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## Some Notes on Kohut's *How Does Analysis Cure?* (1)

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*How Does Analysis Cure ?* is a posthumous work. Since Kohut did not have time to revise the final draft, a certain unevenness in style and discrepancies in content are at times apparent.

It is an important work, even though it can't be considered as fundamental in the development of Kohut's Self psychology as *The Analysis of the Self* (1971) and *The Restoration of the Self* (1977). It contains no fundamental innovations which were not already present, at least implicitly, in his earlier works. However the book is notable for the clear and immediate way in which it expresses its arguments, which more than in the earlier works is an advantage for the less attentive reader. The reason why the concepts contained in this book are stated so clearly seems to be that Kohut sets himself a specific task: to define certain aspects of his own thought which were not expressed clearly enough in his earlier works.

In Goldberg's introduction it is made clear that the present work was partially prompted by the discussions on Kohut's previous book *The Restoration of the Self*. In keeping with the aim of clarifying his ideas, Kohut's new book turns out to be more open, more direct, more polemical towards the prevailing American Ego psychology, which is his most determined adversary, but also the best touchstone for the development of his ideas. Here we find a sadder Kohut, affected no doubt by the bitter controversies that his works have aroused in the United States, where it has been suggested in several quarters that he and his closest collaborators be expelled from the Psychoanalytic Society. The aim of this work is to explain the nature of the psychoanalytic process according to Self psychology. The immediacy with which the book expounds its arguments perhaps helps us to understand better why many analysts have been so perplexed.

In these notes I would like to refer to Speziale-Bagliacca's article (1979) on the controversy about the narcissistic personality between Kernberg and Kohut. I think that Speziale-Bagliacca's article is the only work published in the *Rivista di Psicoanalisi* to have become explicitly involved in the controversy that raged within the American Psychoanalytic Society from the start of the seventies until the mid eighties. The article illustrates well how the scientific dispute initially arose, when the future developments in Kohut's thought had not fully taken shape; although they were undoubtedly present in embryonic form.

Speziale-Bagliacca's article is based on Kohut's first book, *The Analysis of the Self*, in which a method of analysing narcissistic disturbances is formulated. More specifically Speziale-Bagliacca concentrates on the conception of the narcissistic personality and in particular on the differences in opinion on this point between Kohut and Kernberg; Speziale-Bagliacca comes out in favour of Kernberg's theoretical position and clinical approach, while proving to be very critical of Kohut from both the conceptual and clinical-methodological point of view. As far as theory is concerned he raises two objections, basically: in formulating his hypotheses about the structure of the mind Kohut does not take into account the complexity of the relations with the internal objects. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> A very sad coincidence makes of this note a posthumous work too. Savo Spacal had no time to correct the proofs: he suddenly and unexpectedly died leaving his affectionate family, friends and colleagues in deep sorrow and regret. While publishing his work we would like to recall the subtlety of his understanding, his deep and qualified experience and his unique balance of judgement. The *Rivista di Psicoanalisi* will miss a devoted friend and an invaluable member of the editorial board. (N.r.c.)

for example, his concept of the *grandiose Self* denotes “simplistically” an arrest in development, a normal structure that is stuck at an infantile level of functioning. Whereas in Kernberg's and Speziale-Bagliacca's view, acceptance of the theory of the internal objects leads to a conception of the *grandiose Self* of narcissistic personalities that is not a residue of normal infantile grandiosity; in their view rather it is a pathological entity resulting from the condensation of various structures (*the real Self, the ideal Self, the ideal object*) and it performs essentially defensive functions. Thus we are not dealing with an arrest in development, but with a complex pathological defence. The second radical difference of opinion concerns the sharp distinction that Kohut drew in that work between *narcissistic libido* and *object libido*. Speziale-Bagliacca considers this a theoretical aberration on the part of Kohut, due to “*reification of the libido*” (1979, 438), a well-known logical error that leads to the libido being considered an autonomous force working independently of the psychical structures cathected. In this sense Kohut is guilty of “a simplistic, biologicistic bent, of Freudian origin, which can be traced back to the Newtonian-Cartesian tradition” (1979, 439), and of thus following the traditional “epistemological model of the natural sciences” (1979, 440). The inadequate scientific approach, which reifies narcissitic libido into an isolated primordial force, accounts for Kohut's failure to distinguish between pathological narcissism and normal narcissism, and above all leads him to “study (...) narcissism without studying the vicissitudes of object relations [which] does not seem plausible” (1979, 441).

