

## **The Tragic Man of Heinz Kohut: A brief exploration of the psychological anthropology of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology**

Every psychological theory works by virtue of its core psychological concepts and within a limited horizon. The horizon of a psychological theory is its broader — though vague and incomplete — view of the world that surrounds the central psychological postulates in the theory. There are implicit assumptions about human nature in every psychological theory. Such theories build upon an understanding of what determines human character and action, and they vary widely with respect to their understandings of human motivations, personality structure and core characteristics. The anthropological horizon of a psychological theory consists of underlying assumptions in the theory about the nature and condition of man, and the enduring central needs and tendencies that humans generally want to fulfil<sup>1</sup>.

However, most underlying assumptions about the nature of the human being often remain unacknowledged or unexplained in psychological theories. Making such assumptions explicit has several advantages — such as helping us evaluate the coherence of the ideas present and identify what the relationship is between how the theory views human nature and the conditions it proposes as necessary to bring about the fulfilment of that nature with its proper capacities. Similarly, if the fulfilment of the capacities as proposed by the theory also constitutes in part the fulfilment of the person, then formulating an explicit account of it can give insight into overall human flourishing and help us understand pathology as a systematic account of the frustration of these capacities. Such an explicit account will also help us evaluate the

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A.E. BERGIN, «Psychotherapy and Religious Values», 97. The philosopher Margolis argued that one cannot imagine the practice of psychotherapy without an underlying conception of a flourishing life. He asserted, «The enterprise of psychotherapy, whatever the variety in doctrinal conviction, clearly presupposes a set of values in the name of which the alteration of the lives of patients is undertaken». J. MARGOLIS, *Psychotherapy and Morality*, 25.

comprehensiveness and adequacy of the vision of the human person present in the theory<sup>2</sup>.

As the protestant theologian, P. Tillich often maintained in his writings, every perspective on the human condition conveys a sense of what is wrong with us, how we can find healing and how the reality of a new life can be sustained by us<sup>3</sup>. Every theory that deals with the self, characterises also a vision of being in the world regarding how human beings experience, know, act, and relate to themselves, the surrounding environment, and other selves. It also identifies what is normal as well as the limits of human tendencies. It may also include sub-theories about patterns of experience, relationship, motivation, illness, and the ideal state of fulfilment, besides implicitly proposing an unspecified ethic or interpretation of responsibility regarding what a person ought to be or become<sup>4</sup>.

## I. SELF PSYCHOLOGY: ITS INHERENT ANTHROPOLOGY

Self psychology is a psychoanalytical theory that concerns itself with the development, organization, and sustenance of the self in an empathic milieu and with the consequent limits on the development of the self in the form of self disorders when such an empathically responsive surround is missing. It also seeks to restore cohesion in the injured self of the narcissist through psychoanalysis based on empathy. As a psychoanalytic model, it does not concern itself with the wider anthropological and ontological questions regarding the human being because its principal focus is on the self, disorders of the self and restoration of the self that suffers deficits in structure.

Heinz Kohut regards the basic condition of human existence to be a struggle with ones' own narcissistic vulnerability. The growing child initially lives in a state of «undisturbed primary narcissistic equilibrium»<sup>5</sup> with the expectation of finding oneself in an environment that guarantees empathic responsiveness to one's self needs for pleasure and perfection. This expectation is bound to meet with frustration at the parents' inability to offer the growing child

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. E.C. BRUGGER, «Anthropological Foundations for Clinical Psychology», 4.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. P. Tillich as cited in T.D. COOPER – R.L. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. C.R. SCHLAUCH, «Rethinking Selfobject and Self», 69. It may also be noted that different psychological approaches offer different versions of the human condition that guide and delimit the horizon of clinical practice. For instance, Freudian psychoanalysis views man as fundamentally pleasure seeking, the object relations school of Melanie Klein, Winnicott and others offer a vision of man as object seeking, while the existentialist school views man as meaning seeking and Kohut's self psychology views man as selfobject seeking. Cfr. M. MARCUS – A. ROSENBERG, ed., *Psychoanalytic Versions of Human Condition*.

<sup>5</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Analysis of the Self*, 63.

constant experiences of satisfaction of its needs for mirroring of its grandiosity and for idealizing its parents. This gives rise to the narcissistic vulnerability in the growing self of the child. While experiences of «optimal frustration» of the satisfaction of the needs for grandiosity and idealization can lead to healthy development of the self and mature capacity for empathy, lack of empathic responsiveness from parents with impaired capacity for empathic responding to the growing self's needs can lead to disorders of the self or unhealthy narcissism.

