that enable us to be on call at all times, expected to return emails at night and on weekends and to work wherever we might be.” [8]

But then, after all, why do we not see the bright side: the effect of that little screen – our own mobile device – through which every Narcissus, large or small, young or middle aged, male or female, can project their own self-importance to the whole world? Considering the powers of contemporary technology, the image of Narcissus we are speaking of, is not one singular image anymore, but it multiplies in thousands and even millions of images, easily multipliable ad infinitum by the power of a calculating machine. As such, Narcissus is in fact diminished in millions of mini Narcissus-es, nothing more, nothing less, than mere pixels on a screen near other millions of mini Narcissus-es. We see that even the importance of self-importance can be counterfeited by modern technology which will do its computations of computations to enhance that what every contemporary citizen believes they want and need more than air, more than water or food. Because once the first (lower) levels of Maslow's hierarchy are satisfied, there are the third and fourth that remain kind of open and needy. But that is not a big issue anymore as the mobile devices and the limitless access to the internet have found the ideal solution for those needs. As Abraham Maslow emphasized, there is a little problem with the needs for esteem and respect, namely:

“Satisfaction of the self-esteem need leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability, and adequacy, of being useful and necessary in the world. But thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness, and of helplessness. These feelings in turn give rise to either basic discouragement or else compensatory or neurotic trends. An appreciation of the necessity of basic self-confidence and an understanding of how helpless people are without it can be easily gained from a study of severe traumatic neurosis.” [9]

The constant search and neediness for attention, affection, love, understanding, and validation, or respect is, in fact, very energy consuming. Unfortunately for the individual involved in such a process, propelled by one’s own childhood idiosyncrasies and the constant effort to overcome them, one will not easily find a solution for the hidden roots of self-importance. Instead, the inevitable and permanent insistence of the individual – who has no alternative from the monopoly of one’s own self-importance –, the importance given to the *self* (at least to the one presented in the show-window of the world), will inevitably increase the inescapable self-importance. It is a self-increasing process, a never-ending story that gets bigger and fatter by eating itself up, in fact a true *ouroboros* – the old snake or dragon of the alchemists eating its own tail, in a perfect vicious circle. As such, we are talking of a closed system, at least from a psychological point of view, one that is self-feeding on itself but also on its constant fear of being discovered. Because, what lies in the shadow of the self-importance is a very weak self-esteem.

From a socio-psychological perspective, one has to be connected in order to feed on the attention, validation, or whatever one can grab by exhibiting oneself to the public. As such, we have a permanent tension between the ‘exhibiting tendency’, namely the histrionic one, and the all-pervasive fear of being exposed as a fake. To be in the public eye – and to acquire more and more self-importance – on the one hand, and to fear the public eye because it could see through the falseness of the mask one is wearing all the time, on the other hand, – that is the big dilemma of the falseness self-importance carries on. A mask that, we should mention it, does not seat very well on a human face – even more so when such a face is just one in a million or billion others. And, above all, even the masks resemble one another, as we are in a society where uniformization is the norm. As an example, we may think of the universalization of tattoos: once uncommon and making individuals exceptional, nowadays, when everyone wants to be an individualistic exception, pretty much everyone (who still wants to be exceptional) has at least one tattoo if not a whole series on the body.

3. RUNNING AWAY FROM ONESELF

*Everyone you meet is fighting a battle
you know nothing about.*
Robin Williams

Of course, that mask has in psychology a very famous name, it is named *persona*, and C.G. Jung spoke generously about it [10]. Self-importance connects exclusively to what we can call *persona*, or the superficial ‘photo-shopped’ *ego*-image we present to the world. But, as we very well know from Jung’s find, the *persona* is not our *ego*, and, consequently, we should not make such a serious confusion. We may roughly say that self-importance can be identified with the *persona* while self-esteem is a more special quality that addresses the *ego*, namely the core of oneself. As such, the emphasis on self-importance, or the *persona*, is nothing more than a very contemporary formula to running away from oneself, as Bob Marley, in his marvellous song, emphasized it: “You running and running, and you running away” ... “but you can’t run away from yourself” [11]. Or, in other words, you can run as much as you like – and modern life is, more or less, about running –, but you can’t run away from your-*self* because there has to be a *self* that is running away (from oneself). To solve such a paradox, we can split the personality in an *ego* and the *persona* and it is the latter that tries to run and run faster as if it were at the Olympic games, trying to win the golden medal in athletics.