The upshot of all this is a very clear clinical-methodological divergence between Kohut and Kernberg. Kernberg's approach is essentially to interpret the narcissistic transference manifestations as defensive operations in the context of a pathological object world; on the other hand, with his concept of arrest in development, and lack of distinction between pathological and normal narcissism, Kohut “[relies] on a pedagogical-manipulative process and (...) [does not examine in depth] all the possibilities of a strictly interpretative approach” (1979, 446); “(...) by siding implicitly with Ferenczi and Alexander, against Freud and Eissler, [basically Kohut is a supporter] (...) of the corrective emotional experience” (1979, 446).

Of course these few lines do not do justice to Speziale-Bagliacca's comprehensive discussion. However they can provide an introduction to the appraisal of Kohut's last work. Here the author is more at pains than in the past to take into account the many questions raised by his works, or his school, we could say at this point. Thus he gives clearer and more direct answers than ever before. What is more, in the last sentence of the work quoted, Speziale-Bagliacca made it clear that Kohut's thought aimed at going beyond the conceptualisation of narcissistic personalities “[heralding] the proposal of an original and radical metapsychological turn” (1979, 447). Indeed, after the publication of *The Analysis of the Self*, Kohut's thought, which defines itself as *Self psychology* (somewhat overlooking other currents in psychoanalysis which had developed or were developing similar concepts), extended rapidly beyond the field confined to the “narcissistic personalities”, and laid claim to being a natural evolution from, or replacement of traditional psychoanalytic theory.

As is apparent from the work under discussion, Kohut's Self psychology expresses itself, basically, in two forms: a) as a substantial modification in methodology, especially in relation to the Freudian tradition and the variation thereof known as Ego psychology; b) as a re-thinking of the analytic process in general, extended even to the practice of those analysts who are not influenced by Kohutian Self psychology. I will examine separately these two aspects, which intertwine in the ten chapters of the book, and will add some observations of my own.

As far as the question of methodology is concerned. I wish to discuss the role that Kohut ascribes to the *mental disposition of the analyst*, to *understanding* and to *analysability*. As for the conception of the analytic process, I will point out what *Kohut regards as the principal area of the analytic process: the area of psychical support, rather than that related to the maturation of the object relations, of instinctual experiences or of cognitive growth.*

In Kohut's clinical practice emphasis is laid on the methodological principle of the mental

disposition of the analyst. According to Kohut, to a great extent the analyst views the world through the patient's eyes. “[This stance on the part of the analyst] (...) best prepares the soil for the developmental move forward that the stunted self of the analysand actively craves” (Kohut 1984, 141). The emphasis on the analyst's empathic attitude might seem rather irrelevant, or even banal, if one doesn't take into account the shift that this represents from the primacy of other methodological principles such as interpretative activity or countertransference.

Regarding interventions by the analyst, it is important to bear in mind the distinction that Kohut draws between understanding and explaining through interpretations. He maintains that for long periods of an analysis, the analyst's function is to understand and not to interpret. Unlike interpreting, understanding means above all making the patient feel that his experience is being shared by the analyst. Against this background of understanding, the analyst's comments are not designed to broaden the patient's knowledge, but rather they bear witness to an empathic contact that has been established between the analyst's and the patient's mind. Kohut does not specify clearly how and when the subsequent shift from understanding to interpreting takes place. The decisive criterion seems to depend on the fact that at a certain point the patient is able to perceive explanations too as understanding, that is, as the analyst's ability to recognise the patient's real experience, and not as an introduction of unknown aspects, of his psychic reality. Thus the emphasis on the cognitive aspect of interpretations is greatly reduced, if not totally obliterated. Instead the function of the empathic bond in interpretations is stressed. In Kohut's opinion, an interpretation, as a vehicle of knowledge, is unable to avoid completely a certain pedagogical, censorious tone, which is necessarily antianalytic. For example he points out the moralistic quality of an interpretation when it is based on the reality of the instincts, on the child's inadequacy and on a pejorative or defensive view of narcissistic structures. Moreover Kohut reiterates that “lessons in realism” should derive from the reality itself (including that of the setting) without the mediation represented by interpretation.

