Richard Chessick

Definitions of the Self

Psychology of the Self and the Treatment of Narcissism

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Richard D. Chessick, M.D.

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Definitions of the Self

The first problem that confronts anyone who attempts to study the psychology of the self arises from the definition of "self." No two authors use this term in exactly the same way. Perhaps the most well-known use of the term "self" is that of George Herbert Mead (1962), a pragmatist who tried to eliminate the parallelism between the mind and the body by seeing the mind and the self as arising out of social interaction and having no innate separate existence. For Mead, the self was a social self that formed in two stages. At first, the individual's self is constituted simply by an organization of the attitudes of others toward both the individual and one another in the specific social acts in which the individual participates with them. Then, at the second stage, there is added "an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he belongs" (p. 158). Thus, for Mead, the mind or self is formed by "reflexiveness" from social experience, a view that probably influenced H. S. Sullivan (1953) in forming his "interpersonal school" of psychiatry (Chessick 1974, 1977a, Greenberg and Mitchell 1983). This view represents a "social behaviorism," an attempt to extend empiricism to the psychology of the mind or the self. McCall (Mischel 1977) calls it the

"social looking-glass approach to the self," in which the self is essentially a social construction.

Clinical Origin of Kohut's Definition of Self

Mead's approach is in direct contrast to the psychology of the self of Kohut, which focuses on the person's subjective experience, the inner sense of self. The therapist learns about this through empathy or vicarious introspection and attempts to understand the rising and falling of self-esteem in relation to the person's largely unconscious ambitions, on the one hand, and largely unconscious ideals, on the other. As Mischel (1977) explains:

> These in turn are seen as rooted in a sense of self that develops out of relations to others, beginning with the infant's relation to the nurturing mother, a development whose vicissitudes may lead to a self that is relatively cohesive . . . or a self that tends toward fragmentation, . . . as in hypochondria, or the experience of being driven to unusual sexual goals, or other behaviors which the person himself may experience as irrational, (p. 26)

Such apparent "irrationality" experienced by the patient, which is of great clinical importance, is emphasized by Wolf (Mischel 1977),

who presents the case of Miss S., a graduate student whose boyfriend had to be away for six weeks on a trip. She not only missed him and felt sad but could not free herself of the recurrent thought that he would get involved with another woman and forget her, although rationally, in light of their excellent relationship, this was not an appropriate fear. Yet she could not stave off a sense of restlessness, depression, fatigue, mild insomnia, and impairment of work efficiency, and "she suddenly found herself staring at other women with fantasies of touching and sexual contact, became frightened about herself, wondering whether she was becoming a homosexual, and consulted an analyst" (pp. 205-206). From the point of view of the psychology of the self, this example illustrates the patient's subjective perception of a disturbed state of the self, the patient's own perception of apparently irrational thoughts and unwanted fantasies, and the patient's perception in the form of a feeling that something was going wrong with herself, which she characterized as perhaps being neurotic, or going crazy, or becoming a pervert. These feelings led her to consult a doctor.

Self-psychologists maintain that this is a fundamentally different approach from the framework of the natural sciences adopted by

Freud. According to self-psychologists, the structural model of Freud—id, ego, and superego—is an attempt by the scientific observer stationed outside this psyche or "mental apparatus" to describe the inner psyche. Wolf explains:

> Kohut's self/self-object model, on the other hand, allows conceptualization of insights gained from psychoanalytic data in terms of a model that explicitly recognizes that these data are experienced from *inside* a psychic apparatus; it describes relationships from the point of view of an observer stationing himself *inside* the experiencing apparatus, (p. 209)

Wolf illustrates this difference using the case of Miss. S., described above. In classical psychoanalytic structural theory Miss S.'s relationship to her boyfriend is narcissistic, meaning that even a temporary loss of the invested object causes the narcissistic libido to be withdrawn—according to the U-tube theory—into the ego, which is modified to now contain an identification with the lost object. The ego becomes the target of the aggression originally directed at the lost object and suffers the experience of depression. The ego tries to remedy this by a new narcissistic form of object choice expressed by the fantasy of a homosexual relationship. We have to assume that the

choice of Miss S.'s boyfriend also was a narcissistic choice; initially chosen because he was like Miss S. or like what Miss S. aspired to be. In Freud's theory this is contrasted to true object love, defined as the love of someone for their own and distinct qualities.

In Kohut's model analysts attempt to station themselves inside the patient's psyche and to conceptualize the patient's subjective experience. Miss S. was experiencing herself as a more or less well functioning "me" until the boyfriend left; she then began to experience tension, depression, and restlessness as if in a frantic search for something missing, "something with which to soothe herself to restore the previous feeling of calmness and well-being" (p. 210). By means of empathy or vicarious introspection the therapist gains the experience-near conception of Miss S. not feeling like her old self or feeling that her cohesive self had suffered incipient or partial fragmentation. The cause of this is the absence of the boyfriend. He had performed a psychological function which became apparent only when he was no longer present; he "somehow" lent cohesion to Miss S.'s self, functioning as a sort of external glue. When the cohesion of self is lost, there is a restless search for a new self-object to replace the missing part and restore cohesion.

