

PRIMARY NARCISSISM

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1. Core Definition and Formulation

Primary Narcissism is a foundational psychoanalytic concept, articulated by Sigmund Freud, which describes the initial, primordial state of the human infant. This state is characterized by the self as the sole object of libidinal investment. Before the distinction between the ego (self) and the external world is fully established, the infant directs all available psychic energy, or libido, toward itself. This orientation means that the child's immediate and exclusive concern is its own body and inner processes, rather than any external or environmental factors, establishing a period of profound self-absorption.

In this context, the term "narcissism" does not denote a pathological condition, but rather a necessary and universal developmental phase. Freud posited that the ego initially possesses all the libido, which is then gradually distributed outward to external objects (object-libido). **Primary Narcissism**, therefore, represents the reservoir of the ego-libido before this outward investment begins. It serves as the psychological baseline from which object relations--the capacity to love and relate to others--will later emerge, making it crucial for understanding both normal development and the etiology of certain psychoses and neuroses.

The core feature of this phase is the infant's experience of **omnipotence**. Due to the lack of reality testing and the immediate satisfaction of needs (often hallucinated or provided without delay), the infant perceives itself as all-powerful and the center of the universe. This sense of absolute control over internal and external realities is the psychic foundation upon which the later ego structure is built, specifically contributing to the formation of the narcissistic **ego-ideal**--the image of perfection the individual strives to achieve or maintain.

2. Historical Development in Freudian Thought

The concept of narcissism became central to Freudian metapsychology following its formal introduction in his pivotal 1914 essay, "On Narcissism: An Introduction." Before this work, Freud struggled with how to account for non-transference neuroses (such as schizophrenia), where patients seemed unable to form emotional attachments to the analyst, suggesting they lacked object-libido. **Primary Narcissism** provided the necessary theoretical link, explaining that in these conditions, the object-libido had not been successfully transferred outward or had been withdrawn back into the ego.

Freud's formulation was a significant departure from his earlier dual drive theory (sexual instincts versus self-preservative instincts). The introduction of narcissism effectively unified the ego and

sexual instincts under the umbrella of libido, arguing that the ego itself is invested with sexual energy (ego-libido). This conceptual shift was vital, as it positioned the investment of the self as a primary biological and psychological drive, not merely a secondary deviation from object love. The theoretical challenge addressed by **Primary Narcissism** was establishing a continuum between self-love and object-love, demonstrating that both rely on the same energy source.

Later revisions to the theory, particularly those related to the structural model (Id, Ego, Superego), affirmed the role of this primary state. The withdrawal or persistence of **Primary Narcissism** helps explain subsequent psychological phenomena, including the formation of the **Superego**, which internalizes parental and societal demands, and the development of self-esteem, which is regulated by the distance between the actual ego and the inaccessible perfection of the ego-ideal, a legacy of the primary narcissistic phase.

3. Distinction from Secondary Narcissism

A crucial aspect of understanding **Primary Narcissism** is differentiating it clearly from its counterpart, **Secondary Narcissism**. Primary narcissism is a necessary, normal, and universally experienced developmental stage where the ego is the original recipient of all libido. It is an objectless state, existing before the self is meaningfully separated from the external world.

In stark contrast, **Secondary Narcissism** is characterized by a pathological return of the libido to the ego after it has already been invested in external objects. This occurs when an individual experiences profound disappointment, trauma, or rejection in object relations, leading them to withdraw their emotional investment from the outside world and redirect it back onto the self. While primary narcissism is structurally necessary, secondary narcissism is often associated with psychiatric conditions, particularly schizotypal and narcissistic personality disorders, representing a regression to an earlier, self-contained state.

The distinction hinges on the presence of external objects. In the primary state, objects have not yet been established as separate entities worthy of significant investment. In the secondary state, objects were loved but have been abandoned, leading to a defensive withdrawal and hyper-inflation of the ego. Freud used the example of megalomania in psychosis to illustrate secondary narcissism, where the patient demonstrates an exaggerated self-importance mirroring the infant's original sense of omnipotence, but achieved through a psychological retreat from reality.

4. Key Concepts and Components

The Ego-Ideal: The persistent influence of **Primary Narcissism** is most clearly seen in the formation of the **Ego-Ideal**. The perfect, all-powerful state experienced by the infant in its earliest phase is internalized and serves as an enduring aspiration. The Ego-Ideal is the standard against which the actual ego measures itself. In development, the parental figures and societal

expectations replace the infant's inherent perfection as the source of admiration, but the fundamental drive to achieve that original state of perfection remains, influencing ambition and self-worth.

