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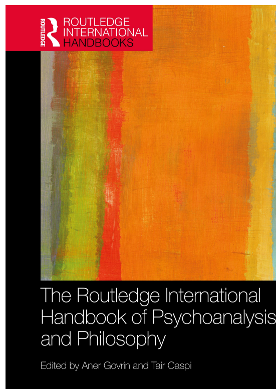


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## Kohut's Self Psychology, Ethics, and Modern Society

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# 13
# KOHUT'S SELF PSYCHOLOGY, ETHICS, AND MODERN SOCIETY

*John Hanwell Riker*

In this chapter I describe in detail Heinz Kohut's concept of the self, as I think it is of profound importance for our philosophical understanding of human life and is little known in academic circles. I further want to show how it can offer modern persons a new concept of what it means to be an ethical subject, and, even more important, how it can offer us compelling reasons for why we would want to become ethical persons. I conclude by showing how Kohut's concept of the self can be used to critique modern society as one that undermines the possibility of persons developing selves while posing as that culture most supportive of individuated selves.

More than any other theorist, Heinz Kohut changed psychoanalysis in America. His emphasis on empathy as the critical factor in therapeutic action transformed clinical practice away from the cool distance of the classical scientific clinician towards a more humane responsiveness; and his refocusing of the major psychological task away from a management of the drives towards the development and sustenance of a nuclear self not only gave clinical work a wholly new focus but offered a novel way to think about our selves and how we go about living our lives. Indeed, his finding of a largely unconscious self (not a conscious ego) at the core of psychological life, along with his grasping of its importance and dynamics, offers philosophy groundbreaking ways to think about ethics and philosophical psychology. It can even provide a substantial non-religious, non-metaphysical answer to the question of why it is personally good to become an ethical person, a question that haunts modern life and which no other naturalistic philosophical psychology can answer as well. It further offers an in-depth psychological ground for critiquing the way modern culture is constructing human beings.

Kohut's concept of the self is not the same as Freud's concept of the ego, nor is it like Winnicott's self in that it is not an inborn kernel. It is profoundly at odds with the ideal of the autonomous individual that is so prevalent in modern society. It has deep reverberations with Plato's connection of the self to ideals, Nietzsche's connection of the self with creative agency, Emerson's notion that the self must be distinctively unique, and feminist theory's notion that we are formed by and exist through relationships. It reverberates with Hegel's notion that spirit is always in the process of developing because it harbors profound dialectical tensions between the ideals it can potentially become and the particular reality that actually is.

Despite these many intersections with philosophies of the self, Kohut is not a philosopher and does not address many of the traditional conceptual problems surrounding who and what we are as humans. He never delves into the ontological status of the self. He never tackles the question

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of what constitutes the reality of the mind or how the mind is related to the body. He knows, being a psychoanalyst, that unconscious mentality can seep into the body and express meanings in somatic symptoms, but he never confronts the conceptual conundrums of this interaction. He also never deals with the question of what makes a person the same person over time (the question of personal identity), although he will say that having an intact self is crucial for having *the experience* of continuity through time and space. He thinks the self is crucial for developing a sense of agency but never enquires into the freedom/determinism problem or the problem of how to grasp the ontological possibility of agency.

What does concern Kohut is determining the kind of psyche that is best able to freely live a robust human life – a life that feels real, personal, vital, and meaningful. In short, the philosophic importance of Kohut lies in the application of his theory to ethics in the tradition of the Greek philosophers, who thought that those human beings who have the best arrangement of the parts of the soul are most capable of living the best of human lives. While the Greek philosophers – and western philosophers in general – proclaim that a soul in which reason directs the emotions and desires is the best kind of soul, Kohut's theory will offer a remarkable challenge to this model by displacing the rational ego from the center of psychological life and replacing it with an unconscious narcissistic self.

## Kohut's Concept of the Self

Heinz Kohut (1913–1981) was a Viennese Jew who fled the Nazis soon after Freud in 1939, went to Chicago, and established himself as a celebrated classical psychoanalyst. However, in his work with the transferences of narcissistic patients (whom Freud had declared unanalyzable), he discovered that their pathology did not stem from repressed sexual or aggressive wishes but from injuries to a core self. In attempting to repair these injured selves, Kohut not only developed an original and complex theory of the self but also a compelling account of how selves develop, how this developmental process can be derailed, and how it can be repaired.

For Kohut, selves emerge out of primary narcissism through a process in which the infantile senses of perfection and grandiosity transform into organic ideals and ambitions (1966, 1971). Like Freud (1914), Kohut sees the baby as an unmitigated narcissist, for it acts as though it were the center of the world: perfect, great, and all-powerful. It does not recognize others as independent centers of perception and initiative but treats them as servants there to do its bidding. While for Freud primary narcissism must eventually be converted into object love, Kohut thinks that narcissistic libido has its own developmental trajectory and optimally transforms into a self during mid-childhood. The transformation of primary narcissism takes two distinct paths, each of which will precipitate into a prime sector of the self: (1) the infant's narcissistic feeling that it is perfect needs to convert into ideals; and (2) the narcissistic fantasy of greatness needs to transmute into a realistic, vitalized sense of agency anchored in positive self-esteem.

