My interest in Kohut's theory of narcissism has developed not just because I find his approach conceptually interesting and because his work has had an enormous impact on clinical practice, but because I think he illustrates, more than any other theorist I can think of, the political dimension within psychoanalytic theorizing. To highlight this aspect of his work, I would like to do three things in this presentation; first, to track the basic principles of Kohut's approach to narcissism and personality functioning in general; second, to place Kohut's work in the larger context of the history of psychoanalytic ideas and the range of strategies taken by various theorists for positioning themselves within that tradition; and third, to examine the implications of Kohut's ancestry in and political affiliation with drive theory for his formulations concerning narcissism.

In presenting Kohut's views, I want to focus mostly on his most recent book, The Restoration of the Self. However, I would like to begin by briefly summarizing the major lines of his argument in his earlier book, The Analysis of the Self, published in 1971, since his fundamental innovations were introduced there. What has changed since 1971 are not Kohut's basic concepts, but the way he positions them vis-à-vis classical theory—in other words, his politics.

In the earlier work Kohut takes as his terminological starting point Freud's original distinction between narcissistic libido and object libido, although he radically alters the meaning of these terms. Kohut suggests a conceptual framework in which narcissistic libido and object libido are conceived of as independent energy sources, reflecting different kinds of experiences and undergoing independent lines of development and transformation. Both


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types of libido cathect objects, but the objects are vastly different. Object libido cathects “true” objects, which are separate from the subject, and draws its energy from the drives as spelled out in classical drive theory. Narcissistic libido cathects “self-objects,” in which the object is
experienced as an extension of the self, either as a reflector of the greatness of the self or as a source of greatness in which the self participates. The terms narcissistic libido and object libido no longer reflect the target of the energy, as in Freud's original usage, but the quality of the relatedness to the object, with particular emphasis on whether or not the object is experienced as differentiated from the subject.

A cohesive and separate self grows out of the developmental transformation of narcissistic libido. This means that the development of the self takes place independently of the drives and object libido. The earliest narcissistic libidinal experiences and, in fact, all later narcissistic experiences, are of two types: grandiose self-configurations connected to mirroring self-objects (“I am perfect, and you appreciate and reflect my perfection”) and self-images fused with archaic idealized self-objects (“You are perfect, and I am part of you”). In healthy development as described by Kohut, there is a gradual, bit by bit breakdown of the more grossly unrealistic aspects of the self - and object images, and a slow internalization of these external relationships with self-objects into permanent structures within the psyche. This process, which Kohut terms “transmuting internalization,” is triggered by the natural and inevitable incremental disappointments in oneself and in idealized self-objects during early childhood. True object relations take place only later, since object-relatedness, in Kohut's use of the term, presupposes the development of a stable self as distinct from objects and hence is a developmental achievement of considerable complexity.

These interesting and innovative formulations raise several immediate and crucial questions. If object libido, involving drive gratification, catacts “true” or “differentiated objects,” where are the drives prior to the formation of a differentiated, cohesive self? How can the emerging self relate both to “true” or differentiated objects through object libido and the drives, and also to undifferentiated self-objects through narcissistic libido? What is the relationship between these two modes of relatedness? It was not until The Restoration of the Self,1 published six years later, that Kohut addressed these unresolved and inescapable problems within his original formulations.

