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Heinz Kohut's Ideas of Self

Charles Strozier PHD , Konstantine Pinteris LCSW , Kathleen Kelley DMin LMFT , Deborah Mart MA and David Strug PHD

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The authors explore Heinz Kohut's ideas of self, including its nuclear and virtual forms, in the critical period from the late 1960s to about 1975. Kohut's creative process, it is argued, has not been fully appreciated. The authors establish the baseline of Kohut's ideas about the self in his first book, *The Analysis of the Self* in 1971. His ideas then evolved significantly in the next few years, as he came to define the self as the center of psychological experience and then to consider what he came to call the nuclear self and the virtual self as extensions of his core ideas about the self-selfobject system. The authors trace the specific sequence of conceptual steps that Kohut took in his reexamination of what he meant by self. Kohut's thinking in this area proceeded unevenly and not always chronologically. His pathbreaking work in the early 1970s on fragmentation, on the cohesion and continuity of the self, and on the mutable nature of the nuclear self and the virtual self represents a seminal development in the understanding of these psychoanalytic concepts.

This article is the result of two years of research, theoretical exploration, and writing by its authors. In its current form, however, it represents the finalizing work of Charles B. Strozier, Konstantine Pinteris, Kathleen Kelley, and Deborah Mart. As we completed our work, we did so with the difficult knowledge that a central and key figure of our writing group—David Strug—was not present for the final months. He caught COVID-19 in mid-March 2020 and died June 4. We collectively agreed, however, to retain his name as a coauthor of this piece because he was so central to our process. His absence is much felt by this group, and we collectively hold our David Strug in mind and heart.

Heinz Kohut's initial definition of self in *The Analysis of the Self* (1971, pp. xiii-xv) described what might be called a variety of selfstate experiences. He was intent

on capturing this diversity. The very first sentence of his book defines narcissism as the "cathexis of the self," which leads to the idea of separating self from ego, formulations for which he credits Heinz Hartmann (1939). But very quickly Kohut moves conceptually beyond Hartmann and ego psychological metapsychology by stating that the most important narcissistic experiences of objects are that they are "used in the service of the self and of the maintenance of its instinctual investment." These experiences he called the "self-objects."

We are suddenly in a new theoretical world of interpersonal relationality and otherness. Kohut's discussion of the self and its defining relationship with the selfobjects "changed the concept of a self," as the psychoanalyst David Terman (2011, p. 200) astutely noted. It was no longer a discrete structure contained within a tripartite psyche; it was a *system* that embodied a *relationship.* Even locked as he was then in the language of drive theory, these ideas of self moved beyond anything that had previously been written or conceptualized in psychoanalysis, although there were important precursors.

Kohut (1971, pp. xv-xvi) continued in *Analysis* to distinguish self from "high-level abstractions" of id, ego, and superego that are "experience-distant" and part of the "psychic apparatus," constructs much beloved in drive theory. Self, on the other hand, is a "low-level" abstraction, by which Kohut means it is "experience-near," not a structure itself but a "content of the mental apparatus." As such, the self is "cathected with instinctual energy" but, much more importantly, has "continuity in time," that is, it is "enduring." The self also has a psychic location, or rather, "various—and frequently inconsistent—self representations." Self experiences, Kohut believed then, are in the id, the ego, and the superego, but also at conscious and unconscious levels within these structures. They can simultaneously be expressed, for example, as grandiosity and inferiority. The self, then, like representation of objects, is a content of the mind but not one of its constituents, that is, "not one of the agencies of the mind."

Kohut elaborated a few years later (in a paper written in 1974 and published in 1985, p. 33) that in reflecting on the self, one must be open to the "bewildering" complexity of the relevant

phenomena. "Instead of the single self of conscious experience," he notes, there are a variety of "incongruous and inconsistent phenomena" in psychological experience (p. 35). We experience different selves as absolute and as the center of the personality, each "fighting for ascendancy, one blocking out the other, forming compromises with each other, and acting inconsistently with

each other at the same time" (p. 35). Victory of one self over all the others is "inconsistent" as we struggle to achieve "synthesis at all costs" (p. 35).