Such a running ‘personality’ is the more or less perfect recipe for evading a problematic *self* – the *ego* that “can’t run away from himself”. Sadly, an unfortunate recipe that cannot and will not resolve anyone’s problems just because one has found this convenient mask or theatrical prop to hide behind. It is not only hiding oneself behind the convenient ‘face-lift’ of the self-important *persona*, but it can also conveniently hide all the fears of being discovered (as a weak self-esteem), and, maybe even more important, to hide one’s own incapacity to do something about all those inconvenient issues that burden and plague the problematic and underdeveloped *ego* for the years past and decades to come. In the end, it is not just a very complicated and never-ending process of cover-up – the fear of being discovered as a fake –, but also the constant preoccupation with one-self that has to be presented in a socially acceptable and appraisable form (if possible, with a visible tattoo). The amounts of psychic energy involved in such a multi-levelled process or constant ‘hide and seek’ game one plays with others and with oneself, are immense. Such energetical involvement is like a constant

drainage which, in the end, does not permit the individual to connect with their problems as they should be apprehended, namely by the humbler aspects of self-esteem concerning one's own *ego*.

If we look at those two aspects or exploratory directions that the *self* (our *self*) can take, it becomes very clear that self-importance is the ominous and detrimental one. The only one that can be of real help in a psychotherapeutic approach is the level of self-esteem as a fundamentally different existential positioning. Being a monopolistic life position, self-importance encloses the individual in a prison, one that is, more or less, self-made. Once arrested in this prison there is no more liberty or possibility of escaping it – one is generally arrested for life. The gates are closed, the walls erected and, as everyone else is living in a prison too, that is what normality looks like. Self-importance, being inherently very important, does not allow any step outside its own territory. The individual is not only arrested in its own prison but has no chance of getting out, because they cannot see that there is something out there. Besides one's own self-importance, there is nothing left to look or to search for, as for example self-development or evolution. Self-importance is 'self-sufficient' (as in: self-restrictive) and, consequently, frozen on its own existential floor where it continues surviving in a very conservative, stagnant, and anti-evolutionary niche. The fact that the self-important individual is permanently surrounded by 'others', and all 'the others' are like him or her, is just another aggravating factor in an already complicated socio-psychological equation. We have here another of those paradoxes of self-importance: they too, namely 'the others' involved in the same social fabric, are bursting with so much self-importance that they can hardly see that there is somebody else out there. What they all want first and foremost is validation, confirmation that they are important – paradoxically, they all are important, at least in their own eyes – and, being on the constant pursuit for applause and appreciation, they see others as mere objects who should just praise them. What are the self-important individuals getting instead from those 'others', who are at least as self-important? Only 'plastic' or false strokes, only formalities, niceties, and empty words, or polite formulas that are so superficial that they will never appease the deep need and the unquenchable thirst for something substantial as acknowledgment. As we know, we cannot live if feed with plastic, one wants natural food, proteins, fibres, etc., everything the body and the soul needs in order not only to survive, but to live, grow and evolve. Plastic strokes are not food for our *ego*, as ultra-processed food (plastic food) cannot be food for our body. Plastic food can fill the stomach but the body will not feel nourishment and will crave for more (plastic) food. And the situation is the same with plastic strokes, the soul cannot feel the nourishment and will ask for more. Plastic strokes are just another lie in our contemporary and fallacious society. A plastic stroke, say a 'like', or an 'emoji' on the internet, doesn't satisfy anybody, it just asks for more, for the endless reiteration of the same empty and senseless stuff. Consequently,

individuals who are always on the pursuit for validation, will need even more of them, thousands and thousands only to feel more unsatisfied and to reiterate the process again and again, in an endless loop.

4. SELF-ESTEEM OR RUNNING TOWARDS ONESELF

Why, after all, wouldn't we run *towards* instead of running *away*, namely running towards ourselves and not away from ourselves?

