Experiencing Selfhood Is Not “A Self”

Robert D. Stolorow Ph.D. & George E. Atwood Ph.D.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15551024.2016.1141611

Published online: 25 Feb 2016.
Experiencing Selfhood Is Not “A Self”

ROBERT D. STOLOROW, PH.D., AND GEORGE E. ATWOOD, PH.D.

Kohut’s lasting and most important contribution to psychoanalytic clinical theory was his recognition that the experiencing of selfhood is always constituted, both developmentally and in psychoanalytic treatment, in a context of emotional interrelatedness. The experiencing of selfhood, he realized, or of its collapse, is context-embedded through and through. The theoretical language of self psychology with its noun, “the self,” reifies the experiencing of selfhood and transforms it into a metaphysical entity with thing-like properties, in effect undoing Kohut’s hard-won clinical contextualizations. The language of such decontextualizing objectifications bewitches intelligence in order to evade the tragic dimension of finite human existing.

Keywords: bipolar self; experiencing selfhood; George Klein; Ludwig Wittgenstein; metaphysical illusion; Wilhelm Dilthey

The contemporary analysis of human existence fills us all with a sense of fragility, with the power of dark instincts, with the suffering caused by mysteries and illusions, and with the finitude shown by all that is living, even where the highest creations of communal life arise from it. —Dilthey, 1910, p. 172

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language. —Wittgenstein, 1953, section 109
The Metaphysical Impulse

The first Western philosopher to examine systematically the relationship between the tragedy of human finitude and the ubiquity of metaphysical illusion was Wilhelm Dilthey (1910). As reconstructed by de Mul (2004), Dilthey’s life’s work can be seen as an effort to replace the Kantian a priori—the timeless forms of perception and categories of cognition through which the world becomes intelligible to us—with “life categories” that are historically contingent and constituted over the course of a living historical process. There is a tragic dimension to Dilthey’s historical consciousness, in that it brings out the “tragic contradiction between the philosophical desire for universal validity [the metaphysical impulse] and the realization of the fundamental finitude of every attempt to satisfy that desire” (de Mul, 2004, p. 154). Dilthey’s recognition of this tragic contradiction leads him to elaborate a hermeneutic phenomenology of metaphysics.

Dilthey’s historical reconstruction of the development of metaphysics aims at no less than its “euthanasia.” Although he holds that metaphysical desire is inherent to human nature, what he seeks to unmask are the illusions that this ubiquitous desire creates. Metaphysical illusion, according to Dilthey, transforms historically contingent nexuses of intelligibility—worldviews, as he eventually calls them—into timeless forms of reality. Anticipating Heidegger (1927), Dilthey holds that every worldview is grounded in a mood regarding the tragic realization of the finitude of life. The metaphysicalization of worldviews transforms the unbearable fragility and transience of all things human into an enduring, permanent, changeless reality, an illusory world of eternal truths. The metaphysical impulse was grasped by both Dilthey and Heidegger as a relentless tendency to transform the experience of the real into a reified vision of the REALLY real.

The Tragic and the Metaphysical in Psychoanalytic Theory

George Klein (1976) claims that Freud’s psychoanalytic theory actually amalgamates two theories—a metapsychology and a clinical theory—deriving from two different universes of discourse. Metapsychology deals with the material substrate of experience and is couched in the natural science framework of impersonal structures, forces, and energies. Clinical theory, by contrast, deals with intentionality and the unconscious meanings of personal experience, seen from the perspective of the individual’s unique life history. Clinical psychoanalysis asks “why” questions and seeks answers in terms of personal reasons, purposes, and individual meanings. Metapsychology asks “how” questions and seeks answers in terms of the non-experiential realm of impersonal mechanisms and causes. Klein sought to disentangle metapsychological and clinical concepts, retaining only the latter as the legitimate content of psychoanalytic theory. For Klein, the essential psychoanalytic enterprise involves the reading of disclaimed intentionality and the unlocking of unconscious meanings from a person’s experience, a task for which the concepts of the clinical theory, purged of metapsychological contaminants, are uniquely suited. Klein’s proposals for a radical “theorectomy” for psychoanalysis have significantly
influenced such contemporary thinkers as Merton Gill, Roy Schafer, and those, including ourselves, who have sought to rethink psychoanalysis as a form of phenomenological inquiry.

Expanding on Klein’s distinction, we might characterize psychoanalytic clinical theory as emotional phenomenology and psychoanalytic metapsychology as a form of metaphysics, in that it postulates ultimate realities and universal truths. We think this division is characteristic of all the major psychoanalytic theories—they are mixtures of emotional phenomenology and metaphysics. Emotional phenomenology embodies the tragic, in that emotional experiencing is finite, transient, context-dependent, ever changing, and decaying. Metapsychology evades the tragic by means of metaphysical illusion. Phenomenology/metapsychology is a trauma-driven binary insofar as finite human existing, stripped of sheltering illusions, is inherently traumatizing (Stolorow, 2011).

**Heinz Kohut and “the Self”**

Let us turn to the dialectic of the tragic and the metaphysical as it shows up in Heinz Kohut’s (1977) psychoanalytic psychology of the self. Kohut’s prodigious contributions to clinical psychoanalysis pertained to a dimension of emotional phenomenology—the experiencing (note the verb) of a sense of selfhood. The theoretical language of self psychology with its noun, “the self,” reifies the experiencing of selfhood and transforms it into a metaphysical entity with thing-like properties. “A self” has two poles, joined by a tension arc. It can be cohesive or fragmented. It can be enfeebled, but, in psychoanalysis, it can be rehabilitated. Sometimes it even has the characteristics of a human agent, as when it seeks selfobjects (more entities) or, when fragmented, it somehow performs actions to restore its cohesion.

