



Kohut's Self Psychology for a Fractured World

New Ways of Understanding the Self
and Human Community

John Hanwell Riker

NEW DIRECTIONS IN SELF PSYCHOLOGY

ROUTLEDGE


John Riker brilliantly examines Heinz Kohut's ideas of self with the astute eye of the philosopher. Riker, who is thoroughly versed in the literature, picks apart the critics of Kohut and shows how this remarkable psychological thinker offers hope for the healing of the modern soul.

Charles Strozier, author of *Heinz Kohut: The Making of a Psychoanalyst* and *The New World of Self: Heinz Kohut's Transformation of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy*

It is well known that one of the least clearly defined concepts in psychoanalytic self psychology is the concept of the self—until now. With this deeply probing and rigorous treatise on the self from the perspective of a seasoned philosopher who is well versed in Kohut's theories, Riker sets out to correct this deficit. He provides us with a comprehensive account of the structural, functional, and dynamic dimensions of the self which is equally illuminating to those of us who are well versed in self psychology as well as to those readers who want to learn more. Riker does not stop there. He draws on Kohut's ideas, applies them to Plato's *Republic*, and thereby imaginatively and boldly conceives of a world based on the ideal of empathy and interconnectedness rather than on reason and autonomy alone. It is an illuminating journey and a joy to read.

Peter Zimmermann, PhD, co-author of *Intersubjective Self Psychology: A Primer*

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Kohut's Self Psychology for a Fractured World

Drawing from Kohut's conceptualisation of self, Riker sets out how contemporary America's formulation of persons as autonomous, self-sufficient individuals is deeply injurious to the development of a vitalizing self-structure—a condition which lies behind much of the mental illness and social malaise of today's world.

By carefully attending to Kohut's texts, Riker explains the structural, functional, and dynamic dimensions of Kohut's concept of the self. He creatively extends this concept to show how the self can be conceived of as an erotic striving for connectedness, beauty, and harmony, separate from the ego. Riker uses this distinction to reveal how social practices of contemporary American society foster skills and traits to advance the aims of the ego for power and control, but tend to suppress the needs of the self to authentically express its ideals and connect with others. The book explores the impact that this view can have on clinical practice, and concludes by imaginatively constructing an ideal self-psychological society, using Plato's *Republic* as a touchstone.

Informed by self psychology and philosophy, this book is essential reading for psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, and philosophers, seeking to revisit and revise constructions of both self and humanity.

John Hanwell Riker has been an award-winning professor of philosophy at Colorado College since 1968 and has published four books. He was the Kohut Distinguished Professor at the University of Chicago in 2003.

New Directions In Self Psychology Book Series

George Hagman

Series Editor

Since Heinz Kohut's *The Analysis of the Self* was published in 1971, psychoanalytic Self Psychology has developed into a theory and mode of treatment which is complex and multi-dimensional as well as vital and still evolving. Enlisting authors from a variety of disciplines, and under the editorship of psychoanalyst and social worker George Hagman, the *New Directions in Self Psychology: Clinical, Research and Cultural Applications* book series will examine the state-of-the-art in Self Psychology, providing an opportunity for authors to explore and extend the model in new directions.

Once limited to a small group centered in Chicago, Self Psychology currently has adherent organizations on every continent. Over the past half century, Self Psychology has influenced academic disciplines such as history, political science, art history, and social theory, as well as psychological research into child development, neuropsychology, addiction and psychopathology. Its influence on psychotherapy has been enormous, with many analytic and non-analytic models benefiting from its concepts such as motivational interviewing, grief therapies, addiction treatments, and person-centered counseling. Most importantly, Self Psychology has continued to thrive in the field of psychoanalysis, being elaborated and augmented by the contribution of many subspecialties such as motivational systems theory, intersubjectivity theory, relational psychoanalysis, systems theory and complexity.

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Preface

The most important thing that any society does is to construct its members to be the kind of human beings who can satisfy the material, cultural, and social needs of that society. Crucial to this construction is society's concept of what it means to be an ideal human being and live an ideal human life. Contemporary society is organized around the capitalist economy and needs to construct persons who can efficiently run the machinery of our highly technological, productive, mobile, ever-changing economic world. As such it has invented the ideal of being an autonomous, self-sufficient, rational individual who is willing to abstract themselves from their relations to place, community, and family in order to be optimally successful in attaining the best positions available in the economy.