The transformation concerning perfection begins when the narcissistic baby suffers a trauma – its pleas for mommy to attend to its needs are not responded to in due time – and the baby realizes it is not only not the most powerful and perfect being in the world but is in actuality the most helpless. This helplessness causes the baby to feel an intolerable anxiety, which it calms by projecting its perfection onto its chief caretaker(s), idealizing them as gods whose primary mission is to care for the child. Security is now regained and the child will live within the projected glow of its parents' perfection for much of childhood and often for a lifetime.

As childhood progresses, the parents will inevitably fail to live up to the child's idealization. If their failures are minor and non-traumatic, the child will, over the next half decade, re-introject the sense of perfection back into itself, but now not as "I am perfect," for reality will not easily

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allow that, but as a nascent set of ideals – "I am not perfect but I have perfect ideals that I long to attain." These ideals typically first take the form of "I want to grow up to be just like mommy or daddy" and will later become connected to the child's unique individuality.

If this side of development goes well, the child will be granted one of the most significant blessings/difficulties of being human: the ability to be motivated by ideals that one loves as one once loved oneself and one's parents. It is the ability to be motivated by beloved ideals that gives life a sense of meaningfulness or purpose. In short, Kohut's theory explains one of the most difficult problems in philosophical psychology: how is it that we can be so moved by ideals that we will endanger our lives and forgo our sexuality in order to stay true to them? Kohut's finding the source of ideals in an original narcissistic sense of perfection, grasping a process by which perfection becomes projected into beloved parents and then re-introjected as an essential sector of one's self, is a unique and compelling way to explain not only how ideals come to be formed but also why we feel such a heightened sense of wellbeing when we realize them – for it takes us back to an original narcissistic state of perfection.[1]

The second path of development involves the child's narcissistic grandiosity transforming into a realistic and vitalized sense of agency by passing through a series of "optimally frustrating" events in which the child needs to expand its skills or abilities to successfully solve the tasks of the events, often internalizing characteristics of its caretakers to accomplish this expansion. (Kohut calls this process "transmuting internalization" to emphasize that the child does not have a wholescale appropriation of others but one that transforms their character into the child's own idiom.) Toilet training is the archetypal instance of an optimally frustrating event. Before toilet training, the little narcissist could spontaneously eliminate its waste whenever and wherever it felt like it, and the "servants" would come to clean it up; but now the child must monitor its body, gain control over muscles, and get to the potty seat in time. While it is a blow to one's grandiosity to submit to these new limitations, the child can feel narcissistically replenished if it succeeds in mastering this task. Rather than the child's feeling "I am great just because I am," it begins to feel "I am great because of what I have accomplished." While toilet training stands out as an Everest in childhood, minor "optimal frustrations" occur many times daily, from getting blocks to fit together, to putting on one's clothes, to crawling, then toddling, then walking, and so on. If all of these events go well, one falls in love with accomplishing, accepts the challenges of the world with an optimistic anticipation, gains positive self-esteem, and develops a vitalized reservoir of energy for engaging in the tasks of life. Kohut calls this side of the self "the pole of ambitions," pointing towards that part of the self that wants to perform and be recognized as special. As he says, this side of us does not want the world to admire our perfect ideals but wants it to admire "me."

This side of the self is what grounds agency. Note that it is not selves that have agency, but persons. A strong grandiose sector of the self provides the psychological wherewithal to grant a person a sturdy sense of being able to be an agent in the world. What interests Kohut is not the philosophical question of how to conceptualize a kind of agentic autonomous motivation but rather the question of why some people seem able to act vigorously in the world in pursuit of their values while others either can't or have a highly diminished capacity for action. His inquiries are meant to understand our lived experience of agency or lack thereof rather than solving a general metaphysical worry about how to conceptualize freedom.

As much as success in optimally frustrating experiences can help build self-esteem and a vitalized core of energy for engaging the world, it is not the major basis for building a sense of self; rather, the presence of empathic mirroring is.

Kohut called empathy "vicarious introspection" and said that it was a "sixth sense" in which one could experience the interior feelings of another person (1959). We are empathic with

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someone when we mirror the other's internal feelings without identifying with them. I sadly experience your sadness, but I am not actually sad – you are. Because empathy involves a subjective mirroring of another subject's subjectivity, it not only allows one to know what the other is feeling but accepts and affirms the feelings in its duplication of them. It is the one form of knowing another subject that does not reduce the subject to an object but confirms the subjectivity of the other in the mirroring subjectivity of oneself.

When researchers studied the responses of new mothers to their babies, they found that some mothers changed their facial expressions almost instantly to empathically mirror their babies' change of affect, while other mothers did not immediately respond to the babies' change of affect but kept a smiling face, seeming to demand that the baby be happy, too (Beebe and Lachmann 2014). When the investigators followed the children into adolescence, they found that the children of empathic mothers showed little to no psychopathology, while those of non-empathic mothers invariably exhibited psychopathology – often in severe forms. Empathy is the psychic protein out of which selves are built.