There are constructs within the theoretical elaboration of Kohut's self psychology which can help us understand its inherent psychological anthropology<sup>6</sup>, because these constructs contain Kohut's view of the basic strivings of the human being and the description of the human condition. These constructs try to answer the fundamental questions regarding man such as: *who am I?* — what is the nature, purpose, and fundamental task of human beings? *where am I?* — what is the nature of the world human beings live in? *what is wrong?* — what is the basic problem or obstacle that keeps man from fulfilling himself? *what is the solution?* — how is it possible for man to overcome the obstacles to his fulfilment? The basic self psychological constructs which attempt to answer the above questions are: (A) the notion of *Tragic Man*<sup>7</sup> as a description of the fundamental dilemma of human existence in the world; (B) the notion of *selfobject*<sup>8</sup> relating as a remedy to answer the fundamental dilemma; (C) *the construct of empathy* as the specific means by which selfobject relating is made possible and as a sign of human maturity. Apart from these constructs which reveal the underlying anthropological vision, Kohut also left subtle hints about the potential (D) *openness of the self to the transcendent*. It may be noted that most of these constructs derive

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<sup>6</sup> The term psychological anthropology in the context of the present discussion refers to the psychological understanding of the human person and of human existence as seen in Kohut's self psychology theory.

<sup>7</sup> It may be noted that Kohut refers to a condition of humanity understood in a generic sense by the term *Tragic Man* and is not to be construed as a sexist usage of language.

<sup>8</sup> In his first major work, *The Analysis of the Self*, Kohut defined self-objects (selfobjects) as «objects which are experienced as part of the self», and not experienced as «separate and independent from the self». H. KOHUT, *The Analysis of the Self*, XIV, 3. In his final work, Kohut delineated the general nature of selfobject with the following words: «Throughout his life a person will experience himself as a cohesive harmonious firm unit in time and space, connected with his past and pointing meaningfully into a creative-productive future, [but] only as long as, at each stage in his life, he experiences certain representatives of his human surroundings as joyfully responding to him, as available to him as sources of idealized strength and calmness, as being silently present but in essence like him, and, at any rate, able to grasp his inner life more or less accurately so that their responses are attuned to his needs and allow him to grasp their inner life when he is in need of such sustenance». H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 52.

essentially from the clinical experience Kohut had with patients with disorders of the self, which significantly influenced his vision of the human condition. In what follows, we shall examine each of these psychological constructs to bring to light the vision of the human person that Self psychology contains.

## II. THE NOTION OF «TRAGIC MAN»

In his work, *The Restoration of the Self*<sup>9</sup>, Kohut describes human functioning as aimed in two directions. The first of these is termed *Guilty Man* (following the Freudian tradition) emphasizing the pleasure-seeking drives and tension-reduction tendency in human beings. Guilty Man refers to the Freudian portrait of the human condition, an image saturated with the experience of guilt over drives that are excessive and out of control. As the biological drives are dangerous, they need to be tamed and approached with serious concern for their destructive potential. This Freudian position leads to the view that man's primary experience is one of guilt. While it might be an oversimplification to see Freud as completely pessimistic over man's nature, there is little doubt regarding the man envisioned in classical psychoanalysis as being conflicted and ambivalent even in the most intimate of his relationships. The Freudian man is internally more conflicted than unified, more tied to the past than influenced by self-determining strivings towards a future<sup>10</sup>. He is merely an actor directed by unknown unconscious forces. Guilty Man lives under the sovereignty of the pleasure principle, trying to resolve inner conflict and often facing frustration in his efforts at tension reduction.

In contrast with the inevitably and perpetually ambivalent and conflicted human being as proposed in the anthropology of classical psychoanalysis, Kohut's self psychology, with its image of Tragic Man, envisions a basically unified human being who is more likely to suffer deficit than conflict. Kohut's Tragic Man is a human being directed primordially to the development of self, who, in not fully achieving his «nuclear programme»<sup>11</sup>, completes his life in «guiltless despair»<sup>12</sup>. Tragic Man, according to Kohut, is dogged by the existential question of his own mortality. The tragic defeat the human being would likely encounter during the pursuit of his or her guiding vision is the consequence of humanity's puny and insignificant place in the universe and not the result of a guilt-engendered neurotic self-defeat<sup>13</sup>. As an alternative

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<sup>9</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. A.M. COOPER, «The Place of Self Psychology», 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Reference here is to the unfolding of the inherent potential of the self.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. M.W. DUNBAR – S. DOBSON, «Freud, Kohut, Sophocles», 54.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. A.M. COOPER, «The Place of Self Psychology» 5. 9. While Freud offers us a narrative about *taming of the beast within*, Kohutian narrative is about *discovery of the self within*.

to the Freudian image of drive-oriented Guilty Man, Kohut argued that our fragmented drivenness comes from an injured or wounded self. Man's condition is tragic because he seeks to fulfil, with difficulty, the programme of his nuclear but damaged self. The basic problem of man is not his biological drives but his narcissistic vulnerability. Kohut's Tragic Man is more concerned with the achievement of ideals than the mere gratification of drives. Man's efforts become a tragic feat, because his striving to realize his true potential is frustrated by the empathic failures in his early experiences.