Kohut explains in the Preface to that volume that whereas his earlier work was written within the conceptual framework of ego psychology, with the addition of the “self”-concept to the ego psychological view of the drive-fueled workings of the psychic apparatus, the present work proceeds from a broader perspective, which he designates as the psychology of the self. The central and unanswered question throughout the book is whether this new perspective constitutes a new metapsychological framework truly supplanting classical drive theory, which the flow of Kohut's thought and the force of his data clearly demand, or whether the new perspective is merely picking up on a different dimension of human experience and hence is complementary to classical drive theory, which Kohut's concern for continuity and integration requires. Kohut swings back and forth between these two possibilities, seemingly never quite feeling completely comfortable with either.
Kohut criticizes the classical metapsychology of drive theory directly and on several levels: philosophically, esthetically, and clinically. He argues that the key issue is not the mode of drive gratification, but the state of the self. True, Kohut allows, a self that is enfeebled and fragmented will become preoccupied with pure pleasure aims, but this is a defensive operation, and the essential meaning of libidinal conflicts is understood only in the context of the issues with which the self is struggling. The overeating of the greedy, obese person, for example, reflects not a fixation to oral gratification, but a need for a food-giving self-object—i.e., the need for a certain kind of relatedness, expressed through the oral greed. The primary psychological constellations and motivations are composed of the relations of the self to self-objects. Kohut suggests that the drive model is focused essentially on “disintegration products.” That is, the self, most basically, does not seek tension reduction or instinctual expression, but seeks relatedness, attachment—a connection to others. If there is severe injury to the self and its relations, these primary constellations break down, and there is a deterioration to pure pleasure-seeking behavior and rage. Hence, classical theory has taken what is already a result of severe pathology and made it the building blocks of its developmental psychology.

Kohut elaborates as an alternative conceptual framework a theory of the development of the self out of its relations to self-objects. Kohut suggests that the child is born with a preparedness for adaptation within an empathic, responsive human milieu, the relatedness being as essential to his psychological survival as is oxygen for his physical survival. The basic motivational energy and the primary unit of analysis in Kohut's system is provided by the relationship of the self to self-objects. Kohut then places into this new framework the concepts concerning the two branches of narcissism he had developed in 1971, changing his terminology slightly. Normal narcissism consists of grandiosity, mirrored by the empathic self-object, and admiration, experienced through a fusion with the idealized self-object. These two branches of narcissism form the two poles of the self. At the core of a healthy and cohesive self can be either a grandiose, exhibitionistic self, derived from experiences with the mirroring self-object, or the idealized parent image, derived from experiences with the idealized self-object. The particularities of the self are determined both by the content of these constituents and also their relation to each other.

Interwoven with Kohut's critique of drive theory and the development of

his psychology of the self is a reclamation of drive theory; he periodically attempts to set his new concepts back into the old context. He does this first by proclaiming a “principle of complementarity” and suggesting that the psychology of the self addresses itself to merely a different dimension of human experience, complementary to the focus of classical drive theory. These two aspects of the psychological nature of man he terms tragic man and guilty man. For the guilty man of drive theory, the hidden knowledge, or content of the repressed, involves drives and castration anxiety. For the tragic man of the psychology of the self, the repressed is composed of structures, split off and fragmented aspects of the self. These two realms are both important and complementary. Second, Kohut attempts to preserve classical theory by distinguishing diagnostically between “structural neuroses” or classical stymptom neuroses, and “disorders of the self,” which include everything else. He suggests that within the realm of structural neuroses, drive theory is adequate as an explanatory context, since the self is already
formed and the issues are primarily oedipal ones. Thus, the carefully defined area of “structural neurosis” serves as a kind of holy ground where the old gods still reign. We will return to these strategies for preserving drive theory shortly.

Kohut's point of view has gradually shifted from classical impulse psychology to a psychology that is essentially object-relational or interpersonal. Little by little, the emphasis in Kohut's grasp of the essential aspects of development has shifted from impulses and conflict to relations with others. If one takes a close look at some of the clinical illustrations Kohut presents, it is clear that, even though he couches his formulations almost exclusively in terms of “narcissism,” the clinical discussions reflect an awareness of the fullness and complexities of relations between the child and parental figures. For example, his concept of “mirroring” has become broadened by 1977 to refer to the total mother-child matrix, including not only reflections of grandiosity, but constancy, nurturance, emotional availability and a general empathy and respect, as well.