What is wrong with this reifying theoretical language and why does it matter clinically? To us, Kohut’s (1971, 1977) lasting and most important contribution to psychoanalytic clinical theory was his recognition that the experiencing of selfhood is always constituted, both developmentally and in psychoanalytic treatment, in a context of emotional interrelatedness. The experiencing of selfhood, he realized, or of its collapse, is context-embedded through and through.

What does theoretical talk of “the self” do to Kohut’s hard-won clinical contextualizations? In effect, it undoes them! “A self” as a metaphysical entity with thing-like properties is ontologically (i.e., in its Being or intelligibility) decontextualized, much as the Cartesian mind, a “thinking thing,” was ontologically isolated from its world. A thing remains the self-same thing that it is whether it is with you or with one of us. Reifying and transforming the experiencing of selfhood into an entity, “a self” with an “intrinsic . . . nuclear program” (Kohut, 1984, p. 42) or “basic design” (p. 160), strips such experiencing of its exquisite context-sensitivity and context-dependence—the very context-embeddedness that it was Kohut’s great contribution to have articulated!

Perhaps such stripping is the very purpose served by these substantializing objectifications. Might they not serve, through metaphysical illusion, to evade a dimension of the tragic familiar to anyone who has experienced an emotional-world-shattering loss—the tragic dimension of human existence that we have previously characterized.
as “the unbearable embeddedness of being” (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992, p. 22)? (Kohut himself experienced at least two world-shattering discontinuities in the course of his development—one brought about by the impact on his family life of World War I and his father’s enlistment and becoming a prisoner of war during Heinz’s infancy, and the other resulting from the destruction of his world by the Nazis when he was a medical student in Vienna [Strozier, 2001]). The objectification of the experiencing of selfhood serves to render stable and solid a sense of personal identity otherwise subject to discontinuity, uncertainty, and fragmentation. A phenomenological-contextualist viewpoint, by contrast, embraces the unbearable vulnerability and context-dependence of human existence.

Kohut (1977) described man as seen through the lens of his psychology of the self as a “Tragic Man [who] seeks to express the pattern of his nuclear self [but whose] failures overshadow his successes” (p. 133). It is our view that Kohut’s concept of tragic man misses the tragedy residing at the heart of human existence as such, prior to any formation of nuclear ambitions and ideals—namely, the tragedy of human finitude itself and the inevitability of decay, death, and loss.

**How Metaphysical Language Bewitches Intelligence**

Just how is the illusory transformation of the experiencing of selfhood into a metaphysical entity accomplished? Wittgenstein’s account of how language bewitches one’s intelligence provides a cogent explanation of how such a transformation can occur.

In section 426 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein famously claims that the meaning of a word is to be found in the “actual use” of it, and he contrasts this understanding with the projection of a picture:

> A picture is conjured up which seems to fix the sense unambiguously. The actual use, compared with that suggested by the picture, seems like something muddied. . . . [T]he form of expression we use seems to have been designed for a god, who knows what we cannot know; he sees the whole of each of those infinite series and he sees into human consciousness. (Wittgenstein, 1953, section 426)

Wittgenstein is claiming here that when one projects a picture as if it constitutes the meaning of a word, it gives one the illusion of a God’s-eye view of the word’s referent as a thing-in-itself, an illusory clarity that one much prefers over the “muddied” view given in the understanding that the actual meaning of a word is to be found in its multiple and shifting contexts of use. When the illusory picture is then imagined as the ultimately real, the word has become transformed into a metaphysical entity; the word *self*, for example, has become “a self.” In place of the “muddied” view given by experiential selfhood—finite, contingent, unstable, and transient, disorganizing and reorganizing in changing relational contexts—one can imagine the clear outlines of a stable bipolar structure that will endure for generations, much like the tripartite structure of Freudian metapsychology. Metaphysical illusion replaces the tragic finitude and transience of human existence with a God’s-eye picture of an irreducibly absolute and eternally changeless reality.
Experiencing Selfhood Is Not “A Self”

References


Robert D. Stolorow, Ph.D.
2444 Wilshire Blvd., #624
Santa Monica, CA 90403
310-453-9020
robertdstolorow@gmail.com

George E. Atwood, Ph.D.
20 Haver Farm Rd.
Clinton, NJ 08809
908-713-9332
ufoatu01@gmail.com

Translations of Abstract

Une contribution marquante de Kohut à la théorie psychanalytique clinique a été de reconnaître que l’expérience du soi se constitue à la fois au cours du développement et au cours de l’analyse, dans le contexte d’une relation affective. L’expérience d’être soi ou son effondrement, en a-t-il conclut, sont irrévocablement liés à un contexte. Le langage théorique de la psychologie du soi, avec son substantif « soi », réifie cette expérience et la transforme en une sorte d’entité aux propriétés de chose, annulant la vision contextuelle durement acquise de Kohut. En réalité, de telles objectivations confortent l’intellect de sorte à éliminer la dimension tragique de notre éphémère existence.

Il contributo più importante e duraturo di Kohut alla teoria psicoanalitica della clinica è stato il riconoscimento che l’esperienza di sé si costituisce sempre, sia a livello evolutivo che nel trattamento psicoanalitico, in un contesto di interrelazionalità emotiva. Egli comprese che esperire il senso di sé o il suo collasso è intrinsecamente connesso al contesto. Il linguaggio teorico della psicologia del sé con il suo sostantivo “il sé”, reifica questa esperienza e la trasforma in una entità metafisica con proprietà che la rendono concreta, di fatto scomponendo le contestualizzazioni cliniche faticosamente conquistate da Kohut. Il linguaggio di simili obiettivazioni decontestualizzanti incanta l’intelligenza così da eludere la dimensione tragica dell’umana esistenza.