According to T.D. Cooper and R. Randall, Kohut's perspective on the human condition can be better understood within the framework of the second century theologian Irenaeus' theological anthropology over against that of St. Augustine<sup>14</sup> whose darker portrait of humanity after the first «fall» has influenced the Western intellectual tradition's view of human nature. Irenaeus proposed an image of humanity as insecure and weak rather than as essentially depraved. Thus, in contrast to what Augustine would later propose, for Irenaeus, human beings were not created perfect but were in fact, created immature and in need of spiritual progress. The human being, according to Irenaeus, is created in God's «image» (bodily powers, reason, and choice) but he needs to grow into God's «likeness». Through a process of trial and error, humanity could grow in its likeness of God. For Irenaeus, the «fall» of the first parent Adam does not have the evil consequences that Augustine would later propose. Adam was immature, with less developed discriminatory powers, and was tempted and fell. Instead of viewing creation (including human flesh) as inherently evil, Irenaeus saw creation as fundamentally good. Thus, Irenaeus proposes a more empathic and compassionate view of human nature and humanity's ills. In offering a non-shaming view of the original sin, Irenaeus suggests that sin is associated with immaturity, insecurity, and ignorance. The fall into sin, thus, was part of growing up and learning about life. For both Kohut and traditional Christian theology, what we call sin has to do with «missing the mark» of our authentic selfhood. In fact, Kohut understands mental health as functioning in accordance with our true design or our essential nature and the tragedy of life consists in not fulfilling our nuclear self-goals<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> St. Augustine is regarded as the primary architect of the doctrine of original sin, which painted a gloomy picture of the human condition after the sin of the first parents, Adam and Eve. Thus, while humanity was originally created in a pure and innocent state, that original innocence has been lost due to the sin of the first parents. This view later led to a tendency in the Western intellectual tradition to see human nature as inherently depraved and not to be trusted. Augustine believed that the fallen state of the human being has pushed his drives out of control and such a state is called «concupiscence» which is an inordinate state of desire in which one is full of excessive longing and lust, a state which is inherited from the previous generations.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 25-36.

### III. «GUILTY» AND «TRAGIC»: MAN'S BIDIRECTIONAL STRIVING

Even though Kohut proposed an alternative vision of man differing from classical psychoanalysis, he did not summarily reject the latter. He maintained that man's functioning should be seen as bidirectional. If his aims are directed towards the activity of his drives then he is identified as «Guilty Man» because of not having lived up to the ideals of the superego, whereas if his aims are toward the fulfilment of the self then he is to be regarded as «Tragic Man» due to the inevitable failures in the effort to realize his self. Man lives not only in a world of neurotic conflicts. There exists deep inside him a primitive core of spontaneity that Kohut called the *nuclear self*. The spontaneous strivings of the nuclear self to express its pattern often meet with failure<sup>16</sup>.

The conflicting aspects of the Oedipus complex became the genetic focus of the development of the Freudian vision of Guilty Man, whereas the non-conflicting aspects of the oedipal phase are at the base of the development of the notion of Tragic Man and of the disorders of the self. The psychology of the self, in essence, explains the pathology of the fragmented and depleted self that finds itself in a world of unmirrored ambitions, in a world without ideals — these in short, are the psychic disturbances and struggles of Tragic Man<sup>17</sup>.

### IV. TRAGIC MAN AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF MODERN MAN

M.D. Kahn opines that modernization and increasingly rapid technological change have contributed to create conditions for the emergence of what Kohut called «Tragic Man». He further observes that Tragic Man, as seen by Kohut, was like Riesman's other-directed man, someone who was forced into narcissistic retreat, unable to cope with the harsh realities of the modern world, unable to find and be nourished by committed caregivers and cohesive ideologies, and who is, as a result, unable to rely on personal emotional resources. The disintegration anxiety that Kohut often refers to in his works is axiomatic of modern times<sup>18</sup>. In the image of Tragic Man, Kohut tried to capture the essence of human experience when one lives an unfulfilled life. It represents the failure of the life project. Such a person experiences disappointment and despair and there is no fulfilment of life which is an essential part to the achievement of a sense of cohesion that results in joy, pride in oneself and enthusiasm for a cause. The central concern of modern man is self-cohesion, and Tragic Man represents man's failure to achieve self-cohesion and the ensuing consequences.

<sup>16</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 243.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. M.D. KAHN, «Self-Object Relations Therapy with Couples», 416.

In Tragic Man, the tensions between ambitions and ideals cannot be reconciled, and disappointment in one's self is overwhelming, and leads to a sense of purposelessness and lack of meaning in life. The result is contempt for oneself and despair<sup>19</sup>.

## V. CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WHO ACHIEVE COHESION

However, in the view of Kohut, for those who can maintain a sense of self cohesion and have transformed their archaic narcissism into its more mature versions, while consolidating their nuclear sense of self, life was not altogether as tragic as it would seem. To them are open the possibilities for the appreciation of humour, for creativity, for the expression of wisdom, and for the capacity for empathy for others. Such persons would confront old age and death with a degree of acceptance of its inevitability, not embittered by the thought that life did not give them all that they sought from it. Kohut maintains that mental health consists in the achievement of self-esteem, which derives from a stable balance between one's goals and ambitions and leads to the actualization of one's potential, one's skills, and one's talents in order to love and work successfully<sup>20</sup>. The experience of balanced tension between ideals and ambitions leads to feelings of joy, enthusiasm, and pride, but an imbalance between these would lead to the symptoms that are typical of many of the disturbances of the self<sup>21</sup>.