We are now ready to get a full picture of Kohut's concept of the self. The self comes into full actuality when the dynamic energy of the pole of ambitions is used for the realization of the self's ideals, and both relate to the idiosyncratic traits and abilities of the individual. It is the fusion of ideals and ambitions with these traits that makes them organic and singular rather than being a mere variation of codes ingested from society. Self ideals differ from ingested social ideals in a number of ways. When we are realizing ideals of the self, we feel vitalized and that what we are doing is meaningful; we lose track of time and do not become depleted but fill with a joyful satisfaction. Social ideals, on the other hand, usually feel like obligations and our accomplishing them often leaves us depleted or drained. Being motivated by social ideals is important, for we are embedded in social contexts, but they are what others want us to do, not what we love to do. Freud found that when the superego imposes socially ingested ideals on the ego, it does so with aggression and often a fear of guilt if we do not perform according to their standards. This dynamic is absent when we are being motivated by our self's ideals, for we love our self's ideals and reap joy when realizing them.

The self is dialectical in the tension generated between its ideals and ambitions, between what I might be and what I in fact am. Our ideals are values to be achieved; our grandiosity is the reality that we want admired. When ideals predominate over ambitions, we can glow with the perfection that they represent, but have little energy for actualizing them. When ambitions predominate, we have incredible energy for accomplishment and success, but it might mean very little as it is unattached to the self's ideals.

Since a central sector of the self is its organic ideals, the self is essentially a set of developmental possibilities for what the person could be. In short, the self is not a thing with a set identity; rather, it is a process that is always seeking to go beyond itself, to go beyond any finished set of accomplishments. It is Faustian in that its essence is to be striving; it is Nietzschean in that it is that which must constantly overcome itself; it is Platonic in that its seeking is not concerned with desire gratification but with the erotic realization of ideals. However, unlike Plato, these ideals are not abstract generalities but personal ideals that emerge out of one's singular being. In Christopher Bollas' words, the self is a destiny (2011).

But what is the self in and of itself? The self cannot simply be an amalgam of ideals and ambitions, because Kohut too often says that the self *has* ideals and ambitions. What is it that *has* ideals and ambitions?[2] Kohut does not answer this question, but says "we cannot, by introspection and empathy, penetrate to the self per se; only its introspectively or empathically perceived psychological manifestations are open to us" (1977, p. 311). While we cannot know what the self is in any ontological or phenomenological way – it simply does not appear nor is the kind

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of thing that could appear – we can offer a kind of operational definition by saying that the self is a system that performs vital functions within the psychic economy. The self helps regulate the affects, grants us a feeling of vitalized aliveness, generates a sense that one's life is meaningful, and provides a sense that one is a unified being. Most of all, having a coherent self at the core of experience makes us feel like ourselves! When our selves are not present, we often fall into doldrums with flat affects, get pulled here and there by peripheral desires and emotions, and wander through the tasks of life without much sense of purpose. With a well-developed ego we might be able to interact with the world well in terms achieving successes, but we cannot emotionally inhabit it in any depth without a well-formed self. In short, we can tell when our psyches have an intact self by attending to whether the functions it is supposed to perform are being adequately achieved.

We need to add a crucial piece to this picture of the self, namely, selfobjects. Kohut realized that in his developmental schema others played self-functions for children when they were unable to do so themselves. These "objects" were so important that Kohut termed them "selfobjects," for they literally were part of the self when they performed the functions that the self was unable to. Kohut held that we need selfobjects not just in early childhood before the self is fully developed, but for the entirety of our lives, for the grandiose sector of the self – the part that harbors our self-esteem – is fragile and always vulnerable to narcissistic blows and disappointments.

> Self psychology holds that self-selfobject relationships form the essence of psychological life from birth to death, that a move from dependence (symbiosis) to independence (autonomy) in the psychological sphere is no more possible, let alone desirable, than a corresponding move from a life dependent on oxygen to a life independent of it in the biological sphere.
>
> *(1985, p. 47)*

> Under normal circumstances, we all need a steady stream of self-confirmation.
>
> *(1987, p. 36)*

In short, Kohut has a double dialectical notion of the self. It not only is a tense amalgam of ideals and ambitions but is located both in the psyche of an individual and in a field of relationships with others. It is akin to subatomic matter being both a particle and a wave at the same time.[3] Often when our spouses or best friends are away, we can have trouble feeling and regulating our emotions and can walk through days without much sense of purpose or vitality. We are not atoms – discrete points of existence – but ecosystems profoundly and inherently interconnected with others. We are both unique selves and embedded in the contextualities of our relations with others (Coburn 2017; Riker 2017b).