With the loss of cohesion of the self, intense sexuality is often found among the disintegration products, “as if sexuality had lost its proper function within a harmoniously balanced matrix” (p. 211). It is a common clinical observation that perverse sexual behavior follows a self-fragmenting experience, almost as if the sexual excitement and gratification were warding off the feeling of deadness due to the lost cohesion of the self. Miss S. illustrates such pathological sexualization of her yearning for a new self-object. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) credit the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm with first describing “the use of sexuality and perversions in the service of maintaining a fragile sense of self” (p. 106).

This concept of the self as a cohesive configuration, experienced as a sense of self with a feeling of wholeness and well-being as Kohut himself (1966) pointed out, is quite different than any social definition of the self. Again and again, Kohut’s early work emphasizes the experience-near aspects, describing how fragmentation of the self (a loss of its cohesion) is experienced with extreme discomfort, such as feelings of depression or deadness together with possible anxiety and even panic. Even transient losses of cohesion are manifested by symptoms such as hypochondriasis and disturbances of self-esteem,

painful subjective states which may drive the individual toward remedial actions like peeping and exhibitionism, that gain an addiction-like intensity. Thus, apparently irrational symptoms, fantasies, and behaviors that explode, for example, over the weekend while the patient and therapist are apart, point to an important function of the therapist in maintaining the cohesion of the self. A complete variety of hitherto confusing, and apparently irrational, clinical phenomena suddenly become intelligible!

The sense of self as originally used by Kohut refers to a subjective experience grasped by the therapist through vicarious introspection or empathy with the patient. As such, it was not directly incompatible with Freud's structural theory and could have been thought of as based on certain sets of ego functions. However, as Kohut's theories developed, anthropomorphic language began to creep into the psychology of the self in a way which is similar to the way that the "ego" was anthropomorphized as "the little man within the man" by Freud in his final writings.

Kohut's Later "Bipolar Self"

In the later writing of Kohut (1977, 1984), the self as a supraordinate concept becomes elaborated in its bipolar nature, showing itself primarily when self-cohesion is not firm. Metapsychological energic concepts are dropped, and the self is now seen to occupy "the central position" within the personality. This supraordinate self develops from a core self or nuclear self which does not begin (as Kohut thought earlier) as scattered nuclei that coalesce, but rather as a self which from the beginning of life constitutes a supraordinate configuration that is the basis "for our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception, integrated with our most central ambitions and ideals and with our experience that our body and mind form a unit in space and a continuum in time" (Kohut 1977, p. 177). The self now resembles the center of our being "from which all initiative springs and where all experiences end" (Kohut 1978, p. 95). When Kohut moves to the bipolar self and its constituents, he apparently introduces a new paradigm. The self is no longer a depth-psychological concept that can be meta-psychologically defined using classical terminology, nor is the self thought of as an entity within the mental apparatus or even as a fourth "agency" of the mind. "The area of the self and its vicissitudes," as Kohut (1978, p.

753) calls it, becomes separate from Freud's psychoanalysis; Kohut (1978) himself labels it "the science of the self' (p. 752n).

PARALLEL TO KANT

Both Kant and Kohut use the concept of self differently in their earlier and later theories, as will be discussed more in Chapter 10. A remarkable parallel between Kant and Kohut appears in Kohut's (1977) discussion of free will. Choice, decision, and free will are explained by Kohut as "the positing of a psychic configuration—the self—that, *whatever the history of its formation,* has become a center of initiative: a unit that tries to follow its own course" (p. 245). This notion and the analogy that follows in the same paragraph regarding "the universe *in toto"* are two of the three classical "ideas of reason" as described by Kant (1781) and used in his moral philosophy to explain the possibility of choice and free will.

Although Kohut claims to maintain an experience-near definition of the self (just as Kant's philosophy points primarily to "the noumenal self in the negative sense"), he, like Kant, relies more and more as his theories evolve on the definition of the self as a supraordinate concept.

Kohut's use of the supraordinate "bipolar self" resembles Kant's use of "the noumenal self in the positive sense" as an explanatory concept. We may trace the evolution of this in Kohut, beginning with his 1972 presentation (Chapter 31 in *The Search for the Self* [1978]), in which he offers the earlier definition. We then move toward his focus on the bipolar self in *The Restoration of the Self* (1977) as a supraordinate concept that solves the philosophical dilemma regarding the subjective phenomenon of free will. The turning point in this shift is labeled by Kohut (1978, p. 935) in his 1974 essay, "Remarks about the Formation of the Self" (Chapter 45 in *The Search for the Self* [1978]).