## VI. BROKENNESS PRECEDES DESTRUCTIVENESS OF THE TRAGIC MAN

Kohut's benevolent vision of man does offer certain useful insights into some aspects of human needs and motivational structure. Kohut does not portray man as inherently destructive or disordered by nature. Kohut tried to offer an alternative to the classical psychoanalytic view that human motivation is primarily rooted in the biological sphere, and that as a result, drives which seek direct expression and are often destructive in nature, must be redirected to socially acceptable behaviour. For Kohut, drives are not inherently destructive but are made destructive because of early narcissistic injuries. Excessive drives, according to Kohut, are only inadequate and unsuccessful attempts at self-repair. The human being fixates on the drives in the attempt

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<sup>19</sup> Cfr. J. PALOMBO, «Heinz Kohut: (1913-1981)», 276.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*; 284; H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. J. PALOMBO, «Heinz Kohut: (1913-1981)», 276.

to repair injuries to the self through them<sup>22</sup>. Thus, it is not *natural* for a person to be violently aggressive, sexually intoxicated, constantly hungry, or insatiable. The insatiability emerges to heal a deficit or repair a damage that has happened earlier. Stated differently, in the perspective of Kohut, the experience of human brokenness comes before human destructiveness. Kohut argued that psychological deprivations and distortions make people aggressive. The destructive behaviour which is harmful to the self and others is often a mistaken attempt to resolve, compensate for and heal hurts and injuries to the self which one has suffered. Any real psychological injury or even the threat of potential injury to one's vulnerable self can motivate violent or aggressive behaviour<sup>23</sup>.

In Kohut's view every act of trying to keep the self safe, even when it is a distorted act, is an expression of a self that seeks cohesion, wholeness, balance, and healing, although at times the means adopted to reach the balance are inappropriate. The issue of injury to the self thus becomes pivotal for deepening our understanding of the human condition in the Kohutian lens. Empathic understanding provides a viable working attitude to adopt in helping individuals restore their injured selves to cohesion and health. It needs to be kept in mind that no discourse on the spiritual and mystery dimension of man should ignore the fact that we are creatures with developmental needs, and vulnerabilities. Otherwise, one runs the risk of engaging in empty intellectual abstractions, which would not help bring any change or healing in the person who experiences fragmentation and brokenness. Much of destructive human behaviour, although harmful to oneself and others, may often be an attempt to resolve, heal and compensate for the injuries to the self which one has encountered or for the threat of potential self injuries. As the self cannot heal itself in isolation from others, it will need empathic contact with a mirroring and affirming other if it is to be healed<sup>24</sup>.

Psychoanalysis in general borrowed in large measure from the tragic themes of Greek mythology in its efforts to compose a valid psychological anthropology relevant to the contemporary understanding of man<sup>25</sup>. Therefore, one notes within psychoanalytic theories a certain obsession with tragic Greek mythical themes of family conflicts, triangulations, the oedipal complex, patricides, matricides, suicides and homicides, and tragic figures such as

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<sup>22</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Chicago Institute Lectures*, 63-72. 200. 208-209.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R.L. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R.L. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 53-67.

<sup>25</sup> About three decades ago Roy Schafer described how psychoanalysis borrowed Greek tragic themes in its elaboration of a psychological anthropology. He argued that of all the perspectives on human affairs, the tragic perspective is by far the most remorselessly searching and deeply involved in comparison to other views. Cfr. R. SCHAFFER, *A New Language for Psychoanalysis*.

Oedipus, Odysseus, Narcissus, and Orestes. Kohut's image of Tragic Man has roots in Greek mythology as represented in Homer's tragic figure of Odysseus and in Sophocles' tragic figures of Oedipus Coloneus and Oedipus Rex<sup>26</sup>. The lack of recognition of the transcendental dimension of existence for the human person makes the Greek themes essentially tragic. Life becomes tragic when one faces the irrationality of existence, notwithstanding one's efforts to confer a sense of meaning on it. The Greek bias of modern psychology results in a skewed interpretation of the mystery dimension of life, which, however, is not always tragic. Kohut's man is a tragic figure because, notwithstanding his noble efforts at self-expansion and self-realization against all odds of life, underlying his awareness is the consciousness of the tragic impermanence of life in facing inevitable death and extinction.

