When you hear the word “narcissist,” who comes to mind, aside from everyone? Your ex, probably. Your least favorite writer. Maybe several of your closest friends. The notion that narcissism is ubiquitous and ever increasing has been a truism for decades. In her new book, “The Selfishness of Others,” subtitled “An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism,” Kristin Dombek destabilizes that contemporary commonplace, breaking off chunks from the inside. It’s easy to agree that, yes, people these days are altogether too narcissistic. Dombek, an essayist and occasional advice columnist for n+1, is after the deep, deceptive narcissism inherent in that very view of the world.

The concept of pathological narcissism dates back, Dombek explains, to the end of the nineteenth century, when the English doctor and writer Havelock Ellis described sexual behavior animated by attraction to one’s own self as “Narcissus-like.” Freud picked up on this, labelling as narcissistic the self-sufficiency of certain confident women and the behavior of homosexual men. Later, two Austrian émigré psychoanalysts, Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut, took an interest in patients who were troubled by “emptiness and meaninglessness” and who seemed, to the two analysts, simultaneously
insecure, aggressive, and self-absorbed. The approach to analysis that Kohut developed, called “self psychology,” advised empathizing with the narcissist. Kernberg argued that confronting, doubting, and pathologizing the narcissist was the only way to win.

It’s Kernberg’s model that we now live with—one that understands narcissism not as a defense mechanism, or as a fungible reaction to circumstance, but as a “condition of a failed self.” The Narcissism Personality Inventory—nine items, which you’d probably recognize; in recent months, the checklist has frequently gone viral in relation to Donald Trump—was first published in 1979, the same year as Christopher Lasch’s best-selling “The Culture of Narcissism,” which argued that ordinary American society was, as a whole, approaching clinical deviance. “For the narcissist, the world is a mirror,” Lasch wrote. The following year, narcissistic personality disorder was added to the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Dombek spends many of her hundred and thirty-eight pages on the social-scientific history of narcissism, and along the way she nods at a variety of related exhibits: the terrible writer Tucker Max and the psychologist Stanley Milgram, Ovid’s Metamorphoses and a self-help Web site called Narcissism Uncovered, her own occasionally self-centered boyfriend and a girl from Atlanta who made a particularly egregious appearance on “My Super Sweet 16.” An argument emerges, via this constellation of data points: the narcissist is real, in no small part because we believe him to be so. “It could be a ‘he’ or a ‘she,’ but let’s stick with ‘he,’ ” Dombek writes, early on. Versions of this line recur, like a wink.

Despite the label’s clinical connotations, identifying a narcissist remains a fundamentally subjective and intimate act. Set the obvious monsters—Anders Breivik, for instance—aside. With the more debatable cases, who you are will generally determine whether or not you deem them pathological. Narcissists are not identified in a vacuum; the person you label a narcissist is usually someone who’s close to you, or a member of a tribe that you have been culturally encouraged or professionally incentivized to dislike. Millennials
I seem narcissistic to baby-boomer social scientists; men and women looking for love seem narcissistic to each other; analysis-resistant patients seemed narcissistic to Freud. Dombek’s historical survey is a persuasive reminder that the traits characteristic of the narcissist—his gender, his likely age, his supposed motivations—have shifted, and will continue to shift, “according to who’s got the power of diagnosis.”

So where Freud once wrote that “the type of female most frequently met with” tended to love narcissistically, we are now more likely to apply that characterization to men. “If there’s one thing a girl with a bad boyfriend has,” Dombek notes, “it’s the moral upper hand in the religion of mental health.” Here, she turns to the corner of the Internet she calls the “narcisphere,” a collection of blogs and forums in which women, mostly, solidify a sense of their superior powers of empathy and raise their collective consciousness about surviving narcissism and about narcissism-induced P.T.S.D. “If you are an especially giving person, warns the Internet, you are a prime target for narcissists,” Dombek writes. The narcisphere has a gendered inverse, which some call the manosphere and which is dedicated to teaching men how to dominate women by feigning self-confidence. This is the realm of pickup artistry. It is much worse than the narcisphere.

