

*Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love*. Simon Blackburn. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press. 2014. ISBN: 9780691161426

In our modern era of corporate greed, political deception, and a prevalent me-first mentality, we have conflicting attitudes toward the idea of self-love. On the one hand, we consider it a primary virtue; indeed, author Simon Blackburn points out that we have entire industries built around enabling vanity and promoting personal self-esteem. However, we also find it contemptible when politicians, businessmen, and even everyday citizens display excessive, and often harmful, amounts of self-importance. It is this problematic nature of self-love that Simon Blackburn explores in *Mirror, Mirror*, attempting to untangle the threads of pride, vanity, and self-esteem to determine right and wrong uses of self-love.

Simon Blackburn is a distinguished research professor of philosophy at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, best known for his work in metaethics. *Mirror, Mirror* is an intriguing look at a narrow slice of normative and applied ethics, juggling philosophical theory, literary exposition, and modern day culture to weave an exploration of historical and modern ideas about self-love. Blackburn ultimately argues for the importance of pride, self-respect, and self-esteem, while championing an increased awareness of the ways these virtues can go wrong, resulting in vanity, narcissism, and greed. Prompted by despair at the L’Oreal slogan, “Because you’re worth it”, the text is exactly as Blackburn describes it—a “perambulation” with a meandering path, though one with an eventual destination in mind.

The introduction walks the reader through several emotions and attitudes that involve our sense of self, situating how such attitudes as pride, arrogance, humility, and integrity manifest in human life and the modern world and the shift from simple social rules to a “quasi-legal network of rights”. Chapter one discusses the idea of the self as tied to identity, objectivity, and narrative

construct. The self, for Blackburn, is necessarily tied to our social and cultural surroundings and developed over time.

The second chapter explores the myth of Narcissus, connecting his ego to the modern epidemic of the ‘selfie’ culture. This leads us to the next section indicting the beauty industry’s promotion of vanity and arrogance. Rather than L’Oreal’s slogan, “Because you’re worth it”, he argues that the actual message is “Because you’re not worth it—unless you buy our product”. Chapter four expounds on the roots of narcissism and the problem of hubris, evils we often find in our political leaders. From there, Blackburn discusses self-esteem and proper pride, and how we can find the right balance of the two with their respective vices.

Chapter six provides a useful look at Kantian and Aristotelian ethics to situate our understanding and assessment of respect and pride, as appropriate amounts of each enable us to successfully navigate the social world. From here, however, chapter seven detours through some philosophy of religion on the way to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in order to understand Christian thought on temptation and pride. Finally, chapter eight meditates on the values of integrity, sincerity, and authenticity in relation to each other, and to creating our best self.

Blackburn’s concluding argument is that we need to utilize a complex Aristotelian method of finding the right amounts of pride, vanity, and our other self-oriented concepts in order to correctly utilize self-love. He offers a strong indictment against many cases in our modern culture such as political leaders, corporate business practices, and the beauty and fashion industries that take pride, self-esteem, and self-love way too far. Our moral, then, is to muster an awareness against such corruption and try to rescue the positive uses of self-love from these problematic abuses.

Blackburn's use of a variety of sources and examples is useful for illustrating the ideas at hand, but make the text one that requires a focused attention to appreciate. His argument, while clearly headed towards a promising and intuitive moral, relies heavily on anecdotal evidence when it bothers to make an argument at all, otherwise assuming the truth of the conclusion. Weighted with bias, the arguments sometimes skim overly quickly through what should be useful, informative theories, or else get mired in literary analysis or social commentary that loses sight of its goal for the details. Certain chapters, particularly chapters 5, 6, and 8, are quite successful as is, while others would be useful paired with other perspectives, or used to simplify more complicated theories in primary texts Blackburn draws from. The interdisciplinary approach, utilizing examples and analysis from philosophy, literature, psychology, and popular culture, is one that makes sense and works well with this topic, giving the reader opportunity to connect with the ideas and concepts from practical perspectives, though they should take care to separate rhetoric from argument.

Nonetheless, this text could prove a useful classroom tool as a secondary or supplementary text in an interdisciplinary class or paired with primary sources, as it contains enlightening ideas connected with thought-provoking, practical application. It also avoids the curse of technical over-complication, making it accessible to an attentive undergraduate audience. Despite flaws in argumentation and pacing, the book succeeds at conveying important ideas in a helpful interdisciplinary manner about a topic that should be interesting and impactful to today's students.

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