Kohut's New Ideas of Self in the Early to Mid-1970s

It is necessary to consider a number of conceptual issues that Kohut was grappling with in the wake of the publication of *The Analysis of the Self* in 1971 in order to comprehend how his ideas on the self evolved in the early to mid-1970s. For one thing, he was wrestling with the development of ideas about rage and aggression in relation to the self. Kohut had originally planned to include his thoughts about narcissistic rage as the concluding chapter of *The Analysis of the Self* (Strozier, 2001). He had been working on his theory of rage for some time, but it was his experience with cancer, diagnosed in the spring of 1971 just after the publication of *Analysis*, that led him later that same year to draft a paper on rage (Kohut, 1972). He turned his fury at the gods into significant theoretical understanding about the self and fragmentation.

In rage (Kohut, 1972) there is an "utter disregard for reasonable limitations and a boundless wish to redress an injury and to obtain revenge" (p. 380). We all react to insults and hurts with embarrassment and even anger, which is a significant part of cultural conversation and is often cathartic (Gay, 2016). But rage is another matter, for the most intense experiences of shame and the most violent forms of narcissistic rage arise in those individuals for whom a sense of absolute control over an archaic environment is indispensable. For such individuals, the maintenance of self-esteem—and indeed of the self—depends on the unconditional availability of the approving-mirroring functions of an admiring selfobject, or on the ever-present opportunity for a merger with an idealized one. What is most apparent in a rage

response is the "total lack of empathy toward the offender," the "unmodifiable wish to blot out the offense," and the "unforgiving fury" that arises when one loses control over those mirroring or idealized others who sustain a fragile sense of self cohesion. It could well be that Kohut exaggerated the "total lack of empathy" for the other, the "unmodifiable wish" to wipe out the offense, and the "unforgiving fury" that one sees in rage. He is describing the extreme case, which may be useful for heuristic purposes but misses the more subtle ways that rage operates in more circumscribed instances, eroding empathy and arousing suppressed fury.

Kohut is quite clear in his rage paper (1972) that early developmental trauma leads to a self that is vulnerable to narcissistic injuries. His focus, however, is on the sequence of psychological events, from a narcissistic injury to a rage response, which he argues is the consequence or by-product of a fragmenting self. Such fragmentation results when a fragile, narcissistically organized self is held together by a thread. Its cohesion and continuity are tenuous. The collapse of self that accompanies an experience of shame and humiliation after a narcissistic injury is both rapid and devastating. Such fragmentation pulls apart those bonds of experience that enable the self to survive. In fragmentation, Kohut argues, we are hurled toward nothingness, the ultimate terror. A threatened descent into nothingness is bedrock for Kohut, and he believed that it must be psychologically arrested at any cost. The chaos such fragmentation evokes generates rage in its wake. Revenge comes to occupy the meaning of existence. Life's purpose becomes to right the wrong and punish, shame, and humiliate those who have harmed us. Rage in this sense serves both as an expression of the injury we have sustained and as a way of forestalling total fragmentation into nothingness. Rage, although not healing, is thus restitutional. It halts the downward slide as it focuses the self on retribution and violence. The self engulfed in rage initially loses its cohesion, which threatens its existence, but then reorganizes, albeit at a more archaic level, focused now on revenge on those who have dared to inflict a narcissistic injury.

The conceptual problem Kohut faced, however, with his new theory of fragmentation, is how it relates to the idea of many self experiences as contents of the agencies of the mind. If fragmentation is so central, what is the nature of the self that is falling

apart? How can a multitude of self experiences exist in the mind and simultaneously fragment? Until roughly 1975, Kohut clung tenaciously to his notion of self in his first book and resisted the “elegant and simple theory of mind” that put the self at the “center of our being from which all initiative springs and where all experiences end” (Kohut, 1978, 659-660). He made good arguments to himself, and surely ones that were as effective as can be made, for why he should hold onto his theory of multiplicity of self experiences.