Heinz Kohut's self psychology reveals that this ideal not only misunderstands what it means to be a self but helps create social practices that undermine the development and sustenance of self-structure. I believe that Kohut achieved the deepest understanding of the human psyche that has yet been produced and, therefore, it is of the utmost importance that our society comes to understand his theory in order to deal with its massive problems of mental health and social pathology. The purpose of this book is to comprehensively elucidate Kohut's concept of the self, use this concept to expose how misguided the contemporary ideal of self is, show how this misunderstanding of the self lies behind many of contemporary society's most pressing problems, and, finally, to construct a model for an ideal self-psychological community in order to point the way out of our fragmenting society into one that can genuinely support self-structure.

Kohut produced his theory of the self a half century ago, but due to misunderstandings of his work by commentators, his own very difficult prose, and a society organized around an ideal that is antithetical to his, Kohut's thought has not gained the ascendance that it should have. It is therefore heartening that three excellent books have recently appeared that will help overcome this deficit. The most pertinent is Charles Strozier's, Konstantine Pinteris', Kathleen Kelley's, and Deborah Cher's, *The New World of Self: Heinz Kohut's Transformation of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (2022). This work interweaves clinical material, theory, biographical vignettes, and historical details in presenting Kohut's thought. It offers especially fine understandings of how empathy can cure, why and how sexualization and narcissistic rage arise from injuries to the self, and the role of dreams in Kohut's work. It is an essential volume for every self psychologist's library, and, I hope, the libraries of all psychotherapists.

George Hagman's, Peter Zimmerman's, and Harry Paul's *Inter-subjective Self Psychology: A Primer* (2020), while not explicitly about Kohut's theory, skillfully relates the innovations in therapeutic technique from intersubjective theory to Kohut's theory of the self. Although some intersubjectivists, like Robert Stolorow and George Atwood, want to eliminate the notion of the self (2020), Hagman et al. show that the purpose of intersubjective therapeutic practices and perspectives is the restoration of self-structure. That is, Kohut's concept of self is seen as the fulcrum for clinical work. This book is full of clinical cases showing how working with leading and trailing edges of both the therapist and patient can lead to a restoration of self-structure.

Finally, Marcia D-S. Dobson's *Metamorphoses of Psyche in Psychoanalysis and Ancient Greek Thought: From Mourning to Creativity* (2023) not only attempts to connect liminal and transitional experiences to self psychology but also presents her own self psychological analysis with Ernest Wolf. By comparing Wolf's approach to other psychotherapies she had experienced, she reveals the extraordinary healing power of a self psychological approach to psychotherapy. Her vision of the self opening to realms of reality and experience usually denied by the ego's containment of experience into rational structures presents new ways of thinking about the powers and possibilities of the human psyche.

These three books focus on clinical material and present it through case studies with far more richness and insight than I, a non-clinician, could possibly do. As a philosopher, what I can add to these books is a rigorous examination of Kohut's key notions—especially those that focus on his vision of the self—in order to bring conceptual and critical clarity to these ideas and to reveal their utmost importance for contemporary society. Rather than presenting case studies, I will closely examine Kohut's texts for what he says about his key concepts. I believe that this close textual examination is unique in the literature concerning Kohut's work. I intend to work through the vagueness and incompleteness of Kohut's ideas to give a full picture of his structural, functional, and dynamic accounts of the self. I will then use this robustly developed concept of the self not only to critique how modern Western society is constructing individuals but also to show how modernity's misguided notion of the self is an important factor lying behind many of the social, political, and personal woes of the contemporary world.

Finally, I want to offer a vision of what an ideal self psychological world would look like and how we need to transform our social practices in the home, workplace, and technosphere to bring it about. I agree with John Dewey that the purpose of philosophy is to perform “a kind of intellectual disrobing” that seeks to expose our social prejudices and “critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us” (1973, 276).

