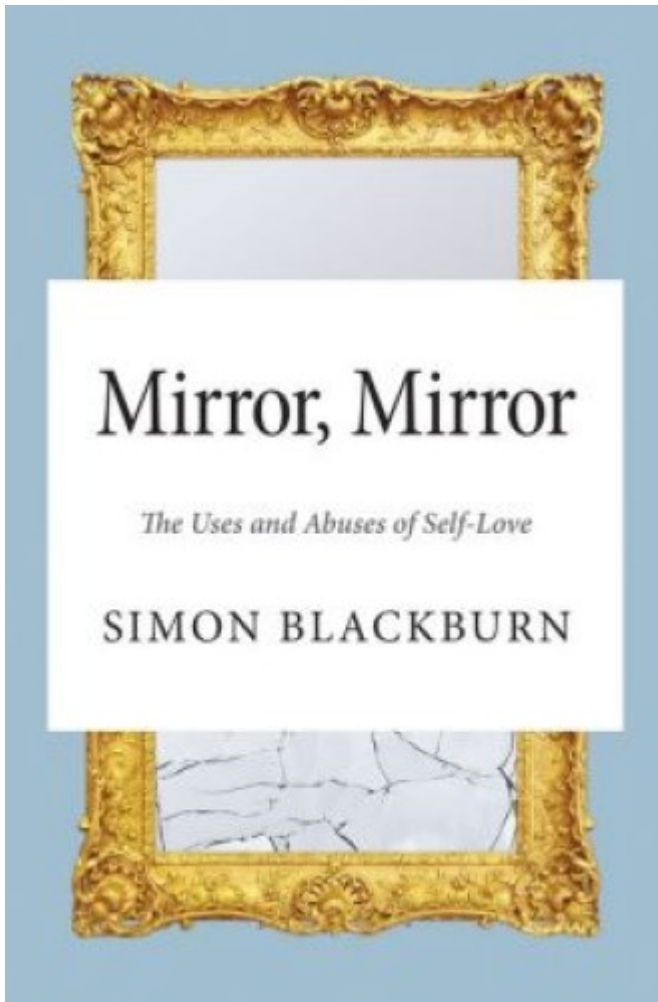


Mirror, Mirror, by Simon Blackburn

reviewed by [Joyce Ann Mercer](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Mirror, Mirror

By Simon Blackburn

Princeton University Press

I watch as two young women hold cell phone cameras at arm's length, laughing as they capture an endless stream of self-portraits, appropriately known as selfies, to share with friends on Snapchat. At first I smile, enjoying the freedom with which

each girl celebrates her own visage, unshackled by internalized social censors against self-appreciation. They wait for reactions to the pictures, their faces reflecting pleasure in friends' texted affirmations. But as they continue without pause for more than ten minutes, I begin to wonder if the practice reflects liberation from artificial demands of self-denial or a new kind of bondage in which teens require a constant stream of feedback on the images they project in order to feel alive and well.

Teens are not the only people whose activities raise questions about the appropriateness of self-focused attention. "Read my sermon, posted here," writes a pastor on her blog. Is it a helpful offering of the fruits of her labor or a bid for more admiring responses? "Hot off the press: see my latest book," writes a young religion scholar on a social networking website, in an act of self-promotion that some say is not only acceptable but necessary in the current entrepreneurial climate of academia. What is the right amount of attention to give to oneself, and when does self-love turn to problematic narcissism? Such questions, critical in faith communities where disciples seek to love God completely and to love their neighbors as they love themselves, are taken up by philosopher Simon Blackburn in *Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*.

The challenge of finding an appropriate balance in one's self-regard is hardly new. From Aristotle to Iris Murdoch, philosophers have identified self-love as a central issue in human experience, and one that we often get wrong. Theologians most often address this topic under the rubrics of pride and temptation and have at times gone too far in condemning as sin what may under certain circumstances be complex, healthy, and necessary self-affirmation. But as Blackburn points out, not only pride but a whole host of emotions and attitudes toward the self can get out of whack. In *Mirror, Mirror*, self-esteem, embarrassment, shame, vanity, envy, self-respect, and arrogance appear alongside character traits such as integrity, sincerity, and authenticity as aspects of Blackburn's inquiry into how to get our love of self into balance.

Blackburn, whose career spans the pond from Oxford to the University of North Carolina, finds these matters newly engaging by virtue of the convergence between contemporary consumer culture and digital communication. When people make their breakfast menus public in cyberspace, perhaps they're merely sharing their everyday lifeworld with friends. Or they might be publicly displaying their cluelessness about the relative unimportance to others of their personal culinary

habits.