Then, suddenly, he changed his mind (1996, pp. 75-77; this paper was presented in 1973). The self now became the center of our being from which all initiative springs. This new formulation was, of course, more consistent with thinking in philosophy for the past two thousand years and especially in the West since Kant. However, in a way that was typical for Kohut—who could hold

contradictory ideas simultaneously—he kept both the more expansive definition of a multitude of self experiences with his new ideas about *the* self, according to what he considered as the principle of complementarity (Kohut, 1977). He was on the cusp of theoretical confusion, but at the same time he sought to remain true to his clinical findings about the complexities of any theory of self. There is no question, however, that he began talking, and increasingly writing, about the self as the center of our being from which all initiative springs, although always in the I-Thou context of the relationship with the selfobjects. By the time of his last book, written in 1980-1981 (although finished by Arnold Goldberg and Paul Stepansky and published in 1984), Kohut had abandoned any notion of complementarity in his definition of the self (p. 99).

The Nuclear Self

In the early to mid-1970s, when Kohut began to think about a unitary definition of self, he also formulated the idea of a nuclear self. This new idea became central to his thinking. As Frank Summers (2011, p. 209) observes, Kohut's idea of the nuclear self is at the very core of his self psychology, and his theory would be ineffective without it. Summers argues that the release of the "nuclear program of the self" is the most important analytic task.

The context for Kohut's initial formulation of a nuclear self was not specifically clinical but historical and was an exploration into the meaning of the humble resisters to Nazism. Given his personal experience of having to flee Vienna after the *Anschluss* (when the Germans abruptly annexed Austria on March 12, 1938), not to mention nearly being sent to a concentration camp in the summer of 1938 (cf. Strozier, 2001), his inquiry had intense personal meaning for Kohut. His draft paper, written sometime between 1973 and 1975, was nearly 100 typewritten pages triple-spaced. After completing this draft, which included significant marginal comments, he decided for unclear reasons not to publish it and set it aside. In late 1979, however, he asked Charles Strozier to edit the paper and prepare it for publication. Kohut, however, died before that task was completed. Strozier significantly revised what was a very rough paper, shortened it by over half, and gave it the title "On Courage." That version of the paper appeared in 1985, along with other papers and some interviews Strozier conducted with Kohut just before his death, in a book titled *Self Psychology and the Humanities.*

Kohut's (1985) essay explores how ordinary people find courage in the face of profound adversity. They are able to do so by drawing upon an inner compass or motive force, rooted in what Kohut calls a nuclear self. Kohut describes the nuclear self as, on the one hand, the basis of a single, unified experience, "that continuum in time, that cohesive configuration in depth, which we experience as the 'I' of our perceptions, thoughts and actions" (p. 9), and on the other hand, as mutable, shifting, and able to undergo changes at critical junctures in life. Each person contains many selves, but the nuclear self is the "most centrally located in the psyche, one which is experienced by the individual as the basic one, and which is most resistant to change" (p. 10). Each of the various conflicting selves within the personality should be "imbued with a sufficient amount of narcissistic investment" (p. 11) to be felt as a kind of center unto itself, without which we would experience a profound sense of fragmentation. The nuclear self undergirds these shifting, paradoxical selves with its "dynamically and genetically meaningful pattern" (p. 30). Kohut observed that most adults repress their nuclear, or deep, self in the interest of participating in externally defined,

socially consensual systems, giving others a shallow "impression of artificiality."

According to Kohut (1985), this nuclear self is "an abstraction derived from psychoanalytic clinical experience," and a "potentially observable content of the mind" (p. 10). It cannot be defined or framed from an objective point of view, but rather is approached and felt based on observable signs and characteristics. These include steadfastness, tranquil joy, a fine sense of humor, subtle empathy, and a "profound sense of inner peace." The nuclear self is also a source of wisdom and courage.

To illustrate how the nuclear self can be generative of great acts of courage, Kohut turns to a study of three heroic Nazi resisters: Franz Jaegerstaetter and siblings Hans and Sophie Scholl. He describes how in the face of terrible adversity the Nazi resisters were able to draw on self-generated guiding principles that led to their selfless acts. Faced with a crisis and even at the price of death, they fulfilled the "heroic" task of living in alignment with their nuclear selves. Each of the Nazi resisters consciously engaged in activities that resulted in their executions.