## VII. HUMAN BEING AS SUBSISTING IN A RELATIONAL MILIEU

Although Self psychology proposes Tragic Man as the representative image of modern man, underlying its vision of the human person is the idea of the inherent human relatedness as seen in the concept of lifelong self-selfobject relatedness. Kohut's clinical experience taught him that some of his patients suffered not from conflicts regarding drives and defences but from deficiencies in their felt sense of self, a self which is experienced as brittle, lacking in cohesion and integrity and often vulnerable to sudden plunges in self-esteem. This led Kohut to ask the developmental question: how does a healthy, stable, and cohesive sense of self develop and how does the process of such a development get derailed? In answering this question, Kohut envisioned the self as developing in the context of certain key relationships, which he called self-selfobject relationships, in which the early caretakers serve not just as objects of the child's needs and desires but also as providers of certain narcissistic functions for its developing self. It is as if the child's experience assumes a subjective sense of reality only when it is mediated through an empathic selfobject, which could be the mother. In every person, there exists a powerful need to preserve a cohesive and abiding sense of oneself as associated with and related to a matrix of other people in terms of actual interactions as well as internal presences<sup>27</sup>. Kohut made clear how the psychological structure of a person is fundamentally and deeply marked by experience of the other who validates him and helps him maintain cohesion.

We never outgrow those responses from idealized, uplifting individuals in whose embracing presence we feel reassured and whose courage we borrow

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. M.W. DUNBAR – S. DOBSON, «Freud, Kohut, Sophocles», 53-76.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. S.A. MITCHELL, *Relational Concepts in Psychoanalysis*, 32-33.

for our own. We still need, when feeling vulnerable, others to give us the assurance that we are special which we cannot give it to ourselves, nor do we outgrow the need for twinship/alter-ego responses from others who assure us that we are normal and acceptable and that we share a common humanity and connectedness with them. Certainly, we do not need these responses as we needed them as children. However, we do need them in their more mature forms. Besides, every one of us, including the most self-secure among us who had highly empathic selfobjects in the past, can lose our sense of self-cohesion and can experience various levels of fragmentation when injuries to our self are burdensome. We then regress to childhood ways of needing intense mirroring, idealizing and twinship/alter-ego responses, at least temporarily, from empathic selfobjects in our emotional milieu. This further testifies to Kohut's claim of our basic self-selfobject relatedness<sup>28</sup>.

Object relations theorists have established that infants are «wired for human interaction»<sup>29</sup>. In his revision of the concept of narcissism, Kohut substantiated how profoundly the psychological structure of the person is marked by and is open to the experience of the other to such an extent that the self is not imaginable apart from its sustaining selfobjects<sup>30</sup>. The life of the self is so marked by the other that the other can be said to be the one whose presence is essential to make personal identity possible and stable. The development of psychological structure requires, along with inborn tendencies, the presence of others, experienced as «selfobjects» who provide certain kinds of functions that facilitate the emergence, cohesion, and maintenance of the self. In the view of Kohut, no person can live outside the self-sustaining matrix of empathic selfobjects who act as psychological oxygen for the self<sup>31</sup>.

Self-selfobject relatedness tells us that our identities are shaped by others as the self achieves its cohesion and structure through empathic selfobject relating. Selfobject needs could be considered as preparing the psychological background for the capacity for self-transcendence because they make the person fundamentally predisposed to relate to an other although for reasons of self-sustenance and affect regulation as in cases of archaic forms of narcissism. A case of narcissistic vulnerability in its archaic forms implies that the person, instead of relating to the other as a separate person, is using the other as a selfobject to regulate his unmanageable affect-states. There is an incapacity for a genuine appreciation of the separate individuality of the other in such cases. Therefore, when the self is restored to its state of cohesion and narcissism is transformed into its more mature forms, there is a corresponding increase in

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<sup>28</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R.L. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 5-7.

<sup>29</sup> S.A. MITCHELL – M.J. BLACK, *Freud and Beyond*, 113.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?* 52.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 47.

one's ability to appreciate and relate to others as separate persons who share the same humanity and to be empathic both towards oneself and towards others.

Self psychology ascribes a determining role to the relational environment when it conceptualizes the self as growing and sustaining itself in an empathically responsive selfobject milieu throughout the course of its existence. It indicates a shift in psychoanalytical perspective towards greater admission of the interpersonal vision of human nature. The self in Kohut can be said to be fundamentally dependent on and open to the other in its environment, and besides it is perpetually embedded in a self-selfobject relational matrix<sup>32</sup>. Self-organization is contingent on at least a minimally responsive environment.

In the concept of selfobject, Kohut recognized the importance of setting aside the notion of an encapsulated self as pure interiority and placed in focus the role of others in sustaining the self. The developing self risks possible fragmentation and deficits if not supported by interchanges with empathic selfobject experiences from others, such as of mirroring, idealization and twinship. Lacking the requisite selfobject experiences, such persons are forced to resort to defensive measures to protect themselves against the threat of disintegration anxiety, which is a fundamental experience for those lacking a secure and cohesive sense of existence<sup>33</sup>. The implication of Kohut's construct of selfobject is that psychological separation is a myth and an impossibility as everyone needs affirming, empathic responses from others throughout life to maintain self-esteem. Maturation and growth, instead of making us independent, only move us away from the need for archaic selfobjects towards an ability to use more mature and appropriate selfobjects<sup>34</sup>. Kohut's concept of the self-selfobject relatedness also demonstrates that the achievement of selfhood is more profoundly an unceasing product of our essential dependence on one another. The focus of self psychology is on the quality of life-enhancing relatedness and care as persons, which according to this model exists throughout life in a self-selfobject matrix<sup>35</sup>.