Meanwhile, advertising images urge us to indulge ourselves often, appealing to the human desire for bolstered self-esteem and special status with claims that we deserve the luxuries of this product or are entitled to the elevated status promised by that one. Such marketing campaigns treat self-denial and delayed gratification like bad habits to be overcome. Just as the currently popular young adult novel *Divergent* explores the dangers of emphasizing a single feature of virtuous human life to the exclusion of others, *Mirror, Mirror* asks whether the good of positive self-esteem becomes distorted when marketers manipulate it.

The marketing images that provide the impetus for Blackburn's book are summed up in cosmetics manufacturer L'Oréal's ubiquitous slogan "Because you're worth it." Blackburn notices that models appearing in conjunction with this slogan seemed bored and indifferent. For help in decoding arrogance and vanity, he turns to Immanuel Kant, who wrote that arrogance is "an unjustified demand that others think little of themselves in comparison to us." This is what fashion models communicate with their aloofness.

Vanity, Blackburn asserts, consists in "greedy desire for the admiration and envy of others." The desire to be included among the group granted superior status through the adulation of others is the driving force behind the purchasing habits of those who buy cosmetics in response to these ads, he reasons. People turn to cosmetic products and surgeries not because they consider themselves "worth it," as L'Oréal would have it, but because of the feeling that they are worth nothing—but could be "worth it" if they bought this lipstick. The implicit promise that those availing themselves of magic cosmetic fixes will join the group of indifferent beauties who demand to be held in high esteem by the unbeautiful is, of course, false. Generally people are far more focused on themselves than on others: "Alas, people do not fall over in love and admiration when you buy the new lipstick. They have their own lives to live," Blackburn writes.

In the myth of Narcissus, a young man spurns those who seek after him. Finally he gets his due when, enraptured by his own reflection, he falls in love with himself. Hearing the voice of a nymph named Echo, Narcissus fails to recognize that the one he hears is not some separate creature but merely his own voice thrown back at him. For Blackburn, the selfie generation's search for admiration is analogous to Narcissus mistaking self-admiration for the admiration of others.

We should not forget the setup of the ancient story: Narcissus gets into this situation because his mother, Liriope, requested that her child be granted long life. The granting of her request came with a price: Narcissus could live a long life, but only “if he shall himself not know.” The myth exposes a critical paradox: we must have a certain level of self-awareness and self-regard in order to know and to be ourselves, and yet we cannot know ourselves by merely looking at our own faces and hearing the sounds of our own voices. As Blackburn puts it, “Our sense of self is intimately tied to our sense of place in the eyes of others, or, in other words, in the moral or social world.” The myth of Narcissus thus not only teaches that inordinate self-focus distorts our capacity to love and be loved; it illustrates the sociality of healthy self-esteem: if we are unable to participate in social engagements—to see ourselves among others and to know how they see us—we lose the capacity to know ourselves truly.

Unfortunately, Blackburn’s discussion of theological and religious treatments of self-regard is less developed. After offering brief caricatures of Augustine and “religion” early in the book, Blackburn eventually returns to a more appreciative analysis of Christianity’s high placement of pride in the list of problems to which humans are susceptible. Drawing on Milton’s story of humanity’s fall, he names pride as an “overarching template of wrongdoing” that becomes the “activator and catalyst” for other sins, such as greed, envy, and arrogance.

Blackburn is clearly unaware of the feminist discussion that began with Valerie Saiving’s pivotal 1960 essay concerning the theological categories of pride, self-love, and self-abnegation as gendered phenomena. Despite this, he occasionally travels alongside feminists—for example, when he recognizes that the moral valuation given to pride is situation-dependent. He distinguishes between vanity and the “proper” pride one feels when one deserves the admiration of others. Proper pride, he notes, is something like self-respect, and it can serve a positive role that vanity rarely if ever achieves.

Might disordered self-love relate to growing economic inequality? Wealthy CEOs “forget to wonder how they appear to others,” Blackburn writes, and they come to believe that because they have wealth, “they must be worth it.” He names compassion as the key to overcoming corporate greed, because compassion involves “imaginative displacement into the state of another”—a solution that will be appreciated by congregations concerned with the Gospels’ focus on wealth and poverty. Blackburn contends that the excesses of the “greed is good” business

culture speaks not of an essentially greedy human nature, but of a cultural construction of human lives that replaces a good and proper self-regard with one that is clearly out of order.

Adults of my parents' generation taught their children not to toot their own horns. It was a behavioral norm that guarded against excesses of self-admiration. Although this can result in inappropriate self-abnegation, particularly for members of marginalized groups, there is a useful balance in the old-fashioned idea that people ought not to seek acclaim for themselves, whether in matters of breakfast menus or beauty.