That is, the purpose of this book is to bring Kohut's revolutionary notion of the self out of its foundational place in the clinic into the wider world to help right the ship of a conceptually misguided culture. There are many reasons why societies collapse. Sometimes they are conquered by others, sometimes they fail to provide for the basic material needs of life, but sometimes they construct concepts that negate essential truths about who we are and what we most need. I believe that Kohut's understanding of what selves most crucially need in terms of selfobject nourishment allows us to see how misguided the modern notion of the independent, autonomous self is and why it causes so much unhappiness today in the land of plenty.

I find myself in a unique position to write this book as I am a philosopher trained in skills that deal with abstract concepts and their interrelations. I have studied most of the significant visions of what it means

to be human developed by Western philosophers, with my favorites being Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Emerson, and the existentialists. When I had a psychological breakdown in the late 1970's, I discovered the power of psychoanalytic therapy to engage the depths of the psyche in a way that philosophy could not. I decided that I wanted to devote my life's work to the integration of these two great discourses around issues of philosophical anthropology (what it means to be human) and ethics. In addition to teaching a course, *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, for two decades and having written four books and many articles interrelating psychoanalysis and philosophy, I have, with my spouse and fellow colleague in Classics, Marcia Dobson, invented and taught an unprecedented undergraduate course in psychoanalysis at the Chicago Psychoanalytic Institute in which a number of analysts appear to talk about both their cases and their theories of how the human mind works.¹ In this course I have learned from some of Kohut's most important colleagues—Ernest Wolf, Marian Tolpin, Arnold Goldberg, and David Terman.

In short, I find myself in an exceptional position to carefully probe Kohut's key concepts in relation to both philosophic and psychoanalytic traditions and to elucidate their importance for modern society.

Note

- 1 *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* devoted an entire issue (Vol. 39(6)) to this course, including articles on why it is important to teach psychoanalysis to undergraduates, sketches of the classes taught by the analysts and the students' reaction to them, and a sample of the papers students have written about what they learned.

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Most of all I need to thank my colleague and spouse, Marcia Dobson, for her careful reading of the manuscript and invaluable help in making it better. Her love and care for me over 40 years of marriage

have sustained me, and her depth of knowledge about psychoanalysis and the human soul have nourished me beyond measure.

A note on the image on the front cover. It is Maria Battista's stunning sculpture of Narcissus.

Maria Battista is an artist living in Colorado Springs. Her website is: mariabattista.com



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Introduction

Heinz Kohut's self psychology has not only revolutionized psychoanalytic theory and practice over the past half century but also constitutes one of the most important sets of concepts ever developed for how best to understand and inhabit our humanity—concepts as crucial as those formulated by such foundational thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Freud. Kohut was able to grasp the nature of the self in more depth and complexity than previous thinkers because he was a psychoanalyst who immersed himself in trying to understand the unconscious dynamics of the human psyche. It was in his treatment of persons suffering from narcissistic disorders that he was able to grasp what self-structure is, how it comes into being, how it can be injured or destroyed, and what it needs to flourish. That is, we had to await the development of psychoanalysis before Kohut could gain his original and life-changing insights into the nature of the self.

As brilliant and important as Kohut's understanding of the self is, his conceptualization of it is not as clear and robust as it needs to be to take center stage in the West's pantheon of great theories. Charles Strozier et al. say, "his thoughts ... about the self ... remain murky and have baffled even the best observers" (2022, 45). Further, while his theory presents a radically different understanding of the self than modernity's notion of the self as being an autonomous self-sufficient individual, Kohut does not develop a critique of this regnant ideal nor show how it lies behind social practices that undermine the ability of persons to develop and sustain genuine self-structure. Nor does he show how this misunderstanding of the self is related to many of the personal and social ills that afflict contemporary society. Finally, to be

fully significant, Kohut's theory needs to envision what kind of society might best enable persons to develop strong vitalized selves.

This book is an attempt to remedy these insufficiencies. Part I clarifies and expands Kohut's concept of the self such that it becomes a more coherent, compelling notion. I will carefully analyze the self from structural, dynamic, and functional perspectives, offer a metapsychology that clearly distinguishes the self from the ego, identify the self's energy as a de-sexualized eros, and explain in depth the self psychological understanding of psychopathology. As I develop and expand Kohut's notion of the self, I will also offer responses to his chief critics, including Stolorow, Cushman, Bromberg, Benjamin, and Lacanian post-modernism.