It is the constant need for *more* (as in *more* the enemy of *enough*)– a paradigmatic prescription of our modern society – that looks like being unavoidable and inescapable. One just wants *more* and *more* and no one sees the end of it. Why? Very simple: because there is no end to it! But *more* is not an absolute, *more* is just a relative term situated on an intermediary state, somewhere in-between. It is a notion that comes, or originates, in the *near* past – where there was *less* – and the *near* now, or, in a running globalized consumerism, the 'immediate future'. And those two contemporary verbal items – the *near* past and the *immediate* future – represent the turmoil that does not allow the presence of the present tense. People are living, or rather surviving, while on the run, in a very bizarre place, namely the 'peri-present'.

In our hectic world, there is no time for the present time. Nobody has the time to live the present because everyone is running away towards the *immediate* future where all our desires and wishes will come true, as they say in the advertising: "be happy with more". The present, on the other hand, has no place or time for *more* – *more* is always in the future, the next moment, the next step on the ladder or just in front of us. As such, the present cannot be satisfying, it cannot fulfil our wishes and, consequently, one must run away from it (as if possessed by a demon of haste, agitation, and restlessness).

But the present is, *par excellence*, the place for the *self*, for oneself, and most of all, for the complex process of self-esteem. Self-esteem as such can only be felt and be lived in the present, namely once one has left behind the constant search for *more*, for something else, for the new and mostly the newest. Self-esteem means to have enough, to be content with oneself, with what one has and, even more so, with what one is as a human being. The search for *more* implies a chronic maladjustment to life as it is given to us, a maladaptation to ourselves *as we are*, and not *as we are expected to be*.

And, surely, more and more of our clients in psychotherapy are not very content with themselves and with their life – they are running away, always on the running away from oneself. They are, constantly and unbending, on the search for something as if there has to be, somewhere out there, something or someone to satisfy their innermost wants or desires (NB not needs). Even psychotherapy as

such can and is assimilated and understood as a promise that could fulfil one's impossible to fulfil wants, or desires, or even whims. Psychotherapy is just another *more*, a more than one already has. It is a *more* also because you can afford it and others don't. And if they do afford it, you still can afford the best and of course the most expensive therapist in town. As we can see, there can be a lot of crescendos of *more* even in the field supposed to cure the problem caused by self-importance. And, indeed, we should not forget the wonderful formulation of Roger Waters: "It's not enough that we succeed, we still need others to fail". [12].

On the other hand, self-esteem does not need psychotherapy, simply because it does not search for more. As such, self-esteem is (self)contained, self-sufficient and autonomous. More than that, self-esteem is not on the consumer's and consumerist's societies side. Self-esteem is rather on the existential side – rather *to be* and not *to have*, as Erich Fromm, in his famous "To Have or to Be?" [13], justly differentiated it – and consequently, not a very worthy asset of the consumerist society. Self-esteem is rather a niche manifestation and, from the globalized consumerist point of view, it should stay that way. As such, the existential approach of self-esteem is just a minority with which psychotherapy does not have to much concern. Such people do not have problems with their problems. Of course, that on the other side, namely for the great majority of the self-important ones, psychotherapy becomes an accredited and much sought 'commodity'. But, once self-esteem becomes a life paradigm, such people, as Murray Bowen emphasized: "... are able to cope successfully with a broader range of human situations, and they are remarkably free from the full range of human problems." [14]. What does that mean? It simply means that such people can cope with problems that life confronts us with every day because they have organized their own lives as to get rid of the great majority of the daily problematic trivialities.

There is, between the existence of the self-important ones and that of the ones that live on the self-esteem side of things, a great and fundamental difference. Indeed, it is a gap between the two existential life positions or attitudes. A gap that is, we may say, pretty much unsurpassable not because of the distance – one that could be recuperated by continuous and constant self-development –, but rather because of two different levels of existence – levels of differentiation of the *self* (as in Bowen's theory). In order to get on the other side, namely that of self-esteem, one should do a somersault, a leap of faith, indeed, that would propel them in another existential niche. And, what should be specified right from the beginning, in fact self-esteem is not a state, a fixed existential possession but a process that reiterates every day. Self-esteem is not like an acquired good, one bought at the promotional offer of a supermarket and that can be presented for 'likes' and the like. Self-esteem cannot be owned, it is not on the level defined by 'to have', but it belongs rather to the paradigm of 'to be'.