Franz Jaegerstaetter had a dream in 1938 in which he is shown a train while an inner voice tells him it is taking adults and children to hell. The dream represented his environment, in which everyone he knew was jumping onto the Nazi bandwagon, as well as his "rediscovering" (as opposed to discovering,

because it was always there) his nuclear self. Upon waking, he understood that he could not betray himself by submitting to the extreme pressures placed upon him by the Nazis. He was the only person in his village to vote against the Anschluss. The dream comes almost like a lighting bolt or act of grace that touches and brings forth the deepest part of his personality. Jaegerstaetter awakes from the dream, transfigured in a sense, with no doubts whatsoever that he will follow his nuclear program and stand for what he believes to be good, right, and humane, even at the cost his life. Jaegerstaetter is then quietly humorous about his situation in letters to his wife as he awaits execution.

Hans and Sophie Scholl were arrested and executed shortly after being caught handing out anti-Nazi flyers for the White Rose movement. Hans openly risked his life for Nazi victims in the months and years before his death in ways that showed his deep

empathy for their suffering. Sophie Scholl, for her part, embodied serenity and inner peace, when on the day of her execution she is described as glowing, a picture of health, and going to her death without a trace of fear. The quality of inner peace is illuminated by Sophie Scholl's final dream. In it she is wearing a white garment, climbing a mountain, and holding a small child. When a crevice opens before her, she is able to save the child but she falls in. She offers an interpretation of the dream the next day before her execution: The child, representing the White Rose ideals, would live on, “despite the obstacles.” Her nuclear self was in harmony with the rest of her personality (Kohut, 1985, p. 19) and thus became “indomitable,” leading to her profound sense of inner peace, even in the face of death.

For Kohut (speaking in the sexist language that prevailed at the time) the nuclear self is embodied by Tragic Man, in contrast to Freud's Guilty Man, who expresses shallower parts of the personality. Kohut would return to this distinction in *The Restoration of the Self* in 1977. The self of Freud's Guilty Man is built around love and work, but also suffering, rooted in genetically programmed drives toward aggression and ultimately a fear of death. As Kohut (1977) argues, in Freud's view, Guilty Man must “bow to the inevitable victory of life-destructive forces” (pp. 224-225). Tragic figures like Oedipus, Jesus, and Hamlet, on the other hand, as well as the Scholls and Franz Jaegerstaetter, all embody the triumph of the nuclear self, and their deaths were the ultimate crowning of this self's pattern or destiny.

It takes courage to follow the nuclear self's program against powerful external pressures. The guilty person of love and work is a moral one, propelled by

drives and under the authority of the superego. The truly courageous but often tragic individual follows the path of the deepest self, and his or her guiding principles, compass, and choices are self-generated.

Rediscovering, rebuilding, or recreating the nuclear self is our ultimate task and remains the goal of self-analysis. The reward is a kind of personal freedom from "fear and guilt, expiation and reform." Death becomes "an integral part of the life curve of the self" (Kohut, 1985, pp. 49-50). Tranquil joy is the final phase of this task, the "equilibrium at the point when the central narcissistic structure achieves its total victory and a tranquil joy pervades the

total personality." It represents the "ultimate ascendancy of a firm and life-affirming self" (Kohut, 1985, p. 27).

There has been much misunderstanding of Kohut's idea of the nuclear self. Robert Stolorow and George Atwood (2016, p. 186), for example, argue that any notion of selfhood, and certainly that of a nuclear self, is illusory, because it renders the self as stable and unitary, rather than discontinuous, uncertain, and fragmented. Stolorow and Atwood (1992) consider the intersubjective field to play "the constitutive role of relatedness in the making of all experience" (p. xiii), and that the experience of selfhood is context-embedded (Stolorow & Atwood, 2016; cf. Hagman, Paul, & Zimmermann, 2019). Trop and Trop (2018) further suggest that the notion of a "nuclear self" is rigid and insufficiently fluid.