Part II uses Kohut's concept of self as a basis for critiquing how modern economic culture is constructing human beings. It explains why the ideal of the autonomous, mobile individual arose with the emergence of a market society and shows why this ideal deeply misunderstands the needs of the Kohutian self. It will further show why this misunderstanding is implicated in many of the socio/political/economic problems infecting contemporary society, including the plague of loneliness, deaths of despair, multifold addictions, sexual and gun violence, vicious bigotry, and even environmental degradation.

Part III attempts to imagine what an ideal society would look like if it were based on Kohut's notion of the self. In this endeavor I will play off Plato's *Republic*, the book that stands as one of the foundational cornerstones of Western culture. The *Republic* constructs a vision of the ideal human being as one in which a rational ego controls and directs the emotions and desires. He says that this psychic organization can come into being only if a person develops crucial virtues—wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice—and receives an education that fosters such a soul. Since the state is responsible for both educational institutions and the social practices that are needed in the production of good persons, the *Republic* develops in detail what the nature of this state must be, along with specifying the content of its educational practices. Throughout the book Plato makes it clear that the good state cannot come into being without good citizens and good citizens cannot come into being without a good state. While this might look like an impossible chicken/egg problem, there is a synchronistic development here in which better persons can over time demand a

better state, and a better state can introduce practices and institutions to help generate better persons.

I think that Plato expresses a truth in seeing the interplay between the organization of the soul and the socio/political/economic practices of the state. It is the social practices of a culture that are largely responsible for how its members construct their humanity. What I want to do in the last part of this book is to inquire into what kind of world would be optimal for the development and sustenance of nuclear selves, so that more human beings could reap the deep sense of flourishing that comes with the presence of a self at the core of experience. That is, I want to re-write Plato's *Republic* from the viewpoint of self psychology and imaginatively construct what an ideal self psychological world would be rather than an ideal rational world.

Kohut's work excites me because I think he got four crucial ideas right about the self, ideas that no one had completely put together into an understanding of the self before he did. *First*, Kohut discovered that the self is not some kind of inborn entity but a structure that comes into being through a developmental process, one which he describes with more clarity and rigor than any other theorist. He brilliantly discloses how and under what conditions the perfection and grandiosity of primary narcissism can be transformed into the ideals and ambitions of a nascent self. That is, selves do not come ready-made in our psyches but must be developed through a process that can produce a vitalized coherent core to our experience if it goes well, but various psychopathologies if it doesn't. In making the claim that the self is a psycho/social achievement rather than an ontological entity or merely the result of social conditioning, Kohut created the first genuinely psychological theory of the self. In seeing the self as an evolution of narcissistic libido, he further taught us that we are inherently narcissistic and need to accept this as an essential part of our human nature. He did for narcissism what Freud had done for our sexuality. He taught us that we need to love our selves and be forever concerned about our self-esteem. In so doing, he freed us from longstanding prejudice against self-love in favor of a selfless altruism. We are by nature narcissistic and never outgrow it; however, it makes all the difference whether we can transform infantile narcissism into more mature forms. I will detail Kohut's theory of how narcissistic libido transforms into a self in the first chapter.

Second, Kohut discovered that our selves are not what they have been presumed to be for almost all of Western history: our conscious egos. While the ego and the self both carry the sense of being who “I” am, Kohut found that their functions, needs, development, and values are extraordinarily different. The ego’s fundamental functions are, as Freud said, to negotiate the organism’s relationship to its environments and keep order within the psychic household (1923). According to Kohut, the self is different—it is that psychological structure which, when healthy, provides a person with a profound sense of meaningfulness and zestful energy for engaging in life, often with little concern for whether its values will lead to optimal environmental negotiations. The self’s values can differ greatly from the values that socially define success for a culture. As Western philosophers discovered, the ego needs education, discipline, and knowledge to develop its powers. Kohut found that the self, on the other hand, needs empathic responsiveness from others to develop its core sense of worth and vitality.