Given that Kohut's notion of the self has a Hegelian kind of dialectical essence to it – it both is in itself and in another and must always being developing beyond itself, it staves off the postmodern criticism of theories that posit the self as having a set essence, for such theories privilege oneness over multiplicity, permanence over change, and structure over activity. In contrast, Kohut understands the self as both a singularity and a multiplicity, as both structural coherence and disruptive change, as both subjective activity and objective structure, as both individualized and contextualized.

In order to more fully grasp Kohut's notion of the self, we need to see its difference from the ego and the other centers of motivation within the psyche. Throughout his works Kohut implies a distinction between the ego and the self but never elaborates on the distinction; yet this distinction is crucial, for the ego and the self have different functions and aspirations. The ego

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is very much as Freud described it: a psychological agency whose functions are to negotiate the organism's relations to its social and natural environments and to establish coherence within the psyche (without which the ego cannot perform its primary task of environmental negotiation). While the ego is capable of performing unconscious activities, such as repression to keep itself coherent, its essence is to be the seat of consciousness/self-consciousness. It develops its powers primarily through education and learning (1923).

The self, on the other hand, is a largely unconscious psychological structure that contains the values and vitalizing energy which, when infusing the ego and our activities, make us feel most like ourselves, most alive, and most actualized. It develops early in life through selfobject relationships, transmuting internalizations, and optimally frustrating experiences. While both the ego and self are involved in establishing psychic coherence, they do it in radically different ways. The self generates coherence by being a fulcrum of value and vitality – a nuclear core around which other motivational structures can revolve. The ego uses rational structuring to organize conscious life and defense mechanisms such as dissociation, repression, and projection to keep traumatizing experiences and emotions from fragmenting the psyche (A. Freud 1936/1938).

Almost all of western philosophy has identified the self with the ego, and this identification has led to the dangerous idealization of the autonomous, masterful, power-seeking individual that has become so predominant in the capitalist world of today. It might be Kohut's greatest contribution to western thought that he located the self in the realm of unconscious subjectivity and found its needs and trajectories to be fundamentally different from those of the ego.[4]

To grasp the difference between the ego and the self, one can do a phenomenological experiment. Remember times when you simply weren't feeling like yourself, lost yourself in a toxic relationship, or found yourself in a job that just wasn't you, and compare these to experiences in which you felt "this is really me." In both kinds of experience there is an "I" (the ego) having the experiences, but in one kind of experience the self feels absent while in the other it is present. That is, the "I" is always sensed in experiencing, but not the self. Hence, these must be two different psychic agencies. One of the crucial maxims in philosophic literature is "to be true to one's self," a statement that makes no sense unless the self differs from the "I" and can either be denied or affirmed by that "I".

The tensions between the ego and the self are critical, and how we resolve them will determine to a significant extent our abilities to live robust human lives. The ego seeks power over both its inner and outer worlds, for such control optimizes the ability to successfully get the organism's needs met. The self, on the other hand, seeks to find ways to actualize its singular ideals, even if this seeking makes the organism's survival more precarious (e.g., the starving artist). The ego needs to formulate an identity (Erikson 1980) through which it can be recognized by society and which usually includes adopting a set of social roles; the self, on the other hand, often finds that accommodation to social structures destroys its singularity and vitality.

While the ego and self are psychological structures that often conflict with one another, their felicitous alliance is needed if a person is to have a robust life. The ego needs to be infused with the self in order for life to feel vital and meaningful; the self needs to be coupled with a well-educated ego to discover and gain admittance to those forms of social life in which it can best be realized. Self-realization that has no social recognition feels unreal and cannot be distinguished from fantasy; however, social success that has little relation to the unique self often feels empty, as when one chooses the wrong mate or career because of social pressures. In optimal cases, the self and ego are so fused that we cannot separate them and simply feel like ourselves most of the time.

There are two other important centers of motivation: the social unconscious (the superego) and the biological needs/pressures (the id). The social unconscious is our introjection of the codes and mores that infiltrate us and make us automatically members of a culture, sub-culture,

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and/or a society. The voice of the body tells us what we as mammals biologically need – food, sleep, warmth, exercise, sex, and so on.

It is persons who think, feel, experience, and act – not egos, selves, the social unconscious, or biological drives. And yet when we inquire into why persons are doing what they are – what motivates them – we enter a realm of murky subjectivity in which not only the voices of the self, ego, social unconscious, and id are clamoring, but also expectations from the past. The unconscious has memories, unconscious organizing principles, an unconscious way of experiencing, and these engage and complexify each of the motivational sectors of the psyche. In short, the voice of the self is only one of a number of voices in the psyche. The ego's voice, by necessity, is the loudest, followed by the voices of the social unconscious and the body. The voice of the self, in comparison, seems almost like an extravagance, but it is that voice which most mobilizes our sense of aliveness and meaningfulness. The absence of the self's voice can be caused either by its being drowned out by louder psychic voices or because the self has suffered serious injuries, in which case debilitating psychopathology materializes.