Omnipotence and Magic: The initial narcissistic phase is inextricably linked to the infant's belief in the **omnipotence of thoughts**. Because needs are met almost immediately--either through parental intervention or through internal, hallucinatory satisfaction--the infant develops the belief that its wishes and thoughts alone control reality. This magical thinking is gradually relinquished through confrontation with external reality, but remnants of this omnipotence contribute to later psychological phenomena, including defense mechanisms and certain neurotic traits.

Auto-Erotism: Freud positioned **Primary Narcissism** as an integration of earlier, fragmented auto-erotic activities. Auto-erotism involves seeking pleasure from specific bodily zones (e.g., thumb-sucking) without reference to a unified self. Narcissism marks the crucial step where these disparate activities are organized under the unified concept of the **Ego**, transforming simple bodily pleasure into self-love directed at the whole person.

5. Psychoeconomic Function and Libidinal Dynamics

From a psychoeconomic perspective--the theory concerning the distribution and transformation of psychic energy--**Primary Narcissism** plays a critical functional role. It ensures the self-preservation of the organism by guaranteeing that the most fundamental energy (libido) is reserved for the maintenance and growth of the ego. Freud conceptualized the psychic apparatus as possessing a fixed quantity of energy; the development of the individual involves the gradual shifting of this energy.

The healthy transition from primary narcissism requires the ego to recognize that external objects are necessary for satisfaction and survival. This realization compels the ego to invest portions of its libido outward, transforming ego-libido into object-libido. This outward flow is not permanent, however. The dynamic balance between ego-libido (self-regard) and object-libido (love for others) is the mechanism that governs psychological adjustment. When object-love fails, the libido flows back, increasing the ego-libido and returning the individual, pathologically, toward secondary narcissism.

The intensity and stability of this primary libidinal reserve are believed to influence the individual's overall emotional resilience. A robust primary narcissistic foundation provides a stable sense of self-worth that can withstand the inevitable frustrations and disappointments encountered in relating to the external world, ensuring that temporary setbacks do not necessitate a total retreat from reality.

6. Criticisms and Post-Freudian Revisions

While **Primary Narcissism** remains a cornerstone of Classical Freudian theory, it has faced substantial criticism and revision, particularly from Object Relations theorists. Figures like Melanie Klein and W. R. D. Fairbairn argued strongly against the idea of an entirely objectless state in infancy. Klein suggested that infants are engaged in object relations--albeit fragmented and internal--from birth, interacting with 'part-objects' (like the breast) immediately.

Object Relations theory posits that the infant never exists in a state of pure self-absorption; instead, the self is formed in continuous interaction with others, even if those others are initially experienced only internally or as basic satisfiers. This viewpoint challenges the necessity of **Primary Narcissism** as a starting point, suggesting that the self and the object are intertwined from the beginning, rather than sequentially separated.

Furthermore, later self-psychologists, such as Heinz Kohut, redefined narcissistic needs not as an archaic state to be overcome, but as valid, enduring needs for connection and affirmation (selfobject needs). Kohut focused on how parental failures to adequately mirror the child's grandiosity (a residue of primary narcissism) lead to deficits in the self, resulting in later pathological narcissism. For Kohut, the healthy path involves the idealization and eventual internalization of parental figures, not simply the abandonment of primary self-love.

7. Significance in Understanding Psychopathology

Despite theoretical debates, the concept of **Primary Narcissism** holds immense clinical significance, particularly in understanding the origins of various psychological disorders. The failure to successfully navigate the transition out of the primary narcissistic phase, or a massive, regressive withdrawal back into it, underlies serious psychopathology.

In the psychoses (e.g., schizophrenia), the complete withdrawal of object-libido into the ego--secondary narcissism--leads to a break with reality, resulting in symptoms like megalomania, delusions of grandeur, and profound emotional isolation. The patient reverts to an internal world where they attempt to reinstate the infantile state of **omnipotence**.

In narcissistic personality disorder (NPD), the core issue often revolves around a fragile sense of self-worth masked by grandiosity. This grandiosity is interpreted as the defensive maintenance of the narcissistic ego-ideal, an attempt to protect the ego from the painful realization of its imperfections by clinging to the illusion of primary perfection. The therapeutic task, stemming from the understanding of this original state, is often to help the patient move toward mature object relations without abandoning healthy self-regard.

Further Reading

[Sigmund Freud \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[On Narcissism: An Introduction \(1914\) \(PEP Web\)](#)

[Narcissism \(The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

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