### VIII. EMPATHY: A HEALING AGENT AND A MARK OF MATURITY OF THE HUMAN BEING

For Kohut, the pathologies of the self are the result of the traumatizing empathic failures of the selfobjects in crucial stages of development<sup>36</sup>. Kohut envisions the human being as being narcissistically vulnerable to brokenness because of failures

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. A.M. COOPER, «The Place of Self Psychology», 13-15.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. L.A. KIRSHNER, *Having a Life*, 31-32.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. G.O. GABBARD, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, 51.

<sup>35</sup> Cfr. C.R. SCHLAUCH, «Reconsidering Psychology», 92-94.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 69-83. 98-101.

in empathic responsiveness on the part of selfobjects, but whose brokenness can be restored through empathic closeness to responsive selfobjects<sup>37</sup>. This is true not just of one's childhood but continues to be so throughout life, according to him. In fact, the process of maturation is a matter of progressing from dependency on the relatively immature selfobjects of childhood to contact with empathically responsive mature selfobjects of adult life. Kohut also defined the essence of psychoanalytic cure as the gradual acquisition of empathic contact with mature selfobjects<sup>38</sup>. As an expression of grace, empathy can be the most powerful means by which the enfeebled self of a person is reassured, strengthened, understood, and even restored to cohesion and wholeness. Being a human medium of grace entails freeing, exercising, and expanding our capacities for empathic immersion into the fragile self-experiences of other persons and for empathic responsiveness to their selfobject needs to facilitate the process of healing<sup>39</sup>.

Kohut also expanded the role and value of empathy beyond its function as the «glue»<sup>40</sup> that mends human brokenness. He made empathy a mark of maturity, a mark of the ultimately healthy self. The mark of a mature, transformed self is one's ability to live each day with broad, encompassing empathy for other persons and for one's own self. Empathy for others and for oneself is also one of the hallmarks of the self that has attained mature transformation of its narcissism. Extending it further, the ability to respond empathically becomes explicitly or implicitly the criterion of health for individual and group selves. It could as well be postulated that for Kohut, it constitutes a moral obligation to respond empathically which should be adhered to by everyone because it fits best into the specific self needs which are of ultimate significance to the people in modern times and culture<sup>41</sup>.

## IX. OPENNESS OF THE SELF TO THE TRANSCENDENT OTHER

Kohut, it would seem, had not specifically considered the possibility for religious transcendence in the human being, though he accorded the selfobject function to religion<sup>42</sup> and was himself a member of the First Unitarian Church in Hyde Park, Chicago, near his home, and even at times gave sermons to the congregation. However, it may be argued that a relationship with a transcendent

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 281.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R.L. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, xii.

<sup>40</sup> Reference here is to Kohut's use of a passage from Eugene O'Neill's work *The Great God Brown*, in which occurs the famous line: «Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue». Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 287.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 15-16.

Other could serve as the milieu for the activation of the transferences of mirroring, idealization and twinship in the self and result in the internalization of that Other as a transformative selfobject. Kohut's postulation of the selfobject need of idealization seems to accentuate the spiritual dimension in human nature. The need to idealize, which is present in the self, points to the need to transcend one's personal identity and limitations and to merge with someone or something larger than the self, to obtain comfort in moments of fragmentation as well as to inspire and guide the self<sup>43</sup>.

In Kohut's view, the person's greater freedom to create substitute selfobjects via visual imagery when external reality is devoid of tangible selfobjects must be considered among newly acquired assets when success and failure in therapy are assessed. In this context, he admits to a non-apologetically positive assessment of the role and importance of art and religion in their possibility to fulfil this substitute selfobject function for the individual<sup>44</sup>. Kohut states in *The Restoration of the Self*:

And nowhere in art have I encountered a more accurately pointed description of man's yearning to achieve the restoration of his self than that contained in three terse sentences in O'Neill's play *The Great God Brown*. These are Brown's words close to the end of his long day's journey into night, after a life torn by uncertainty about the substance of his self: «Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue». Could the essence of the pathology of modern man's self be stated more impressively?<sup>45</sup>.