For Kohut, most psychopathology arises from injuries to the self, typically resulting from selfobject failures – failures of neglect or traumatic abuse. When selves are injured, there are a number of serious consequences. First, the development of the self is arrested and with it the possibility of attaining a mature sense of self and the ability to experience a rich emotional life. The core of the self that had been developed is cocooned behind a set of defenses that will not let it or its pain flow into conscious ego life. Second, narcissistic symptoms appear, and these typically include feelings of inner deadness and meaninglessness along with compensating defenses such as a heightened sense of greatness and manic energy – energy that can accomplish a great deal but which does not lead to a deep or lasting sense of self worth. Often addictions, along with an increase in entitled behaviors, attempt to fill in the hole where a self should be. Third, narcissistic rage erupts and will remain until the self is repaired and able to resume development. Narcissistic rage differs from anger in that it is unrelenting and seeks to destroy those who have injured the self or others who are connected to the victimizers through transference. Ordinary anger and aggression typically arise when others stand in our way and dissipate when the obstacle is removed; not so with narcissistic rage, which can fester for a lifetime and take revenge on innocent others who unfortunately get unconsciously connected to the original victimizer.

In short, persons with injured selves tend to be those who perpetrate unnecessary suffering in the world – sometimes on a grand political scale like Hitler, or in small soap-opera scenarios, such as couples endlessly nagging one another in an attempt to destroy each other's self-esteem. People with intact selves who are able to find activities and relationships in which the self can be affirmed are not those who bring misery to the world. It is persons with injured/unrealized selves filled with narcissistic rage who tend to be devastating for others. As Jonathan Lear says, "It is cruelty that breeds cruelty; and thus the possibility of a harmonious cruel soul, relatively free from inner conflict and sufficiently differentiated from the cruel environment, begins to look like science fiction" (1990, p. 189). This insight that there is a profound connection between the internal structure of one's psyche and the ability to be an ethical human being brings us to a discussion of the complex interrelations between a self psychological understanding of the psyche and ethics.

## Kohut's Self Psychology and Ethics

Insofar as self psychology posits character traits crucial for living well, it can be used as the basis for a virtue ethics, in distinction from a de-ontological ethics concerned with adherence to rules or a consequentialist ethic concerned with the production of a general welfare. A virtue ethics

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based in self psychology can incorporate much of what is important in the other two ethical systems by showing that it is only a certain kind of human being – one not suffering from significant injuries to the self – who can understand that they are not above the rules and who can have a general empathic concern for others. If one has a coherent self and has developed the kind of character traits necessary to generate and sustain a matrix of selfobjects, they will be the kind of person who can abide by common rules, have a general compassion for fellow humans, and not have narcissistic rage festering in them that wants to destroy others.

If we think of ethical persons, as Aristotle did, as those who have developed the moral virtues – including becoming just, moderate, and generous – then we can see that from the viewpoint of self psychology it behooves us to become ethical human beings, for it is this kind of person who is best able to generate and maintain a matrix of selfobjects. In adulthood, one will not be able to live among selfobjects who can give genuine support to the self unless one is able to act in a reciprocal way by being a selfobject for them. Hence, one needs to develop character traits that allow one to participate in relationships with other human beings who can love and care for one. That is, one needs to be capable of friendship.

Aristotle claims that it is only persons who have developed the moral virtues who can be true friends with one another. The virtues are crucial for interacting with friends, for, as Aristotle says, few people will want to be friends with someone who is a bad person – someone they cannot trust or who will be deficient in some major way, such as being greedy or immoderate or unable to regulate their emotions and desires. For Aristotle, good human beings need friendships both as the primary arena in which to actualize their virtues and as the place where they are sustained by being mirrored by others who are like them. Kohut and Aristotle go hand in hand in saying that when one develops the predispositions of character that are best for one's own well-being, one also develops the kind of character that can best help others and sustain community.

The one Aristotelian virtue that Kohut emphasizes is courage, now re-defined as the ability to stay true to the self's ideals in situations in which we might suffer grievously if we do so, and gives the example of persons, such as Hans and Sophie Scholl, refusing to go along with the Nazis even though it cost them their lives (1985). Society is always pressuring us to conform to its values; courage is necessary to generate and sustain integrity around the self's ideals – to stay true to oneself.

The most important non-Aristotelian virtue that self psychology advocates is empathy, a trait that inclines us to understand others from inside their experience before arriving at judgments of them. In emphasizing the importance of empathy, self psychology both avoids Nietzsche's devastating criticism of morality as an objectifying, life-negating discourse and aligns itself with much of feminist ethics. Nietzsche exposes traditional morality and its tendency to judgmentalism as a discourse that negates individual spontaneity and attempts to control others by holding them accountable to moral standards – hence demanding that all persons fit a general type. Rather than approaching others with a set of moral categories by which to judge them, empathic persons seek to know what they are feeling and why. Their empathy affirms and validates who they are in their individuality rather than taking the moral position of superiority that judges them according to a general standard.