The reason Kohut could discover the self as a largely unconscious structure that can be present or absent from ego consciousness is that he was working in the psychoanalytic tradition. That is, neither he, nor anyone else, could have discovered and described the self before the psychoanalytic tradition came into existence with Freud’s work at the beginning of the 20th century. It was because Kohut was trying to understand patients with significant narcissistic disorders that he was able to discover the self by finding what was missing from these patients and what functions they desperately needed him to play. Just as Freud came to understand the dynamics of psychological life by dealing mostly with women who suffered from hysteria, so Kohut discovered the dynamics surrounding the development and sustenance of a self by working with patients who had failed to develop adequate selves.

While Kohut expressly makes the revolutionary claim that the self and the ego are different (1971, xiii), he never develops a new metapsychology to fully explain their differences, functions, and interrelations. One of the purposes of this book is to provide a new self psychological metapsychology without which we cannot fully understand what Kohut means by the self. I will develop this new metapsychology in Chapter 4 and use it to show how a misidentification of the self with the ego is implicated in many of the problems of modern life.

The *third* idea about the self which Kohut got right is that it is structured around ideals and ambitions that relate to idiosyncratic traits and predispositions. This vision of the self captures a number of important ideas from the most profound philosophers writing about the nature of the self. It reverberates with Plato's philosophical truth that humans need to be motivated by ideals rather than just desires if they are going to live meaningful lives, a claim that has resonated throughout almost all the Western philosophical tradition and is an anchoring idea in Confucius' thought. However, Kohut differs from these philosophers in distinguishing between general ideals derived from reason or society and those that originate organically in our singular beings—ideals that spring from the soil of our particular traits/predispositions. When we are actualizing our self's ideals, we feel vitalized and believe that what we are doing is meaningful; when we are following ideals imposed by external sources, we feel obligated. In differentiating self-ideals from social-ideals Kohut aligns his theory with the existentialists and Emerson, who claim that acting from our singular selves rather than social codes is the ultimate source of personal vitality. However, Kohut distinguishes himself from these great philosophers of the self by disclosing our need for recognition and confirmation from others. The existentialists proclaim the heroic lonely individual asserting his singularity against the monstrous generalizing forces of society; Kohut's vision is of the unique individual remaining in connection with others.

Kohut also captures Hegel's crucial idea that the self is inherently dialectical: a tension between who one actually is and an ideal of what one might become. For Kohut the dialectical tension occurs between my narcissistic grandiosity and my ideals. In my grandiose self-esteem, I glory in who I am and what I have accomplished; but my ideals represent the self that I long to be but am not yet. I am both who I am and who I might be. Hence, Kohut's concept of the self is inherently dynamic, for the self must always be in the process of achieving ideals that stand beyond what we have already become. The bipolar self is a process, not a thing—a teleological questing into the future rather than an entrapment in some repetitive structure of identity.

While Kohut is without parallel in his conceptualization of how infantile perfection and grandiosity transform into the qualities of a self, he almost never writes about the "narcissistic libido" that provides

the quantitative side of the self—the energy that binds the poles together and which issues into the vitality that the self grants the psyche. I will attempt to mend this gap in Kohut’s theory by connecting narcissistic libido to a concept of de-sexualized *eros*—one I get from both Plato and the later Freud. I think that once we find that the self’s energy is *eros* (embodied love), a great deal of what Kohut says about the self will make more sense and be more alluring. Structure tends to be boring; erotic love is thrilling. I develop a concept of the self’s energy as *eros* in Chapter 3.

The *fourth* revolutionary idea Kohut discovered about the self is that it is inherently relational. Self-structure is so intrinsically interconnected with others that they literally constitute an intrinsic part of our selves. Since one of the primary ways Kohut defines the self is as a set of functions, others literally become part of the self when they are performing these functions. That is, the self is both a psychic structure within a person but also a field of relationships extending into others. They are not just objects, but “*selfobjects*.” We need selfobjects desperately when we are developing a self in childhood, but never outgrow our need for others to support and sustain the self—to literally be part of our selves.

This understanding of the self as inherently fused with selfobjects has helped revolutionize psychoanalytic practice. The notion that the therapist is a selfobject for the patient moves the therapist/patient relation from a “one-person” interaction in which an omniscient distanced therapist examines a patient and offers objectively valid interpretations to a two-person interaction in which the subjectivities of both persons are taken into account and healing takes place at the intersection of those two subjectivities. Even more important, Kohut’s claim that empathy is both the therapist’s fundamental tool for understanding what a patient is feeling and that which primarily fosters psychological health has been adopted by therapists of all stripes.