The focus here seems to be on how the experience of the grace of God serves the purpose of healing man's inherent brokenness. It is possible to pose the question as to how the relationship with a transcendent Other, who is immaterial and only experienced religiously, can serve as a transforming selfobject for the growth of the narcissistically immature and wounded personality into what Kohut envisions as the healthy and mature self. Psychoanalyst L.M. Cataldo, using Kohut's model, provides a good discussion on how the experience of God (Jesus) as a selfobject, transformed the narcissistically wounded Francis of Assisi to become a transformed and mature self<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Regarding the human needs that religion meets, Kohut said, «I would have no doubt that anything as encompassing and broad and basic as religion is to man ... could not possibly relate to just one dimension of the self». The idealizing need is perhaps the most obvious aspect of religion, and we cannot easily dismiss the concept of God «because there must be something idealizable, something that nears perfection or is perfect, something that one wants to live up to, something that lifts one up». H. Kohut as quoted in C.B. STROZIER, *Heinz Kohut*, 328-329. See also L.M. CATALDO, «Religious Experience», 528.

<sup>44</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *How Does Analysis Cure?*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 287.

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. L.M. CATALDO, «Religious Experience», 527-540.

Kohut considers the peak of self-development as *cosmic narcissism*, which is an experience of the self and the world that goes beyond the narcissism whose transformation is its very basis. To Kohut, the ultimate transformation of narcissism manifests several qualities that mark one's relationship with self, others, and the world. Thus, the cosmic narcissist is one who displays the capacity for creativity, empathy, humour, acceptance of one's finitude (death), connection to a transcendent reality and wisdom. He or she can accept his or her own limitations with humour and a touch of realistic sadness and can express natural talents and gifts, feel connected to a higher reality, and empathize with an other. Among the transformed narcissistic components, the most considerable achievement, according to Kohut, is the acceptance of the finiteness of one's existence. This achievement rests on the creation of the higher and expanded form of narcissism or cosmic narcissism, which transcends the boundaries and participates in a «supraindividual and timeless existence», as the certainty of eventual death is fully realized<sup>47</sup>.

People «remember» their original psychological universe, that is, the primordial experience of their mother, in the form of occasionally occurring vague reverberations known as the «oceanic feeling». Cosmic narcissism is also rooted in the primordial experience of identity with the mother. It is attained by very few people through the gradual transference of libido from the narcissistic self to self-transcending ideals and is marked not by grandiosity but by «quasi-religious solemnity» and «quiet inner triumph» along with the residual sadness for the once cherished self<sup>48</sup>.

Kohut admits to the possibility of some degree of self-denial and transcendence in human beings when he suggests that «a genuine decaathesis of the self can only be achieved slowly by an intact, well-functioning ego; and it is accompanied by sadness as the cathexis is transferred from the cherished self upon the supraindividual ideals and upon the world with which one identifies»<sup>49</sup>. Further on, he also acknowledges the role of values when he speaks of wisdom as a transformation of narcissism, that is, an attitude formed through the integration of the cognitive function with humour, acceptance of transience and a firmly cathected system of values<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> H. KOHUT, «Forms and Transformation of Narcissism», 258-269.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. D.M. WULFF, *Psychology of Religion*, 356.

<sup>49</sup> H. KOHUT, «Forms and Transformation of Narcissism», 268.

<sup>50</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, «Forms and Transformation of Narcissism», 268. Strozier notes, «Religion is not, as it was basically for Freud, a rather mundane human institution but rather a complex interplay of human psychological needs and the deeper workings of the divine. Unlike Freud, Kohut grants a God and then tries to understand our psychological relation to him (or her)». C.B. STROZIER, *Heinz Kohut*, 330.

Kohut opined that the relationship to the idealized parent imago may have its parallel in the relationship of the true believer to his God which includes also mystical mergers<sup>51</sup>. He argues, «the relationship of the true believer to his God [...] in which the figure of the perfect and omnipotent God, with whom the powerless and humble believer wants to merge, corresponds to the ancient omnipotent self-object, [sic] the idealized parent imago»<sup>52</sup>. Kohut understood mental health as functioning according to our true innermost design<sup>53</sup> or essential nature. The tragedy in life is not fulfilling our nuclear self-goals — the tragedy of unfulfilled potential<sup>54</sup>. Kohut was very convinced that each person had an almost inborn design, a destiny to fulfil in life. It can represent the central programme for our life, the sense of calling, (one's vocation of life) and it may be proposed that this would be Kohut's version of the imago Dei, or the image of the divine within each person — an invitation to achieve amid life's struggles, the basic ambitions, and goals of the self<sup>55</sup>.

Kohut has left us subtle hints of the self-transcendent tendency within the human person. For instance, when he writes that «our transient individuality also possesses a significance that extends beyond the borders of our life»<sup>56</sup>; or when he observes, «The mere unrolling of specific holidays in the course of a twelve month period [...] the gradual decline with winter, and the rebirth with Easter spring, appeals to something deep in all of us»<sup>57</sup>. For Kohut, one can hardly dispense with the concept of God as an ideal, «because there must be something idealizable, something that nears perfection or that is perfect, something that one wants to live up to, something that lifts one up»<sup>58</sup>. The selfobject need for idealization also points to the need to transcend one's personal identity and limitations and merge with someone or something larger than the self, to comfort in moments of fragmentation as well as to inspire and guide the self. Thus, we may extrapolate that underlying the therapeutic objective of restoration of self is a subtle acknowledgement of the infinite nature of the self as possessing a timeless significance beyond the borders of earthly life. In the achievement of cohesion in the self during therapy, the person also undergoes a change in the archaic grandiose self towards mature, socially integrated ambitions, self-esteem and self-confidence and the sector of the idealized parent imago becomes transformed into internalized ideals

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Analysis of the Self*, 27, n°12.

