The Real Selfie

Me-related preoccupations are complex.

Published on March 12, 2014 by Glenn C. Altschuler, Ph.D. in This Is America


Confessing that self-love possessed “all my soul and all my every part,” William Shakespeare declared in Sonnet 62 that “for this sin there is no remedy.” And yet, Simon Blackburn points out, the Sonnet continues with a complex reversal. A look in the mirror undoes the author’s vanity, revealing “me myself indeed/Beated and chapped with tanned antiquity.” In the final two lines, Shakespeare incorporates his beloved as a second self, integral to what we might now call his “identity,” providing a legitimate reason for self-contentment and self-love.

In *Mirror, Mirror*, Blackburn, who has taught philosophy at Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, draws on the story of Adam and Eve, the myth of Narcissus, the work of Aristotle, Adam Smith, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Jean Paul Sartre, ads for cosmetics, and a few empirical psychological studies, in a meditation on self-love, vanity, pride, self-mastery, and self-esteem. This constellation of values, he argues, are benign, and even essential, in some forms, and damaging in others.

Blackburn’s thesis—that me-related preoccupations are complex, and, at times, healthy—is sound, sensible, and unsurprising. And his polemical political digressions seem, well, self-indulgent preachments to the choir. In their addiction to “simple moral remedies,” he writes, Republican politicians sneer at “facts” and “data.” The “absolute command of the spirit of the age,” by Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Milton Friedman, continues, he declares, “in spite of the visible damage to their people.” It is very difficult, Blackburn opines, for the rich (who he refers to as “kleptoparasites”) “to have satisfying human relations with anybody or anything.”

That said, *Mirror, Mirror* does contain insights that challenge the conventional wisdom about self-love. Blackburn, for example, doesn’t accept the widely accepted view that the newborn infant, having no awareness of the difference between itself and its world, responds angrily to forces that frustrate or deny its needs or desires, until, if all goes well, it adjusts (with the help of a primary care-giver who gives it attention, love, and security). There is “no independent evidence,” Blackburn suggests, for the proposition that infants have any consciousness of self at all. Better understood as creatures of sensation than of thought, they may well be expressing distress rather than anger.

Blackburn also demonstrates that our sense of self is often “reciprocal with our sense of other people, and their sense of us.” The experience can be destabilizing. It can also be salutary. Newcastle University’ Psychology Department, Blackburn indicates, put an honesty box in the communal room, which specified payments for tea, coffee, and milk. When the banner at the top of the notice showed the eyes of a face staring at the viewer, payments were three times greater than when the banner...
depicted a frieze of flowers.

In a critique of Polonius’ advice to Laertes ("to thine own self be true"), Blackburn reminds us that the modern self is deemed to be fragmented and unstable. What if virtue is not the birthright of every person? What if Laertes’ self is “insincere and insecure, irresolute and unknowing”? What if it is “a pretty nasty piece of work”?

In the end, however, Blackburn concludes that “we do indeed have real selves,” and reason to hope that they can lead us to greater sincerity in our everyday interactions. “But these selves are not inner,” he maintains. The products of education, upbringing, and experience, they are subject to change. And so, for those who are willing to listen to the voice of conscience within and sound assessments from without, a look in the mirror may well be a good idea.