Even when interpretations avoid bringing the patient back to a realistic attitude and don't set themselves the task of directing him towards what is considered a desired level of development, they represent a constant frustration for him: they recognise his needs, hopes and expectations, but they certainly don't gratify them. However they can be considered *optimal frustrations* in so far as they replace the ungratified experiences with the empathic bond with the analyst's mind. In Kohut's view, these optimal frustrations are the main stimulus of mental growth. The frustration of the experiences associated with empathic gratification leads the patient to react by gradually developing *compensatory psychical structures* which finally express themselves in those *transformations of narcissism* (mature ambitions and ideals, creativity, humor, wisdom) that Kohut described in great detail in his earlier works (1971, 1977).

Another distinctive feature of Kohut's methodology is his position on countertransference. Kohut is even less explicit about this than he is about the interpretative function; this is without doubt due to the sort of psychoanalytic environment he worked in. Since his principal and most direct interlocutors were the Ego psychologists, it was natural for him to centre his own controversy above all on their “interpretative moralism”. Since in European psychoanalysis ample use is made of countertransference as an important indicator of the patient's basic communication it is worth noting this other methodological divergence too. It is not that Kohut fails to consider the existence of countertransferential reactions; they are however taken into consideration as shifts from the analyst's optimal empathic attitude, and are not being examined as experiences whose specific traits can tell us something about the psychical reality of the patient. Thus countertransference is conceived in the sense that Freud originally gave it as a disturbance in the analyst's analytical capacity. Kohut goes one step further however; for Freud countertransference implied above all the risk that the analyst might scotomise certain parts of the patient's psychical reality, whereas for Kohut its negative effect is represented by the breaking of the empathic bond. This break is of necessity traumatic for the patient. According to Kohut, it manifests itself in the

shape of emotional withdrawal, for example, in the tendency towards acting out or in fragmented instinctual expressions - all reactions which are regarded as opposing progress towards mental health. Thus for the analyst countertransference becomes an obstacle which he must recognise and surmount in order to reestablish the interrupted empathic communication as soon as possible. Since the patient does not understand why he is suffering from these sudden disturbances, the analyst does well to tell him about his own "empathic failure", for in this way he enables him to recover the positions lost in his regressive movement.

Still on the subject of methodology, some mention must be made of Kohut's conception of analysability: it is a relativistic conception; indeed it is defined by the patient's ability to form during analysis a stable "*selfobject relationship*" (Kohut has adopted this term in this work in order to avoid using "narcissistic transference" given the many ambiguities and often negative connotations associated with the concept of narcissism), which is defined as an agent of support for the Self. "(...) *the general meaning* of the term selfobject (...) [refers to] that dimension of our experience of another person that relates to this person's functions in shoring up our self" (Kohut 1984, 49). If a stable selfobject relationship depends on the analyst too, then, within certain limits at least, analysability turns out to be a function of the analytic couple rather than an exclusive characteristic of the patient. In this sense, a patient which in a certain analytic situation turns out to be a borderline case (which Kohut considers unanalysable in so far as it does not have a sufficiently organised *nuclear Self*), can become a narcissistic disturbance if it is treated by another analyst who favours the development of a stable form of selfobject relationship (mirror, twinship or idealising transference).

Kohut's conception of analysability allows us to understand in which psychical area he situates the analytic process: *in the area of support and narcissistic development* and not in that of the cognitive growth, of instinctual experiences or object relations.