For Kohut, however, the concept of the nuclear self is not a stable or unitary notion that is rigid and insufficiently fluid, because Kohut's very notion of the nuclear self—indeed of the self in general—is inseparable from the selfobject. Kohut's concepts of self and the nuclear self are interconnected with others whose functions we use to maintain our cohesion in a constantly evolving system that is context-embedded. Kohut was unique among psychoanalytic thinkers for having described a deeply contextualized concept of self; since he wrote, his ideas of self have been reframed and expressed in a different language, but not altered conceptually in any fundamental sense.

Furthermore, we can deepen our understanding of what Kohut meant by his idea of the nuclear self by considering what is true and authentic in experience. This broader definition of what Kohut meant by the nuclear self is that truth and authenticity emerge in a variety of ways knowable through introspective self-understanding and empathic understanding within one's self-selfobject system. In one sense, the point of psychoanalysis is to identify, through the long and arduous task of inquiry into experience, that authentic truth Kohut

called the nuclear self. It is a process that involves failure, backsliding, and pained progress, which is always tentative and in context. But there are some psychological markers that lead toward the notion of an authentic truth that occupied Kohut's imagination both before and after he started talking and writing about what he called a nuclear self in his courage paper.

What is clear in what we recognize in retrospect as Kohut's first self-psychological paper in 1966, “Forms and Transformations of Narcissism,” is that he introduces, however tentatively, the key idea that ambitions and ideals in human experience exist outside of the formal structural model of id, ego, and superego. Ideals and ambition are aspects of the self, which at this point he subsumes as a dimension of narcissism, although that idea leads him to the much more interesting notion that narcissism itself can be transformed. The self, in other words, is mutable and amenable to transformation. Narcissistic energies, as he puts it, can be transformed into “more highly differentiated, new psychological configurations,” including creativity, empathy, the capacity to contemplate one's own impermanence, humor, and ultimately wisdom.

Kohut (1966) describes each of these “configurations” in markedly clear and precise terms. Empathy, as the underlying glue that ties them all together, “is an essential constituent of psychological observation” that is based on the fact that in our “earliest mental organization the feelings, actions, and behavior of the mother had been included in our self” (p. 262). He notes that this deep empathic connection with early caregivers can get lost in development. He writes: “Nonempathic forms of cognition ... attuned to objects which are essentially dissimilar to the self become increasingly superimposed over the original empathic mode of reality perception and tend to impede its free operation” (pp. 261-262). Kohut's ideas on empathy evolved from his early writings in the late 1950s, as in “Forms and Transformations,” where it is described as a configuration of narcissism, to the early 1970s, as in “On Courage,” where he argues that empathy not only forms the basis of what constitutes the self but also is the preeminent basis of self psychology. By the early 1970s and for the rest of his life, Kohut's self psychology becomes for all intents and purposes a psychology of empathy.

The element of creativity, he (1966) goes on to say,

> *serves many purposes, and it involves the whole personality, and thus a wide range of psychological structures and drives. Creative people may of course be hungry for fame and are vulnerable, even regressed and childlike, but they are in touch with their*

> *surroundings. They break down the "I-you" barrier, which lends their work true insight. (p. 264)*

The acceptance of our transience, or death, is another form of transformed narcissism and may in fact represent our "greatest psychological achievement, despite the fact that it can often be demonstrated that a manifest acceptance of transience may go hand in hand with covert denials" (Kohut, 1966, p. 268). To grasp with painful clarity that we die represents a huge step in reaching that authentic truth of experience. It might seem a long way from accepting our transience to humor as another transformation of narcissism, but, says Kohut, the two have much in common. Both relate to an acceptance of our end, not with excessive humor that can serve to avoid reality but as a quiet "superior stance" that allows one to contemplate his or her own end philosophically.

Finally, Kohut (1966) discusses wisdom as his last example of transformed narcissism. In a sense, wisdom is the crowning achievement of the self. It is marked by one's "acceptance of the limitations of his physical, intellectual, and emotional powers" (p. 270). Wisdom draws on the attainment of higher forms of cognition, to be sure, and the renunciation of the more elemental narcissistic demands that can debilitate experience. Wisdom embodies the possession of ideals, the capacity for humor, and the acceptance of our transience, but also transcends these other forms of transformed narcissism. They must be present but do not themselves constitute wisdom, which can be defined as a, "stable attitude of the personality toward life and the world, an attitude which is formed through the integration of the cognitive function with humor, acceptance of transience, and a firmly cathected system of values" (p. 267). After 1966, Kohut no longer speaks of transformed narcissism and uses these qualities, as in the courage paper, as illustrative of the self.