I believe that empathy is the essence of "care," the trait that many feminist ethicists proclaim to be the essence of moral life. Virginia Held defines care as "attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility" (2006, p. 10). It is particular others that count in ethics, not some generalized other or universal law applicable to all human beings. The particular others emphasized in feminist ethics are, for the most part, those that self psychology would recognize as persons with whom we have some kind of selfobject relationships – children,

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parents, friends. While a number of their needs might be apparent without much attention – such as the needs for food and warmth in children – deeper emotional needs, especially the needs surrounding narcissistic equilibrium, are not knowable without empathy. Further, food and other objective supplies can be given in various ways, such as mechanically or resentfully, but it is only when they are given empathically that the full needs of the person are met. To care for others is, primarily, to empathically respond to their needs.

Feminist ethics also tends to emphasize that we are not autonomous atoms but exist in relationships, and without these relationships we could neither grow up nor flourish. An ethical way of life arises out of the complex set of personal interactions we engage in as we develop into adulthood. It is the quality of these exchanges that produces the ability to be an ethical person who can empathically care for the selves of others.

One might now ask how the claims of justice fit into this framework, for it appears that an ethics based in selfobject connections will breed favoritism rather than fairness, a quality many think to be the essence of ethics (Rawls 1971). In a self-psychological view of ethics, the concerns of justice are placed primarily in the development of a predisposition to be fair rather acting out of a rule-generating rational ego. Unless there is a predisposition to obey what one recognizes as the claims of justice, those claims will not generate just actions. Nevertheless, the actions required by empathic care and those required by a sense of justice can and do conflict. I agree with Virginia Held that we cannot construct a rule that tells us to always favor empathy over justice or vice versa, nor can we devise an algorithm for saying which takes precedence when. In the end we hope that our decisions are those that a person of practical wisdom would make.

The difference between a self-psychological virtue ethics and other virtue ethics is the recognition that an intact unconscious self needs to be the fulcrum of psychological experiencing rather than a conscious ego. Not only is this a new, more complex view of what it means to be an ethical person, but it is also a view in which the conflict between narcissism and altruism is resolved, for in becoming ethical persons who can care for others we become the kind of person who can best nourish our individual selves. In short, if we think of ethical persons as those who exhibit the moral virtues, care deeply for and respect others, and have a depth of empathy with which to interact with others, then we have the kind of person who is also most able to care for themselves, for they are the most able to generate and sustain a selfobject matrix.

But now let an egoistic interlocutor ask, "Why can't I be a good person to those close to me – my friends – and be unethical with those who are not my friends?" Why should one's ethical stance govern one's relation to all human beings rather than just one's selfobjects? The major problem that critics have found with virtue ethics is that character traits tend to be context dependent. We can be generous, kind, caring humans with one set of persons and brutish, domineering, and callous with others. It seems that we have the ability to turn the virtues on or off depending on context – witness numerous Nazis who were loving family members at home and brutal victimizers at work in the camps. Why be an ethical person all of the time in all contexts, even those in which there is no possibility of selfobject reciprocity?

The fundamental reason for always acting as an ethical person is that if one doesn't, they lose the centrality of the self and with it the integrity of the psyche (Riker 2017a; Summers 2013). Integrity involves being who you are regardless of situation. If one needs to be an empathic caring person to sustain the self, then one must keep that character in all situations, including those that threaten one. If one becomes opportunistic and shifts character, value, and personality depending on context, then the self is displaced as the fulcrum of psychic life by the ego, for it

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is the ego that controls the switching. The ego is, by nature, opportunistic, for it seeks power and success. The self, on the other hand, seeks to live in an empathic, caring world, and as such needs to dwell within an empathic, caring person. To ignore the self or displace it depending upon situation means that one loses integrity. Kohut himself makes this point:

> We may justifiably deplore . . . the actions and attitudes of those who quickly and opportunistically adjust their convictions under the influence of external pressures. In such individuals the nuclear self ceases to participate in the overt attitudes and actions and becomes progressively isolated and is finally repressed or disavowed. The psychological outcome, *which is unfortunately more or less characteristic of the psychological makeup of the majority of adults*, is a person who, despite his smoothly adaptive surface behavior, experiences a sense of inner shallowness and who gives to others an impression of artificiality.
>
> *(1985, p. 11; emphasis added)*

Although the ideals of the self will be particular for each person, part of those ideals must be to sustain an empathic, virtuous way of being in the world, for these values are crucial for dwelling within a selfobject matrix. To abandon these values is to abandon the self and lose it as the pole star around which the rest of the psyche revolves.

However, it is one thing to be predisposed to treat all humans with empathy and care and quite another to deliberately seek to interact with those who are other or different. Such engagement with otherness is challenging because, as self psychology has shown, we need mirroring more than any other psychological nutrition, and mirroring is best given by those who look and think like us. Not only does this mirroring enhance the grandiose sector of the self, but so does merging with a group formed around some essential sameness. Members of these selfsame groups find their grandiose selves sustained both through mirroring and by merging with the greatness of the group.