At this point, in order to understand Kohut's conception of the analytic process, it is expedient to examine his *definition of mental health*. His definition contrasts with what he calls "Kleinian and Freudian orthodoxy", which he believes pushes the patient in a preconceived direction (towards genitality in the Freudian system and towards object love in the Kleinian one) by fitting him into a rigid definition of mental health and directing him towards solutions which were already experienced as failures in childhood. Kohut relativised the goal to be achieved through psychoanalytic treatment: the *nuclear Self* as it is found in every analysable (that is, not borderline or psychotic) individual is endowed with a specific "programme" which tends towards its own realisation; analysis plays a supporting role by creating the right conditions for the patient to pluck up the courage to become aware of his own plans and true ideals and to pursue them consistently and with determination.

In order to go ahead with the realisation of its "programme", the *nuclear Self* requires the support of selfobject relations appropriate to the various phases of development. Kohut's view is that this need of the support of selfobjects lasts a lifetime; he thus regards as mistaken theories which posit a shift from dependence (symbiosis) to independence (autonomy), or from narcissism to object love. Rather he believes that there is a progression from more archaic forms of narcissism to more highly developed ones (Kohut 1971), in the same way as object love develops. Thus the need for selfobjects is not a characteristic peculiar to childhood, but a permanent feature: during our lifetime only a progressive maturation of relational modalities with selfobjects is possible. The analyst never ceases to be a selfobject for the analysand; however in a successful analysis, his role as a selfobject at the beginning differs considerably from his role at the end of the analysis. If the analyst initially performs the function of an archaic and exclusive selfobject, at the end his role as selfobject consists in resounding with "empathic communication"; moreover, by this time the patient will have learnt to find other sources of support outside the analytic situation. "(...) without being pushed away by the analyst (...) the patient will spontaneously move toward new modes of sustenance by an increasing variety of selfobjects outside the analytic

situation” (Kohut 1984, 79).

According to the Author, the idea that support is necessary from the cradle to the grave can represent a serious narcissistic scar and can thus be difficult to accept; perhaps it is no more easy to come to terms with than the Freudian view that man is ignorant of his own psychical reality and a slave to his own instincts.

Moreover Kohut points out how selfobject transferences are more silent, and thus more difficult to identify than those dominated by erotic or aggressive instinctuality. If the analyst concentrates on the erotic (or aggressive) aspect of the transference fails to appreciate the peremptoriness of the selfobject's need and does not attach enough importance to the precariousness that characterises the patient in his area of support, then Kohut believes that the analysis will inevitably turn up a blind alley. According to Kohut, the vehemence of the instincts is of secondary importance compared to the need for experience with the selfobjects. Overriding, uncontrollable instinctuality is a clear sign of a Self that is not sufficiently guaranteed by the selfobjects it needs. Kohut repeatedly warns about the danger the patient is exposed to if the analyst concentrates on isolated, fragmentary phenomena (such as symptoms or instinctual reactions) and neglects more global psychical states. He suggests that one should speak in terms of *instinctual experiences of the Self* instead of in terms of instincts. “(...) if the self is healthy, the drives are experienced not in an isolated fashion, but as an immanent modality of this healthy self” (Kohut 1984, 208). It is precisely this concern of his that induced him to redefine psychoanalysis as the *psychology of complex psychical states* (in contrast to conceptions which define it as depth psychology or psychology of the unconscious or of the instinctual id). Thus Self psychology is clearly opposed to the current in psychoanalysis that upholds the primacy of the instinctual drives.

Self psychology has thus overturned traditional views: from the perspective of Self psychology, the psychical phenomena which have traditionally been assigned a primary role (fantasies of seduction, incest or castration) are considered of secondary importance, and *vice versa*. From this point of view, the agoraphobic patient's reluctance to go out of doors is not due to the need to protect himself from incestuous fantasies, but rather to the primary defect in his relations with the selfobjects. The need to be accompanied is to be attributed to a primary experience of a defect in the Self.