Kohut (1979) also described in some detail in his autobiographical case, "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z," that sense of an authentic truth in self experience, which he called "nuclear" in other contexts. Written some 14 years after "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism" and within 2 years of Kohut's own death, the intensely personal case of Mr. Z illustrates the sharp difference between an "experience-distant" formulation and one much more attuned to his authentic self experience. There are many ways of discussing

this aspect of this rich and insightful “case,” but nothing illustrates it better than the contrast in the way Mr. Z comes to understand his dreams at the end of each analysis.

At the conclusion of his Freudian analysis, for example—which was in Chicago with Ruth Eissler in the 1940s—Kohut had a dream of his father rejoining the family after a long absence when Z/ Kohut was 5 years old. He (1979) wrote:

> *He was in a house, at the inner side of a door which was a crack open. Outside was the father, loaded with giftwrapped packages, wanting to enter. The patient was intensely frightened and attempted to close the door in order to keep the father out. (p. 22)*

The dream, he felt in this first analysis, centered on wanting to keep the father out to consolidate his oedipal victory with his mother, although it was tinged with castration anxiety and a “defensively taken submissive and passive homosexual attitude toward the father” (p. 22). In his second, self-psychological analysis, Kohut (1979) came to a remarkably different interpretation of the dream:

> *The new meaning of the dream as elucidated by the patient via his associations, to put his message into my words, was not a portrayal of a child's aggressive impulse against the adult male accompanied by castration fear, but of the mental state of a boy who had been all-too-long without a father; of a boy deprived of the psychological substance from which, via innumerable observations of the father's assets and defects, he would build up, little by little, the core of an independent masculine self. When the father suddenly returned to take his position in the family, the patient was indeed exposed to a frightening situation. The danger to which he was exposed was not, however, to his body but to his mind. (p. 23)*

What the dream showed Kohut is that he wanted to let the father in, not keep him out.

In his second analysis, Kohut also gained much clarity about his truer feelings toward his mother and her icy withdrawal when he moved to autonomy (which set off dreams he [1979]

described as “desolate landscapes, burned-out cities, and, most deeply upsetting, of heaps of piled-up human bodies, like those in pictures of

concentration camps he had seen on T.V." [p. 18]). But his most interesting dream was of seeing his naked mother from the back and feeling almost existential dread. Kohut dismisses as superficial—and what would have been his interpretation in his first analysis—any idea that the relevant issue derived from not seeing his mother's genitals. What he came to see is that his dread came not from his inability to see his mother's missing penis, but that her back was turned to him and he could not see her absent face.

In another personal note, in a conversation with Strozier in 1979, Kohut (1985) illustrated the authentic truth of his experience in terms of the continuity of the self:

> *I'm an old man. My hair is grey. My muscles are feeble. Yet I know I am the same person I was when I was 18, and 22, and 6, when I was running and jumping. It's still in me and a part of me. There is no discontinuity. I have totally changed and yet my conviction that I have remained the same is absolute. I never feel myself chopped up in that way, however otherwise my self might be endangered. There is that sense of continuity along the time axis from the little boy in the Austrian Alps to Vienna to the well-known investigator of the self at the age of 68 in a place whose name I hardly knew when I was that young. I have no question I am the same. There is a sense of utter continuity. (p. 236)*

The Virtual Self

Reflections on nuclear self experience also led Kohut in the early to mid-1970s to consider issues of developmental beginnings of the self. Are we born with a nuclear self? And even more importantly, how does a notion of a nuclear self relate to early selfobject experience? Kohut's (1996) reflections on these interrelated questions led him to consider the idea of a virtual self. His insight is startlingly original, simple, and elegant. Kohut's idea is that the psychological reality of a baby exists as if real in the mind of the mother. "From the very beginning," Kohut says (in a reflection

written on March 28, 1975), "the parents relate to the child as if he were an independent center of initiative, already a special individual" (p. 297). At birth, Kohut says, the baby has not one "iota of self-awareness" but is already an "anticipatory expectation in the empathic self-object mother's mind about what

this child should feel as an independent self" (p. 297). The baby is a complete psychological being if seen within the selfobject milieu of the mother. The baby's self is an imagined future, a potential yet to unfold within the context of its virtual reality.