In contrast to self-esteem, self-importance is not at all compensated, but constantly to be compensated, or – to use the proper word for a pretty elaborated psychological scheme – ‘over-compensated’.

Let us say that somebody inclined towards the superficialities of being self-important looks at the world, at others, at society. What does such a person see? To employ a concept borrowed from Transactional Analysis, we will say that such a person sees oneself as being OK. If one is OK, and that is very important, how do others look like? How can they look? Are they OK too? Or, we still need others to fail in order for us to look great and to succeed? We must make a clear differentiation here: the self-esteem based individual will present himself and the others as OK (the I’m OK you’re OK life position), and that’s the way he also feels it (congruent). On the other hand, the self-important based individual, trying hard to hide his weak self-esteem, will (falsely) present himself as OK, and the others not OK (the I’m OK you’re Not OK life position) while deep down he regards himself as not OK, the others not OK, and the situation not OK – a dangerous and precarious life position named ‘despair’ [15]. That is the position that justifies the individual to act as self-important. There is a deep need to survive, to overcome the ‘despair’ and as such we may encounter the bizarre situation in which one may reach social levels of surprising arrogance or even violence while when alone they can be rather depressed or even addicted to some substances.

Such a realization is obviously rather for the inner feelings, or the intuition, and for the forces that fabricate the parade pseudo-self that is imbued with self-importance [16]. But then, what is self-importance if not the over-compensation of such a disturbing realization? Henceforth, the existential position of self-importance has to be constantly feed with the all-important ‘plastic food’ that has calories but not nutrition. It is all about arrogance and vanity which desperately try to compensate something built on a rickety and unstable foundation. Over-compensation is put in place and continuously reinforced, not only to blind others by presenting them a socially accredited image, but also to blind oneself too, in order to believe such a lie and to continue with the falsity of self-importance.

If what the individual feels as incompleteness is realized on the level of rather concrete mental operations, the much-needed over-compensation is ‘fabricated’ out of the influx of thoughts, judgments, and constant comparisons with others, and made possible from the level of formal operations. Consequently, and bearing in mind this Piagetian perspective, we have here another hiatus in the individual psyche, where two contradictory directions are at work, each one handling different tools in quite antagonistic directions. Feelings tend to recognise the modest and humble state of the person, while rationalizations try to compensate a not so desirable issue by over-emphasizing the exteriority, the image presented in the show-window of social life, one’s possessions or status, namely the old slogan of “fame, fortune and glory”. Therefore, such people do not

preoccupy themselves with the existence considered *per se*, but rather with what life can offer them, namely the concrete things one can buy or appropriate from the supermarket economy. The intelligence involved in that process is on the concrete level of operations, one that can handle very well the offers or campaigns. Such people cannot and will not be clients of choice for an existential therapy (in the true transformative sense of such a serious approach), but they rather fit quite well into the large offer of all forms of counselling. What they are interested in is rather to be heard, they just want to talk about their all too important problems or everyday issues; it is rather about the ‘chimney sweeping’ or the ‘talking cure’ discovered by Bertha Pappenheim during her own therapy under Freud’s supervision. Such an ‘important’ individual, as in the ubiquitous self-importance, will always give the utmost importance to his own problems, no matter how trivial they are.

On the other hand, something that is so important as self-importance is (at least for all those under its spell), should not be changed or dismissed out of hand. In fact, it should not be touched at all, but left as it is, besides maybe some little and not very significant adjustments. We should know that what lies beneath is of the outmost fragility for the *self*. Self-importance, as we said earlier, is just a mask or a shield, a last resort of protection an individual can muster to preserve his or her internal fragility, uncertainty, or weakness given by the weak self-esteem.