While belonging to selfsame groups might be necessary for sustaining the self, it has proved highly problematic, for it typically involves the abjection of others who are different. When this abjection occurs within systems of power, the dominant groups tend to enact systems of prejudice, discrimination, and violence against those seen as other: men have subjugated women, westerners non-westerners, whites blacks and other people of color, and so on, endlessly. These systems of injustice have caused much of the suffering that human beings have historically inflicted on one another and continue to be devastating sources of misery throughout the world.

Kohut's discovery that mirroring is crucial for psychological life seems to doom us to an interminable repetition of group aggression and structures of injustice; however, self psychology can also show why persons need to engage with otherness. To remain vital, the self needs to constantly develop, and it can do this only if it is open to otherness – other ideas, diverse kinds of people, other cultures, different ways of engaging the world, diverse values. If we remain cozily in our favorite groups and petrify others through stereotyping, prejudice, and unwarranted aggression, we petrify our selves. Either we develop the propensity for engaging with difference or our selves wither and die in patterns of stultifying repetition.

In sum, self psychology, more effectively than any other theory, allows us to grasp the psychological roots of our compulsive attachment to sameness but also offers the vision of a new way of constructing humans – as beings who need to generate an integral self that approaches all humans with empathy rather than judgment and aggression. But can modern society construct such persons?

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## Self Psychology and Modern Society

Modern western society, although it purports to support individual selves more than any other culture, in fact undermines them in many ways, three of which I want to highlight: (1) through the dominance of an ideal autonomous individuality; (2) by confusing ego identity with self structure; and (3) by the pervasive undermining of selfobject relationships in the home, friendships, and workplace.

First, behind much of the dynamism, inventiveness, and mobility of modern life stands the ideal of the self-sufficient individual – someone who does not rely on tradition, religion, or others and who makes their way in world through their own initiative and wits. The defining trait of American individualism is the ability to be independent – to not depend on others for material or emotional sustenance. While individuals can choose to be with others – can choose to have friendships or erotic relationships – they can do so as long as they do not become overly dependent on them. The value of independence is so dominant that it has the tendency to undermine the possibility of committed love relationships and close friendships. That is, this concept of the autonomous self-sufficient individual undermines the self in denying our critical need for selfobject relationships to sustain the self. This ideal of autonomous individualism must be implicated in the sad statistic that about 60% of Americans feel desperately lonely, often in states of anxiety and constant despair. One of our new important categories in measuring social health is deaths due to despair – deaths that come from suicide, alcohol addiction, and drug overdoses – many due in part, on my account, to the loss of a vital self at the core of experience. To be an autonomous individual is to be a lonely, isolated, unsupported person with an insufficient flow of psychological nourishment.

Second, to be someone in the modern world is to have a socioeconomic identity, and these identities are ranked in terms of status and power (Foucault 1979). The best kind of life is supposedly had by those who attain the most esteemed socioeconomic identities. Having an identity is not the same as having a self. For Erik Erikson, the task of constructing an identity comes in late adolescence/early adulthood when one establishes in a pre-conscious/conscious way how one wants to be seen and recognized by society (1980). This typically involves choosing important socioeconomic roles such as career, marriage, and family and then identifying oneself with these roles. The self, on the other hand, comes into existence in childhood and is largely formed in an unconscious way through important selfobject interactions.

In the most felicitous cases we will choose social identities through which to fulfill our self's ideals and ambitions. However, the self's values can be quite idiosyncratic and not those that grant social prestige. Insofar as identities are strongly associated with the ego rather than the self, they will tend to value those positions and roles which grant the most power to negotiate the social and natural environments – those that pay the most and/or provide the most status. Such beliefs often de-value the need for selfobjects and one's peculiar ways of being oneself. That is, we tend to encounter extraordinary pressures to conform to social ideals when constructing our identities and often lose our selves in this process. I am reminded of a survey Colorado College took of its incoming class several years ago in which 80% of the students said that they wanted to be either doctors or lawyers – the two most prestigious professions in today's world. The students did not inquire into who they were; they just accepted that if they could be anything, they would adopt the most esteemed identities.

Third, modern society undermines the development and conservation of selves by destabilizing selfobject relationships in families, friendships, and the workplace. Since it is common for both parents to have to work to sustain a household and their socioeconomic identities, modern homes are often lonely places with scarcely enough selfobject interactions with young children

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to help them develop selves. Daycare centers simply are unable to respond with the full gleam and adoring care that loving parents can. When parents do get home, they often find themselves so drained from work and commuting that they can't nourish one another, let alone their children. Since the grandiose sectors of their selves are undernourished, parents often overly pressure their children to be stars at school, thereby affirming social values of success over developing the idiosyncratic potentialities of their children.

Not only has the home become a deficient place for getting selfobject needs met, but so has the workplace, which is now an "objectified" space in which the subjective experience and needs of employees are hardly recognized or responded to. Corporations reduce workers at every level to the functions they perform and make them replaceable by others – including machines – who can do the functions better or at a lower cost. In these objectified conditions, warmth and affection – friendship – among fellow workers is highly problematic, and, hence, neither the modern home nor the workplace is an adequate environment for sustaining selfobject interactions.