The nature of this shift in Kohut's vision is expressed most clearly in a fascinating paper published last year entitled “The Two Analyses of Mr. Z.”3 In this paper, Kohut discusses two complete analyses with the same patient, each lasting four years at five times per week, separated by a 5 1/2 year interval. In the first analysis, Kohut suggests, he was thinking and working within the classical model, whereas by the time the patient returned, he was thinking and working within his newly developing psychology of the self. Kohut couches the shift, of course, in terms of his formulations concerning narcissism. What was most striking in my reading of the paper, however, were the absence of the parents as real people in the first analysis. All the interpretations concerned schematic and standardized figures: the patient's grandiosity reflected his oedipal triumph during the time his father abandoned the family; the patient's major anxieties centered on castration anxiety and fear of the father as an oedipal rival upon his return; other themes reflect a regression to pregenital aims in flight from oedipal and castration anxiety, etc. In the second analysis, Kohut discovered that the patient's mother was psychotic, sadistic, and intrusive in bizarre and terrifying ways, and that the patient's father revealed a subtle blend of submissive and secretly expansive qualities. While within the classical framework of his first analysis, the patient is seen solely as a product of instinctual drives, with schematic and universal properties, the second analysis explored the impact of the parents as people on Mr. Z's development and difficulties in living. Within this new framework, the patient is seen within a network of relationships. As Kohut puts it, “I believe that I now understand how the structure of Mr. Z's self. was genetically related to the personalities of his parents.”3,p. 25

I would now like to step back from Kohut's recent work and consider certain major shifts in conceptualization and emphasis within the history of psychoanalytic ideas.

Freud's first formulations concerning the origin of neurosis put great emphasis on the central impact of significant others. In fact, prior to 1897, he believed seduction by adults to be the causative factor in all psychopathology. The eventual implausibility of this infantile seduction theory opened the way for the discovery of the significance of fantasy and the development of
drive theory. I'd like you to consider for a moment Freud's state of mind at this crucial point, in 1897. Freud had written over the past several years a series of papers promulgating his seduction theory and, despite Breuer's gradual defection and the unpopularity of his views, Freud had staked his reputation on this theory. Imagine his initial chagrin when, partially through his own efforts at self-analysis, he discovered that his patients' “memories” did not necessarily correspond to actual events at all, but were a product of their own imaginations. Freud had been taken. It was not the parent who had seduced the child, but the child who had longed to be seduced. It was a testimony to Freud's courage and genius that he was able to turn this discovery of his error into an occasion for deepening his inquiry into the nature of human experience. If sexuality was not introduced precociously into the mind of the child by the adult, Freud reasoned, it must have been generated from within the mind of the child, as the product, as Freud conceptualized it, of inherent drives and wishes. At this point, the emphasis in Freud's psychology shifted radically from the study of the impact of relations with others, to the study of the internal life of the child, conceptualized as resulting from the unfolding and complex development of the drives and their derivatives. Relations between the self and others, real and imagined, were not eliminated entirely, but were understood to be important only in their relation to their role vis-à-vis the drives, as gratifiers or inhibitors. Part of the reason for this underemphasis on the reality of the interaction between the self and others within classical drive theory must have been due to Freud's having felt burned by his patients’ apochryphal seduction memories. Thereafter, the focus was not on what the parents did to or with the child, but on the press and dread of what were taken to be the child's own instinctual needs. The work of Melanie Klein represents the furthest extension of the swing of the pendulum on this particular issue, where real others are relegated to the important, yet distinctively secondary role of merely modifying or refining the more primary relations with internal objects which are built into and generated from the instincts themselves.

The clearest departures from classical drive theory came during the 1930s and 1940s in the work of the so-called Neo-Freudians (Sullivan, Horney and Fromm), and in the object-relations theory of Fairbairn. Although each of these theories is very different in many important respects from the others, they have in common a radical rejection of drive theory as the basis for human motivation and development, substituting instead a view stressing the development of the self out of its relations with others. Of course, these relations are not viewed in terms of single acts, like seductions, but in the interaction of personalities over time. Others are sought, according to this group of theorists, not because of their properties as gratifiers or inhibitors of drive tension, as in the classical model, but because contact and relatedness with others is understood as a powerful motivational force in its own right. Residues of these relations become central features in the development and structuralization of the self.