Psychotherapy should, in such cases, reconstruct and reinforce the *ego*, as Freud himself already recognised. The client should have something to fall back to, once his or her false edifice is torn down. Although, such clients, given the circumstances of the nine-to-five life (or the rat race), are rather inclined towards the ‘more superficial’ approaches, that should not be it and cannot be all because, as David Brooks suggests:

“The answer must be to stand against, at least in part, the prevailing winds of culture. The answer must be to join a counterculture. To live a decent life, to build up the soul, it’s probably necessary to declare that the forces that encourage the Big Me, while necessary and liberating in many ways, have gone too far. We are out of balance. It’s probably necessary to have one foot in the world of achievement but another foot in a counterculture that is in tension with the achievement ethos.” [17]

That means that one can, and even should, live in two different worlds. One of those would be the internal world of self-esteem and appreciation of one’s uniqueness and the other the social and professional involvement where self-importance is in saddle as a necessary instrument of survival. Of course, that such a dichotomy is at first perceived as inauthenticity, but so is the inherent falsity of self-importance. We should not forget that psychotherapy should be, in Carl Rogers’s words:

“... the psychological conditions that are most conducive to increasing this highly important self-awareness. With greater self-awareness, a more informed

choice is possible, a choice more free from introjects, a conscious choice that is even more in tune with the evolutionary flow.” [18]

And, one page further, Roger concludes, in the most specific humanistic point of view, that:

“The crucial point is that when a person is functioning fully, there are no barriers, no inhibitions, which prevent the full experiencing of whatever is organismically present. This person is moving in the direction of wholeness, integration, a unified life. Consciousness is participating in this larger, creative, formative tendency.” [19]

And that should be everyone’s life challenge: to find a way “in the direction of wholeness” meaning integration – not of the demands of the society, or the workplace, or the social-media – but of what oneself is and can be in order to achieve a unified and integrated life. Although, at least apparently, self-importance is something expansive and does not comprise barriers or inhibitions, it is not very functional. Self-importance is not at all a ‘formative tendency’ and, if it is creative, its only creation is a functional mask that has rather the role to protect the individual (and his internal fragility and insecurity) than to allow him to fully function. It is by the involvement of self-esteem that somebody leaves habitual barriers behind and forgets all about inhibitions in order to express his or her true potential, uninhibited and unrestrained by the social calculus of conveniences or politically correctness. Such superficialities do not count any more for a liberated person. As such, self-esteem is not only an existential position of departure but also of arrival. Once someone goes for it, it will enhance itself with the help of the constant reiterations of positive feed-back loops in an ever-growing process of self-development.

5. CONCLUSIONS

*...you've gotta make your own kind of music
Sing your own special song
Make your own kind of music
Even if nobody else sings along.
Mama Cass Elliot, Make Your Own Kind of Music*

As an existential position, being self-important gives a unique and, in the same time, unilateral perspective onto the world and inevitably onto others too. If one is self-important, others cannot be in the same category! One is, consequently and undeniably, in one’s own league! Or, in other words, others cannot be as

important as oneself is, or as one has to be in order to be always above them, always one step in front of them. Even on a political level, in our liberal democracy, full of or stuffed with human rights, we have learned that the places on the podium of life are, after all, very limited. It is clear to everyone that we, no matter how liberal or democratic, cannot be, all at once, number one. The democratic ideal and the rights for all, imprinted by utilitarian and pragmatic ideas of at least one hundred years old philosophies, actually imply an oxymoron, namely the strange idea of all being ‘number ones’!

Self-importance is always on pursue for what is important: obviously and exclusively: oneself. From such a perspective there are no ‘others’, at least as equally valuable and important subjects. Indeed, self-importance in itself is already a wrong existential step. It starts from recognizing an only, unique, and all-important subject, and neglects all the others. Being self-important implies that others cannot be the same. The perspective onto the social world is fundamentally wrong and distorted. The existential inscribing of such an individual is mostly or mainly emotional and, as such, more or less irrational. And, where there is not very much reason, there cannot be much morality either, because, as Ayn Rand specified:

“The relationship of reason and morality is reciprocal: the man who accepts the role of a sacrificial animal, will not achieve the self-confidence necessary to uphold the validity of his mind—the man who doubts the validity of his mind, will not achieve the self-esteem necessary to uphold the value of his person and to discover the moral premises that make man’s value possible.” [20]

Consequently, and we may say, unavoidably, relationships are built on a precarious ground and have at their very base a built-in principle of uncertainty, a quantum reality of vast emptiness populated rather by fields of energy, but not by the ‘solid emotional matter’ or warmth we would expect from interactions among humans. For the self-important ones the value of one’s own person does not come from within; it cannot flow from the interior and the profoundness of one’s *self* because it is, by its own nature, distorted by the shallowness of its own superficiality. Morality, on the other hand, if it is to be real and ‘substantial’, is not something superficial or something one can take easily. As such, the ‘morality’ of self-importance can hardly be understood as morality itself. It is rather a pastiche which can hardly conceal its own falsity and superficiality. Anchored only in formulas and conveniences, such a ‘morality’ is no more than an empty shell or a very thin mask of politeness that tries to hide the unilateral preoccupations of a self-absorbed individual.