Two years later in *The Restoration of the Self*, Kohut (1977) extended his idea about the virtual self by arguing for a synergy between the mother's nuclear self and the virtual self of the baby: "The nuclear self ... is not formed via conscious encouragement and praise and via conscious discouragement and rebuke, but by the deeply anchored responsiveness of the self-objects, which in the last analysis, is a function of the self-objects' own nuclear selves" (pp. 99-101). The newborn has no "reflective awareness," and yet is from the beginning "fused via mutual empathy with an environment that does experience him as already possessing a self" (p. 99). Earlier in the book, he elaborates:

> *At the moment when the mother sees her baby for the first time and is also in contact with him (through tactile, olfactory, and proprioceptive channels as she feeds, carries, bathes him), a process that lays down a person's self has its virtual beginning—it continues throughout childhood and to a lesser extent later in life. (p. 15)*

One's nuclear self, in other words, exists as the developmental descendant of an earlier and more ephemeral virtual self. Kohut's nuclear self is a developmentally alive, inherently relational concept. From the very beginning, the baby exists as a virtual self in the context of the mother's empathic milieu, a complete, cohesive, independent center of initiative. Kohut lays the groundwork for a relational developmental process, which unfolds between infant and caregiver and concurrently engages the dyad's own unique qualities, yet somehow also represents a developmental linkage into the ineffable relational milieus one shares with one's culture, cross-generational experiences, beliefs, and even human evolution. The virtual self begins before birth, with the actual

experience of mother and baby in the womb. The virtual self is intimately connected to the nascent self of the baby. The nascent baby meets what is dreamed of in the mother or caregiver, along with the whole cultural heritage embodied in the womb. What becomes actual is the emergence of a child with its nascent potential, in the context of its relationship with the mother.

The virtual self experience between caregiver and child can, in the best of circumstances, support an awakening into authenticity. The same possibilities for healing exist in the therapeutic encounter between analyst and analysand. An analyst engages with the analysand's virtual self from the outset, even if unconsciously. The analysand seeks therapy to create an imagined future self but has no clear sense of its contours or form. The analyst, in turn, meets these expectations with an image of future potential that is implicit in the encounter. In this way, psychoanalysis relies on the virtual self paradigm in an anticipatory manner. The empathic ground must be prepared. Then there will be disappointment. Explanation makes sense of what has happened. Structure is what results. The gradual and inherent tilt toward wholeness and integration is bolstered by the milieu of empathic attunement. As in development, truth and authenticity are shared virtual strivings inherent in an empathic psychoanalytic process. This process at its inception is virtual in form and function.

Conclusion

Kohut continued to reflect on aspects of self after 1975. Most notably, he theorized the tension between the poles of the mirroring and idealized selfobject transferences in *The Restoration of the Self* in 1977. In his last book, *How Does Analysis Cure?* (published posthumously in 1984), he argues that we should consider the idea of twinship as a coequal selfobject transference, along with mirroring and idealization. We have not extended our analysis in this article to treat these ideas, which are dealt with by John Riker in this collection. Our paper, in other words, and that of Riker, complement each other. Our focus is on Kohut's earlier and, we argue, critical formulations in his 1966 paper, “Forms and Transformations of Narcissism,” his first book in 1971, *The Analysis of the Self*, and then his ideas about the nuclear self in the draft paper, “On Courage,” and his tentative

but fascinating ideas about the “virtual self” a few years later. We feel this early and creative period in Kohut's thinking has not been fully understood. It was then that he formulated his basic ideas about self that transformed thinking in psychoanalysis in a way that fully embraced ambiguity and laid the theoretical groundwork for a theory of self that has proven pivotal for contemporary self psychology, intersubjectivity, and relational psychoanalysis.

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