Perhaps the greatest schism in the history of theoretical psychoanalysis has been between those theorists who broke decisively with the drive theory model and those theorists who maintained their allegiance. The latter group, of which American ego psychology is the most prominent example, has certainly not remained static. In fact, in both groups, there has been a clear and unmistakable shift of the pendulum back in the direction of an emphasis on the importance of
relations between self and others. The growing, widespread interest in “object relations” and formulations concerning the self by such formally orthodox writers as Schafer and Gedo are illustrative of this widespread shift. However, those theorists who have attempted to preserve an allegiance to drive theory have had to face a considerably difficult problem, which the theorists who broke with drive theory were spared. How can an understanding of the importance of relations with others be reconciled with drive theory? If human motivation is concerned with drive gratification, how can object relations be more than instruments of the drives? Or, put the other way, if relations with others have a central and primary importance, what happens to the drives?

Kohut is among those theorists caught squarely in the middle of this dilemma, and, I suggest, his attempts to work his way out of it constitute a large portion of his writings. His way out is different from strategies of theorists like Edith Jacobson and Kernberg, who have attempted to weave object-relations issues into drive theory by changing the very definition and conception of the drives themselves, to include the impact of early relationships. Kohut, as we have seen, leaves classical drive theory intact, and simply grafts on to it his psychology of the self, declaring the two theories compatible according to the “principle of complementarity.” I would like first to return to Kohut's work, to consider more closely his particular strategies for blending the new with the old (i.e., drive theory), and second, to point out the constrictive shadow which the drive theory model casts over even the newest of his formulations.

The first of Kohut's strategies centers around his “principle of complementarity”—the drive model and the self-psychology model are tapping different dimensions of the complexity of human experience, guilty man and tragic man, respectively. This principle is difficult to reconcile with Kohut's other formulations. Kohut has argued that drive impulses are pathological products of a deterioration of larger relational configurations. If the impulse results from a disintegration of relationship, how can one have both impulse and relationship simultaneously and complementarity? Kohut argues that most clinical material can be interpreted both ways, in terms of drive and conflict issues and in terms of the psychology of the self, again suggesting the importance of complementarity. Yet, the fact that interpretations can be drawn both ways doesn't necessarily mean that it is useful to, or that it adds anything to the explanatory power of one's interpretive framework to do so. In this case it merely seems to compound formulations in an internally inconsistent way. Kohut employs an analogy to algebraic equations, suggesting that the drive theory model is adequate in explaining “structural conflict,” even though it leaves out the self, since it leaves out the self on both sides of the conflict, and, therefore, as in equations, the effect of the omission is equalized and nullified. This has considerable polemical elegance, but, on closer examination, seems puzzling and not very persuasive. How can one, to use Kohut's phrase, “disregard the participating self” and still essentially understand the phenomena? If drives result from the disintegration of primary relatedness, doesn't a theory which views drives as primary, and sees pathology as consisting of conflicts concerning drive derivatives, fundamentally misunderstand the central difficulties? To say that leaving out the self on both sides of the conflict is algebraically insignificant doesn't address the fact that it also omits a focus
on the fundamental psychological issues, which are, after all, what psychoanalytic theories, in contrast to algebra, are supposed to be dealing with. The “principle of complementarity” seems less designed to integrate two compatible and mutually enriching perspectives and more designed to preserve an older framework that is conceptually incompatible with a newer one.