In suggestive detail, Dombek imagines a scene through the point of view of a boyfriend who has been identified as a narcissist by his girlfriend. The girlfriend, who has been spending a lot of time on the Internet, and has become convinced that her boyfriend’s fairly ordinary flaws are symptomatic of a serious disorder, watches him, “lip trembling.” He asks what’s wrong. She puts on a fake smile and says nothing; the narcisphere has advised her to protect herself and withdraw. And there begins an emotional arms race, in which the only way to respond to someone you assume to be entirely insincere and empty inside is to suppress your own instincts for kindness—to act, in other words, like a narcissist. “It can be spooky,” Dombek imagines the boyfriend thinking, “how unrelated what she says is to what seems to be going on inside.”
I myself am terribly afraid of narcissism—not the narcissism of others, but my own. In truth, I don’t think I am especially narcissistic. But for a while now I’ve harbored a suspicion that the things I most believe about myself are perfectly, diametrically wrong.

Dombek makes this case elegantly, and by heavy implication: If you are strongly averse to something, won’t you inevitably have trouble recognizing it within yourself? The religious fear of evil can itself lead to evil—a desire to protect unborn children, for instance, can cause a callous disregard for women’s lives. The fear of being inconsistent about one’s feminism often leads one to be inconsistent about one’s feminism. Fixating on any demon necessitates a deep familiarity with it, and today my fear of narcissism derives from intimate acquaintance with the many evolving ways a person can bend her life into a flattering mirror online. In the book’s opening section, before giving up the first-person pronoun, Dombek writes, “If using the word I turns out to be a symptom of narcissism, you won’t hear from me again.”

As a reader, I resisted this notion: there’s a plain responsibility to the “I” when it’s used well, an admission that human experience is often too specific for a “we.” But as a writer I know exactly where Dombek is coming from. This fear of appearing narcissistic—of being narcissistic, deep down—is where a particularly elusive form of the disorder may live. I am disturbed by the idea of being narcissistic, and yet I find other people’s self-absorption merely embarrassing. If that disturbance stems from an abiding suspicion that I can’t see myself clearly, well, what greater proof of overwhelming self-concern could there be?

Two contemporary psychologists, Jean Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, relying on somewhat outdated survey criteria, have proclaimed that millennials are the generation of entitlement. (This is my generation; Dombek locates herself between millennials and Gen X.) “The Narcissism Epidemic,” Twenge and Campbell’s 2009 book, is frequently cited as proof that teens are bad. The authors argue that narcissistic personality disorder “is no longer markedly different from the expectations of our culture.” This, of course, is the argument
that Christopher Lasch made nearly forty years ago, and that many of us have been making ever since. But the fact that this argument has been fomenting since the nineteen-seventies does not negate it, Dombek observes: if there is a narcissism epidemic, it had to start sometime. Like a disease, it would spread slowly at first, and then, after finding new methods of transmission—in this case, the Internet and social media, probably—it would move quickly, reaching everyone at once.

If “toxic self-absorption” is indeed the new American disease, then it will be important to remember that no one has immunity. The story of the narcissist is, in part, a story of the people around him pleading for empathy, insisting that we should all care more about one another. And yet somehow this account of the world has become “a story that divides us, by defining empathy as something we have and others lack,” Dombek writes. Perhaps in pathologizing narcissism, we have forgotten how perilous it is to constantly diagnose other people. In the end, what “The Selfishness of Others” lays out most clearly is not the danger of narcissism but, rather, the danger of any particular world view that requires, for the sake of consistency, its owner to believe that she is good.

*Jia Tolentino is a contributing writer for newyorker.com.*

---

**READ SOMETHING THAT MEANS SOMETHING**

Try *The New Yorker* for only a dollar a week. [SUBSCRIBE NOW].

**WATCH:** This artist strives for maximum realism in her creation of newborn baby dolls.