Not only has Kohut’s notion of the selfobject transformed clinical experience, but it can also be used to justify to modern persons why it is good to become an ethical person (Riker, 2010), a justification that is sorely needed in a world in which it seems that many are prone to cheat and commit other unethical acts. Once Kohut re-defines the self, he also re-defines self-interest. Since it is in our deepest self-interest to have friends who can be selfobjects for us, we need to be able to be

selfobjects for them, for it is mainly in reciprocity that adults are able to live within a matrix of selfobjects. It is not hard to show that the kind of person best able to be a selfobject for others is someone who has developed the moral virtues and expanded capacities for empathy and care. That is, it turns out that the kind of person who can best be a selfobject for others is an ethical person. It is good to be good! Chapter 2 focuses on the self's functions, selfobjects, and the importance of this theory for ethics.

As important and revolutionary as Kohut's concept of the self is, it has been criticized by some important clinicians and not been adopted by society at large. Within the clinical world, Robert Stolorow and colleagues have claimed that Kohut's "self" is a reified term that takes us away from lived experience and causes us to think of ourselves as isolated Cartesian egos (2019). Stolorow wants analysts to focus on intersubjectivity and contextuality rather than some "metaphysical" entity termed "the self." Phillip Cushman declares that Kohut's concept of the self fosters the "masterful, bounded, and empty" human beings who roam the capitalist streets of modern society (1995). Jessica Benjamin finds that using others as selfobjects can generate a tendency to not recognize them as independent subjects (2018). Kohut's theory has also been challenged by Philip Bromberg, whose work claims that there is not one central self but many self-states revolving around an ego (1998).

While I will fully develop responses to these critiques in subsequent chapters, let me say that they all involve misconceptions of Kohut's notion of the self. It is not a thing as Stolorow claims, but a structured process that is profoundly inter-relational. It does not foster capitalistic emptiness as Cushman claims, for in its insistence on singular ideals, it stands as a ballast against generalized socioeconomic ideals. Kohut never implies that we see others *only* as selfobjects; and without some conception of the central nuclear self, we cannot make sense of the crucial ethical notions of integrity and "being true to one's self."

However, there are wider, deeper reasons for why society at large has not adopted Kohut's understanding of the self. For one, there is the decline in the acceptance of psychoanalysis as a science that offers the premier way to deal with psychopathology. Rather than long-term engagement with an in-depth process for exploring one's unconscious motivations and life-history, quick-fix-loving Americans prefer to take

a drug or make some cognitive/behavioral shifts that are under their conscious control. Jonathan Lear says that psychoanalysis is being dismissed partly because insurance companies do not want to pay for long-term treatment, partly because analysts in the 1940's/50's made inflated claims about psychoanalysis' effectiveness, but mainly because Americans reject the idea "of humans having depth—as being complex psychological organisms who generate layers of meaning which lie beneath the surface of their understanding" (2000, 27). Insofar as Kohut is in the psychoanalytic tradition, his work gets dismissed.

Another reason for why Kohut's work has not entered society at large is that it is at odds with the reigning postmodernist mindset in which anything that appears to be an objective ground of meaning is cast into a graveyard of dead ideas. Postmodernists tend to dislike set structures, especially those that carry rigid forms of identity or authority. They prefer de-constructing to constructing. They value fluidity, difference, de-centering of power and authority, and seek the end of grand narratives that have been used to organize our thinking about the world and ourselves. The grandest of these grand narratives, according to arch-postmodernist Lyotard, is "the self" (1979). Even if Kohut's concept of self is the most fluid, permeable, and de-centered (in terms of its existence both in a person and that person's selfobjects) ever proposed, just the use of the noun "self" is enough for many post-modern thinkers to never read Kohut.