The second major preservative strategy Kohut employs is his proposition that there are two classes of pathology-disorders of the self and “structural neurosis”-and that the drive theory is applicable to the latter. Much of Kohut's argument is directed toward an orthodox audience, defending the clinical reality of the “disorders of the self” necessitating the development of his new psychology of the self. It seems to me that the concept of “structural neurosis” as based on conflicts involving drive derivatives is more in need of a defense, and is fundamentally contradicted, again, by Kohut's innovative concepts concerning the development of the self. Kohut argues that “structural neurosis” involves conflicts concerning drives and “true objects,” thereby presupposing an intact self. Yet, he has also argued that drives are disintegration products reflecting a breakdown of primary relational configurations, thereby presupposing a pathologically defective self. How can “structural neurosis” contain at one and the same time no self-pathology and conflicts concerning drives, which, by definition, reflect severe self-pathology? One is almost compelled to wonder whether disorders of the self and “structural neurosis” are qualitatively divergent categories of pathology or whether they both involve disorders of the self in relation to self-objects, distinguishable quantitatively. At a few points in his latest volume Kohut does seem to imply this, for example, in his suggestion that oedipal struggle concerning conflict and turmoil may already reflect disturbances in relation to self-objects. Kohut thus poses as a possible speculation what his whole line of thought seems to demand as a conclusion. The strategy of preserving the drive theory metapsychological framework by establishing a diagnostic domain for orthodox concepts again has an aesthetic appeal, but seems conceptually unnecessary, clinically misleading, and at odds with the thrust of Kohut's major lines of innovative theorizing.

Having considered Kohut's strategies for grafting his new formulations onto classical drive theory, I would like to finish this presentation by considering the way in which his tie to drive theory influences, in a constrictive fashion, the manner in which he has developed his new, more relational concepts. Although, as we have seen, Kohut's clinical illustrations reveal an attention to the complexities of the relationships between the child and the parents, he has a tendency, in his theoretical formulations, to collapse all interpersonal issues around the concept of “narcissistic needs,” always along the two branches he had established in 1971-mirroring and idealization. The complexities of the child's wishes and feelings concerning the parents are categorized into these two modes-the desire for empathic mirroring and the opportunity to idealize the parent. As a consequence, developmentally significant persons, for Kohut, always remain somewhat schematic
and shadowy figures, important only in their role as narcissistic gratifiers or frustrators. This, by
the way, is characteristic of the treatment of object relations in most theories deriving from drive
theory. Objects are important only in relation to the drives, as gratifiers or inhibiter. As a further
consequence of this collapsing of all issues around narcissism and all relations to others around
the polar categories of gratification and frustration, all psycho-pathology is then attributed by
Kohut to narcissistic injuries sustained by failures of the self-objects in mirroring or allowing
idealization. This uniformity of formulation prevails despite the fact that in case examples
illustrating these presumed narcissistic failures, as, for example, in the case of Mr. Z, Kohut is
clearly describing gross defects in the parents’ personalities, including depressions, withdrawal,
emotional shallowness, violent mood swings, and mechanical relatedness to the child. Although
the parents are brutalizing the child emotionally, Kohut is determined to limit the injurious effect
to the failure to reflect infantile grandiosity.

Why does Kohut overwork the concept of narcissism? In addition to the principle of getting the
most out of a good thing, one would have to speculate that part of the appeal of this term is that it
grew historically and linguistically out of drive theory; in using narcissism as an energetic force
which is either gratified or frustrated, Kohut preserves an instinctual flavor in his formulations.
Thus, although Kohut has almost given up drive theory, his treatment of developmentally
significant others still preserves some of the old drive theory slant, and his overuse of the
concept of narcissism causes his formulations to appear at times reductionistic and
oversimplified. One might question, for example, whether mirroring and idealization and their
incremental dissolution are the most salient aspects in the building of the self, or whether the self
develops out of the real emotional contact the parents have with the child. Central to this contact
are their acceptance of the child not as grand, but as he is, with his limitations, and their allowing
themselves to be seen as real people, experienced not solely as ideal, but also as sometimes
frightened, confused, and struggling. Is the basis for the growth of the self the incremental
disappointments in instinctual, infantile narcissism, as Kohut suggests, or the real, nonillusory
contact between the parents and the child over time?

Note

1 Portions of this work were previously published in “Twilight of the Idols: Change and
Preservation in the Writings of Heinz Kohutz.” Contemporary Psychoanalysis 1979, 15, No. 1

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3 Kohut, H. The two analyses of Mr. Z, Int. J. Psycho-Anal., 60 (3): 3-27, 1979. [→]
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