Kohut's original concept of the self was a simpler experience-near abstraction, marked in its fragmentation by certain clinical phenomena; it is certainly consistent with traditional psychoanalytic theory. His later use of the self, however, is not entirely consistent with this theory. Although he continues to derive his concepts from psychoanalytic experience, postulating the self as a center of initiative implies that a mysterious something besides the instinctual drives (either instead of them or in addition to them) is a main energic spring of human behavior and thought. And, indeed, Kohut regards manifestations of the drives already as "disintegration products"

rather than fundamental to human nature. So Kohut and Wolf (1978) write, “Once the self has crystalized in the interplay of inherited and environmental factors, it aims toward the realization of its own specific program of action . . .” (p. 414). There will be much in this concept to interest certain Marxist thinkers, who view the very formation of the human self and its lifelong program, attitudes, and beliefs as largely a product of the predominant socioeconomic milieu in which it is formed (Wood 1981).

It is important not to confuse Kohut’s “bipolar self”—which is a center of initiative and action—with certain other common uses of the term. The term “self” as used by followers of Kohut is entirely different than the “essential self” or, as Kohut (1977) calls it, “axiomatic self,” of philosophers which is postulated as a center of free will and the basis of responsibility in human behavior. This “essential self” has a long philosophical history and is related to the metaphysical concept of “substance” and the theological notion of “soul.” It has no unconscious or developmental aspects and the method of empathy and introspection is not applied in a clinical setting in order to unearth its nature. However, personal introspection expressed in the work of, for example, Kierkegaard or Augustine, sometimes illuminates what the

authors consider to be a true, authentic, or philosophical self that is responsible for choices.

Sartre's Definition of Self

The modern or existential version of this programmatic self assumes, again only using a conscious phenomenological psychology, that the self has no essence but is capable of forming itself in one way or another as the individual goes on in life. Sartre and other existential philosophers made no attempt to integrate their hypotheses or convictions with the empirical data of psychoanalysis. The British group of psychoanalytic authors discussed in the next chapter are clinicians who have also emphasized the world around the patient in an existential sense, but who have at the same time attempted to reconcile their theories with the views of Freud, or at least have tried to employ clinical psychoanalytic experience and the unconscious.

Murdoch's (1980) discussion of Sartre's (1964) *Nausea* sees it as a comment on the human condition. Sartre insists that our direct relationship to Being has a "gloomy" or "viscous" feel to it, although he offers no explanation of why this should be. This notion first arose,

perhaps appropriately, in his *War Diaries* (1984). For Sartre, what does exist is brutal and nameless; this is basic Being-in-itself, which is absurd and given directly to us.

In the chapter "Quality as a Revelation of Being" in *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre (1973) discusses the "fascination of the viscous." It is an existential category, immediate and concrete. Sartre's "phenomenology" presents our direct experience of absurd or brutal Being-in-itself as a nauseating one.

The individual's Being shares the Being-in-itself with all else that is, but it also contains Being-for-itself that is an unavoidable consequence of human consciousness, and also a third form of Being that Sartre labels Being-for-others. This latter connects the individual inextricably with others as, for example, through the immediate shame experienced in certain situations precipitated by the look *(le regard)* of the other.

For Sartre, existence precedes essence and individuals make themselves whether they want to or not since they cannot avoid choices. There is no human nature from God, no essence to man, and

no God. People make their own goals and ideals which are revealed retroactively in their actions. We are "condemned" to be free and our awareness of freedom is accompanied by anguish. To escape this anguish we can blame God, heredity, upbringing, circumstances, the unconscious, and so on, but all of these are what Sartre calls *mauvaise foi* (bad faith).

The individual's operative ideal or the ideal self and values are revealed in actions. They are first set by an original choice or basic project. We discover people's basic project through a review of their actions; the basic project unfolds itself as the individuals move toward their future.

All followers of Sartre stress the notion that the individual is *only* the sum of actions and conscious or preconscious purposes. All existentialists emphasize basic conscious choice as the key to our lives. They view Freud's unconscious and any other deterministic psychologies such as behaviorism as manifestations of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). All existentialists would oppose breaking down an individual psyche into structural components such as id, ego, and superego (see Chessick 1984). The individual is seen not as an essence

or entity but a process, for life is endowed with possibilities through the freedom possessed to make conscious choices and thus construct a self reflected in activities performed.

Brown and Hausman (1981) and Soil (1981) have presented powerful attempts to reconcile Sartre's attacks on Freud with the actual doctrines of Freud. Hanly (1979) has convincingly demonstrated that irreconcilable differences in attitude and approach persist between existentialist philosophers and psychotherapists, and Freudian psychoanalysts. Kohut's later (1977) "psychology of the self in the broader sense," although it retains the notion of the unconscious, is closer in philosophical orientation to Sartre than to Freud, as far as a holistic epistemological position is concerned.