On the other hand, self-esteem commence from a different perspective, namely that of *esteem* and appreciation. The starting point of esteem is, of course, the self-esteem. A person that is capable to esteem oneself will be able to extend that perspective onto others as well. As such, others are understood, valued, and esteemed because, in the first place they exist, they are recognised as human

beings in their own right. They are subjects and not objects that have to look up to a singular and self-important one. From such a perspective, there are no ‘more important’ or ‘less important’ ones. A beautiful example for the previous statement is presented in George Orwell’s “Animal Farm”, where the protagonists of the novel wrought on the great wall of the farm: “All animals are equal.” [21]. That would be the existential perspective of self-esteem. But, sometimes during the night, somebody completed the simple sentence to say that: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” [22]. Indeed, that is the perspective of self-importance!

If self-esteem is virtue (meaning that it is maintained by a constantly renewed strength of character), then self-importance is power (comprises the force one has and exerts on others). In short it is just as Goethe said about Napoleon: if one does not find virtue – self-esteem – one cannot but take power instead, namely self-importance. And power is something that must be paraded with, that has to be presented to the world, as the French ‘Great Emperor’ illustrated (and, sadly, all of the dictators that were, that are, and, we may say, will be). Kipping the same context in mind, self-importance is an abuse one does on the human potential, it is actually a *coup d’état*, an anthropological *lèse majesté* for which there is a heavy praise to pay. From a Piagetian point of view, namely that of the evolution of intelligence, self-importance manifests mainly on the grounds of concrete operations stage with maybe some formal operations masquerading. On the other hand, self-esteem starts from the formal stage of adult intelligence and, as it is in a continual development process, is moving towards the post-formal levels that embrace complexity – as Ken Wilber specified in: “Integral Psychology” [23].

As such, those that are on the self-esteem trajectory of existence, are in a constant and never-ending maturity and growth process. Although it is said that “life is unfair” and we should “get used to it”, in our very core of our personalities, we cannot get used to it, we cannot resign. We strive, and fight, and learn, and go on despite all the difficulties life throws at us relentlessly. Maybe that is so, because there is a drive that originates in the innermost shrine of our temple where the self-esteem is, and not in the more superficial, colourful, and luring self-importance. Self-importance is just something that meets the eye. But life itself and the deep aspects of human psychology are more than what one can see, measure, evaluate, display on a screen or in a statistic pie.

It’s not easy to work in psychotherapy with self-important clients. First of all, because they do not usually subject themselves to psychotherapy (they do not have a problem). And, if they do, they do not search for the ‘deeper’ approaches, preferring the ‘quicker’ ones (they haven’t got the time), the ‘shallower’ ones (they want to speak and to be listened to), or maybe the ‘posher’ ones. Then, being ‘very important’ they’ll try and hijack the sessions, they will try to lead it,

and the psychotherapist as well, as far as possible from the actual issue: the lack of or the weak self-esteem. In fact, that admission is a critical point, a very dangerous moment, because once the mask is removed, the work should begin from the 'despair' position, a position prone to major issues as aggressiveness or depression, various dependencies, and sometimes the suicidal tendency. Psychotherapy should, in such cases, reconstruct and reinforce the *ego*, The client should have something to fall back to, once his or her false edifice is torn down. The psychotherapist as well should have a 'free line' to supervision or intervision as an external perspective may often be required.

In the end, such a psychotherapeutic intervention should not be an 'extraction', but rather a training for increasing the highly important self-awareness that one can, and even should, live in two different worlds. One of those would be the internal world of self-esteem and appreciation of one's uniqueness and the other the social and professional involvement where self-importance is in saddle as a necessary instrument of survival, a mix over which the client should regain his own control.

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