Postmodernists prefer to talk about "the subject" rather than "the self" because subjectivity is phenomenologically available and can be explored for the way it structures experience. As such, it is extremely useful in socio/political discourse, for we can detect different ways of structuring subjectivity, including ways that embody cultural prejudices and contextualized perspectives, such as the patriarchal or racialized subject. Making the subject rather than the self the central notion for understanding why humans are the way they are is especially important in deconstructing certain forms of subjectivity, such as those that arbitrarily assume privilege and power, and constructing new ideals, such as "the post-colonial subject." While we can articulate what colonial and post-colonial subjects are, it makes little sense to talk about selves in this way. "Subject" can also be paired with "object" and "objectification"—a process in which subjects are reduced to objects and, hence, de-humanized. In short, the matrix of concepts

connected to “being a subject” are key players in the discourse concerning power and justice; something that the complex of concepts around “being a self” are not. As socio/political discourse attempting to deconstruct arbitrary forms of power, such as white privilege or patriarchy, is ascendant in the contemporary world, discourse about a “nuclear self” seems not only archaic but dangerously obfuscating. I will show why this critique is misguided in Chapter 4 when I distinguish between the self and the ego and show that we need a psychological conceptualization of who we are rather than one that reduces humans to their socio/economic/political identities.

A third reason why the concept of self has declined in significance is the rise of phenomenology as the preferred way to examine human experience. Phenomenology seeks to describe our lived experience without theorizing about structures or entities lying behind or beneath experience. Just as the impressionists strove to paint light and life as we experience them rather than trying to invoke positive or negative spiritual forces underlying the world, so phenomenologists attempt to depict what appears, not what lies behind the appearance. As Heidegger says, phenomenology and ontology are one—that which is is that which appears (1927). Rather than theorizing about some strange sub-altern structure—“the self,” Stolorow, Atwood, and many current analysts are content with the phenomenologically available “sense of self” that is experienced by their patients and themselves (2019). If patients experience a stronger “sense of self,” then the therapy is going well; if it is weak, highly fluctuating, absent, etc., this indicates psychological disturbance. What seems to be eliminated as unnecessary is a theory about some metapsychological self that lies beneath the surface of these experiences. Again, I will show that without some kind of theory about psychological structure, we will not be able to make much sense of what phenomenologically appears.

The above are reasons enough for seeing why Kohut’s work has not made the impact that it should have, but Kohut’s dense, jargon-laden writing has also been responsible for his lack of impact. A number of his crucial ideas and concepts are left as murky as a southern swamp. For instance, Kohut says that the self is a psychic content and not an agency, but never explains what he means by making this important distinction. He often writes as though the self is the whole person but also writes as though it is a particular psychic structure. He writes that

the nuclear self has two poles (ideals and ambitions), but rarely says what it is that has these two poles; that is, we never learn what the energy of the nuclear self is that holds the poles together. He also says that we “love our ideals” and feel “pushed by our ambitions,” but never specifies who the we is that is feeling the love and the push. Is it the ego that is loving the self’s ideals, the whole person, or the self’s loving its own ideals? Is it the ego that is feeling pressured by the narcissistic ambitions of the self, the self’s response to its own ambitions, or the whole person? He describes the self differently in different places: as a discrete structure, a set of functions, a process, a subject, or a diffuse presence infusing subjectivity. What really is it?

Kohut often writes as though the self and the ego are different psychic agencies but never clarifies their difference; yet this difference is crucial if he is to maintain his radical differentiation from Freud, and crucial if we are to understand his new psychological dynamics. He also writes that narcissistic love and object love have two different developmental trajectories, but since the narcissistic self is fully intertwined with selfobject others with whom we supposedly have loving relations, this cannot be so. Might self-love and object-love be so inter-fused that their trajectories cannot be easily separated?

This book will respond to these criticisms and questions by developing, creatively expanding, and explaining in depth Kohut’s concept of the self. Once we fully understand the self, we will be able to see why it is not the kind of privileged static ground that postmodernists dislike, and why it is a decisive concept in understanding how to construct subjects that are open-minded, capable of interacting with diversity, and capable of treating others humanely with empathy rather than objectifying them. We will also see why it is essential to go beyond phenomenology to theorize about structures that lie beneath the surface of experience, for without such theories we cannot fully understand who we really are or why we are experiencing things in the ways that we do. In fact, without a theory of the self, I do not think that the fundamental tenets of phenomenological intersubjectivity make much sense.

However, there is a final, and perhaps most important, reason for why Kohut’s concept of the self has not entered the culture: it is a revolutionary concept, one that forcefully challenges contemporary society’s notion of self as an autonomous self-sufficient individual. Insofar