Both Sartre and Freud agree that there exists something unknown to the person which may become known under certain conditions. For Freud, this implies repression and the unconscious; for Sartre, a unified psyche fooling itself—self-deception or bad faith, a concept closer to Freud's "disavowal" and Kohut's "vertical split."

Sartre believes that humans struggle to realize their freedom in

an all-encompassing and alienating world. Material reality in Sartre's (1976) later writing is described as the "practico-inert," our total environment, which is in resistance to our projects, limits our knowledge, and is our only instrument for living. Man is a contingent being thrown into a universe allergic to man. Sartre gloomily describes man as a "useless passion" in the sense that the effort of human freedom or the Being-for-itself to achieve the basic project is doomed to fail since man dies.

The unresolved issue of individual human freedom forms one of the most fundamental and controversial problems in philosophy and psychology, and lurks behind Sartre's "basic project" and Kohut's "basic program of the nuclear self," to be described in later chapters. The irreconcilable differences between Sartre's various concepts of the "self' as reviewed by Barnes (1980-1981), and the "self" of Kohut in psychoanalysis are readily apparent. Kohut's work is *not,* as has sometimes been claimed, a version of existentialist philosophy.

Dryud (1984) states that Sartre treats preverbal developmental history much as H. S. Sullivan does: it is important but unanalyzable; later, Sartre speaks of that phase as "protohistory." Dryud points out

that Kohut would not agree with Sartre that protohistory is unanalyzable. He continues that both Sartre and Sullivan viewed the self as a compromise, very similar to Winnicott's "false self" and much as Lacan (see Chapter 17) views the ego as the "enemy" (pp. 234-235). Sartre essentially uses a model of the self as an agent which makes choices and his so-called existential psychoanalysis is a methodology designed to bring to light "the subjective choices by which each living person makes himself a person" (Mitchell 1984, p. 258). For Freud however, the mind operates according to the principle of psychic determinism upon which a person can never generate his own causal impact; free will and free choice have no status in this theory. Freud depicts human experience as driven by forces largely unknown, a direct product of internal pressures and compromises.

Kohut's Early Definition of Self

Kohut's "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism" (1966), the earliest definitive contribution to the founding of his psychology of the self, was generally accepted by the psychoanalytic establishment. Examination of Kohut's work shows the emergence of clear differences between Kohut, Freud, Sartre, and the various other views of

philosophers and psychologists on the “self.”

“Forms and Transformations of Narcissism” begins by stating that the antithesis to narcissism is not object relations but object love. Thus, a person may have many acquaintances but have no object love. Conversely a hermit can be, theoretically, past the stage of development of narcissism and capable of object love, although the hermit has no object relations. An individual may indeed have a profusion of object relations that make that person “popular” as we have seen unfortunately in certain American presidents or pathological media “personalities.” Object love, on the other hand, represents a mature relationship with objects, based on a realistic intrapsychic representation of the object, shifting over continuing experiences with the object.

The archaic formations of the narcissistic self (later called the grandiose self) and the idealized parent imago are introduced in Kohut’s work as the inevitable consequence of the disturbance of the infant’s blissfully experienced balance of primary narcissism. At this point, Kohut says that the idealized parent imago is related predominantly to drive control while the narcissistic (grandiose) self

is closely interwoven with drives and tensions. Speaking of the preconscious derivatives of these two structures, Kohut states that "man is *led* by his ideals but *pushed* by his ambitions" (p. 435).

In "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism," Kohut sees the narcissistic (grandiose) self and idealized parent imago as having to be gradually integrated into the web of our ego; as in Freud, the ego and the mature self are not carefully differentiated. Already in "Forms and Transformations," the term "ego" is used to represent organizations, functions, and structures that are remote from the conscious mind and more fixed, whereas the "self" is nearer to experiential consciousness and represents roughly the person the individual subjectively feels one's self to be. The concept of mastery of the narcissistic (grandiose) self is still presented somewhat vaguely as a function of the ego's capacity to harness narcissistic energies and transform narcissistic constellations into more highly differentiated new psychological configurations.

In Kohut's early work, the result of proper such mastery is described already as the development of creativity, the acceptance of transience, the capacity for empathy, a sense of humor, and "wisdom."

But these are conceived of essentially as derivatives of successful ego functioning in the transformation of narcissism. We must ask eventually why Kohut did not stop with this important contribution, but instead began to diverge from the mainstream of traditional psychoanalytic theory in his first book, *The Analysis of the Self* (1971). The answer to this question is the key to the origin and continuing importance of the psychology of the self.

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