The extraordinary degree of modern mobility also adds to the difficulty of establishing selfobject networks. Indeed, contemporary persons move so often that friends seem to be changed every few years. With this kind of mobility, one has only oneself to rely on for psychological wellbeing, as the world and one's relations shift with incredible frequency.

The ego can get along fine without selfobjects, but the self cannot. Without selfobject nourishment, selves do not achieve a robust presence in the experiences of modern people who, dominated by ego concerns, develop into "masterful, bounded, and empty persons" (Cushman 1995). They are masterfully disciplined and self-controlled so as to operate the machinery of modern economic society; isolated within the boundaries of their individuality, and empty because they do not have a core sense of self vitalizing their lives.

These are also the kind of people who harbor narcissistic injuries or depleted selves and as such tend to try to fill the void at the core of psychic life with incessant excitement or feeling high – often becoming addicted to alcohol, drugs, sex, shopping, gambling, food, video games, and so on. They tend either to want to be center stage or retreat into the background for fear that any kind of success might stimulate shameful infantile needs for narcissistic acclamation. They have trouble tolerating criticism, cut in lines without permission, and demand that you drive your car the speed they want to go.

They are also the kind of person who cheats (Riker 2010). As David Callahan shows in his *The Cheating Culture,* cheating infects almost every aspect of American life, from individuals cheating on income taxes and their resumes, to doctors pushing pills for drug companies, lawyers padding their bills, car mechanics doing unnecessary repairs, students cheating on tests and papers, companies – such as Enron and WorldCom – cooking their books, and spouses cheating on one another (2004). While cheating is not a horrific moral crime, such as the genocides of Hitler and Stalin, it is a practice that undermines personal, social, economic, and political life. It creates a culture in which no one can really trust anyone else, helping to create a world of loneliness and isolation.

Kohut attempted to show that narcissism is not necessarily bad – it is an essential part of being human. However, there is a mature narcissism that comes into being if the self has a felicitous development and a pathological narcissism that occurs when the developmental trajectory of the self gets derailed. For Kohut, mature narcissists are creative, humorous, and empathic. They accept their mortality and merge their selves' values with wider, more transcendent ideals (1966). They recognize, respect, and affirm the selves of others and are willing to empathically help those selves flourish, as they are willing to let others be part of their selves. They do not measure themselves by the standards of society but by organically developed values in which they ask of themselves whether they are being true to themselves.

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It is this kind of person that Kohut would prefer to inhabit our modern culture rather than the masterful, bounded, empty immature narcissists that seem so prevalent these days, prevalent in part because of the culture's conceptual misunderstanding of what it means to be and have a self.

In sum, Kohutian self psychology has a great deal to offer not only to philosophy but the wider world. Its conception of the self as a largely unconscious psychological structure that differs from the ego, which is built through intensive selfobject responsiveness, harbors the core vitality and sense of meaningfulness in a person, and has a lifelong need to be in such profound relations with others that they constitute a part of their selves is an attempt to re-conceptualize some of the most profound presuppositions of the modern world. Without this re-conceptualization of the self, modernity will continue to drive us into lives of loneliness, anxiety, despair, and aggressive competitiveness and, because it has no genuine answer to the question of why one should become an ethical human being, it will be constantly undermined by cheating and other narcissistic behaviors. A competitive, disciplined, isolated, empty human being might be just the kind of person that capitalism needs to endlessly consume market goods and work feverishly for the wherewithal to keep consuming, but such persons are never deeply fulfilled, and their incessant overheated production and consumption has led the world to the brink of environmental disaster.

This is not to say that Kohut has the final take on the nature of the human psyche. As he himself says, "Ideals are guides, not gods. If they become gods, they stifle man's playful creativeness. They impede the future" (1977, p. 312). Theories, like persons, must keep evolving or they die.

## Notes

1 Freud also recognized that the ego ideal is a transformation of narcissism (1914) but does not follow the transformation of perfection through the idealization of caretakers and then the re-integration from them. The ego ideal for Freud gets largely converted into the superego (1923) and tends to carry guilt with it, while for Kohut, the ideals of the self do not have the feeling of an imposition on the ego but provide a deep source of meaning for a person.

2 In my own attempt to think into this problem, I have proposed that *eros* as conceived by Plato in his *Symposium* and the later Freud might be what the self most basically is. See Riker, *Exploring the Life of the Soul* (2017a, chap. 4).

3 The metaphysical system best able to grasp how all entities exist both in themselves and in connectedness with others is that of Alfred North Whitehead. In particular, see his *Process and Reality* (1927).

4 This articulation of the difference between the ego and the self is at best a sketch. For a more robust description of their functions and differences and their relation to subjectivity, see Riker, *Why It Is Good to be Good* (2010, chap. 4) and Riker, *Exploring the Life of the Soul* (2017a, chap. 3).

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