<sup>52</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Analysis of the Self*, 106, n°1.

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 241.

<sup>54</sup> When this is read with the traditional Christian theology's view of sin as «missing the mark» of our authentic personhood, we may notice some common ground.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. T.D. COOPER – R. RANDALL, *Grace for the Injured Self*, 36.

<sup>56</sup> H. KOHUT, *The Restoration of the Self*, 180.

<sup>57</sup> H. Kohut as quoted in C.B. STROZIER, *Heinz Kohut*, 329.

<sup>58</sup> H. Kohut as quoted in C.B. STROZIER, *Heinz Kohut*, 329.

whose pursuit can lead to self-transcendence. The achievement of a coherent ideal self with well internalized ideals may facilitate the process of self transcendence and the attainment of internal consistency. That said, it needs to be noted that self psychology does not explicitly speak of the reality of God and of a self-transcendence tendency in the human being, with God as its principal object.

Seen against the fundamental human tendency for theocentric self-transcendence as proposed by Christian Anthropology, the anthropological insufficiency in Kohut's vision of the human being is however revealed in that, for Kohut, self-transcendence has an egocentric focus because its primary objective is the perfection of the subject who transcends himself only to realize cohesion and the inner design of his self. The human being is the measure of all things under the self-psychological framework and the ideals and values of which Kohut speaks are in relation to the self and they do not fully transcend the self. Its therapeutic endeavour begins with a self that experiences vulnerabilities and ends with a self that has achieved a reasonable degree of cohesion. However, it does not invite the self to any transcendental and divine reality beyond itself.

## X. CONCLUSION

We have thus far seen that the Self psychology of Heinz Kohut envisions a psychological anthropology in terms of the self which develops from a state that lacks cohesion to a state of cohesion through empathic self-selfobject connectedness. It also describes how such a developmental process of the self can be blocked due to empathic failures and yet be restored to cohesion through the experience of empathic selfobject responsiveness. Self psychology offers a model for understanding the vulnerabilities of the self and restricts its inquiry to the psychological realm of the experience of the self. The essence of self psychology seems to lie in its vision of the essential human condition. Injuries to the self and the resulting experience of fragmentation are the central problems of the human condition according to Self psychology. The central existential dilemma of mankind is not captured in the Freudian description of an internal, guilt-laden conflict between pleasure-seeking instincts and the internalized prohibitions of society; rather, it is to be found in man's continual and never completely successful tragic struggle to use his talents in the joyful and creative pursuit of personal ambitions and ideals contained in the self. In the construct of Tragic Man, Kohut presents a man who is relational by nature, who is partially open to the other and seeking empathic connection, who needs affirmation, idealization and twinship experiences all through life, who strives hard to realize the nuclear programme of his self, who is not aggressive or

lustful by nature and is therefore inherently good, but whose pursuits end in tragedy due to non-empathic environments and inevitable death.

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#### ABSTRACT

Every psychological theory contains within its central postulates implicit assumptions about human nature and its condition. This article attempts to bring to light the underlying psychological anthropology informing the theory of psychoanalytic self psychology proposed by the noted psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. Self psychology is a psychoanalytical theory that concerns itself with the development, organization, and sustenance of the self in an empathic milieu and with the consequent limits on the development of the self in the form of disorders of the self in the absence of empathic responsiveness. Using the constructs of *Tragic Man*, *selfobject relating*, *empathy* and *openness of the self to the transcendent*, we attempt to delineate the understanding of the human person that informs the central psychological postulates in the theory of psychoanalytic self psychology.

*Keywords:* Tragic Man – Selfobject – Empathy – Self-transcendence – psychological anthropology

#### RIASSUNTO

Ogni teoria psicologica contiene, nei suoi postulati centrali, assunzioni implicite sulla natura umana e sulla sua condizione. Questo articolo tenta di portare alla luce l'antropologia psicologica sottostante rendendo nota la teoria psicoanalitica della psicologia del sé proposta dal noto psicoanalista Heinz Kohut. La psicologia del sé è una teoria psicoanalitica che si occupa dello sviluppo, dell'organizzazione e del sostenimento del sé in un ambiente empatico e dei conseguenti limiti allo sviluppo del sé sotto forma di disturbi del sé in assenza di reattività empatica. Utilizzando i costrutti dell'*uomo tragico*, *la relazione con l'oggetto-sé*, *l'empatia* e *l'apertura del sé al trascendente*, tentiamo di delineare la comprensione della persona umana caratterizzata dai postulati psicologici centrali nella teoria psicoanalitica della psicologia del sé.

*Parole chiave:* uomo tragico – oggetto-sé – empatia – autotrascendenza – antropologia psicologica

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