In Kohut's opinion, all psychopathology (including Oedipal neuroses) stems from defects in the structure of the Self. It is above all this thesis that indicates the lines his thought developed along following the publication of *The Analysis of the Self* in 1971, on which Speziale-Bagliacca's critique is based. According to Kohut, traditional analysis has focused attention on the *desire for the object*, while it has neglected or misunderstood the vicissitudes of the Self with its *need of the selfobject*. “Via the theories of Self psychology (...) the Self psychologist can emphatically perceive configurations that would otherwise have escaped his notice. Specifically, the new theoretical formulations allow him to acknowledge that he may become the target not only of his analysand's drive-wishes, but of his analysand's selfobject needs as well. (...) the self psychologically informed analyst realises, in other words, that the remobilisation of these needs constitutes a positive analytic development, that is a positive achievement. He realises accordingly that it would be an error to reject them by interpreting them either as unwelcome defensive maneuvers, as attempts to escape the painful confrontation of anxiety- and guilt-provoking aggressive and sexual drive-wishes (...)” (Kohut 1984, 84).

Finally I wish to deal briefly with another aspect of Kohut's thought that tends to arouse considerable perplexity: the question of the acquisition of knowledge during analysis.

Kohut maintains that he does not consider the cognitive aspect to be an essential component of the analytic process; in fact he regards it as a fundamental prejudice of traditional psychoanalysis. He alleges that by concentrating on the search for knowledge Freud transformed a personal prejudice of his, which was typical of the time, into a fundamental therapeutic principle. In keeping with this point of view, the postanalytic autoanalysis is, according to Kohut, a sign of an

unfinished analysis rather than of a successfully completed one. Consistently with this view, in Self psychology much less importance is ascribed to the concepts of defence and resistance since they are regarded as an expression of a psychology marked by a cognitive orientation.

In my opinion, these views that Kohut puts forward in this book firmly and unambiguously, conflict with other conceptions formulated by him; I am referring specifically to the acquisition of humour and wisdom, which he considers important indicators of the narcissistic transformation that is supposed to take place in a successful analysis. It seems to me that the acquisition of humour and wisdom and of the very ability to find adequate selfobjects is inconceivable without the development of self-awareness (or insight); therefore I would like to suggest that *the development of self-awareness is precisely that basic narcissistic transformation on which all the others rest*. One wonders why there is this paradox in Kohut's works. I think the answer lies in the fact that he does not draw a sufficient distinction between the development of awareness in the self-investigating subject and the knowledge conveyed by analytic interpretations. In order to bring about the development of an adequate self-knowledge in the patient, the analyst does not need to make particularly incisive interpretations, but rather he must be able to recognise his role as a support (in the sphere of selfobject relations), which is inherent to the analytic situation. Thus the profound awareness that the patient acquires through the analytic process is not so much triggered by the analyst's interpretative activity, as by the work that the patient himself carries out, supported as he is by an empathic environment in the shape of the analytic setting. Besides, Kohut seems to be well aware of the cognitive value inherent to the patient's self-observatory activity; the following quotation bears eloquent witness to this: "If there is one lesson that I have learned during my life as an analyst, it is the lesson that what my patients tell me is likely to be true - that many times when I believed I was right and my patients were wrong, it turned out, though often only after a prolonged search, that *my* rightness was superficial whereas their rightness was profound" (Kohut 1984, 93-94). It is on this basis that Kohut embraces the view that "lessons in reality" are to be imparted to the patient by reality itself, while interpretations designed to achieve this aim are likely to be counterproductive.

"Seeing reality through the patient's eyes" can certainly be experienced by the analyst as a sort of submission or "altruistic surrender", to use a term of Anna Freud's. Although this message is not stated explicitly, it is present throughout Kohut's works and it may well be one of the main reasons of the stormy reaction that his work has provoked in the United States. Indeed it can represent a considerable narcissistic scar for an analyst to become aware of and accept this methodological position. After all Kohut suggests that the analyst's interpretative ability and theoretical subtlety can be of wholly secondary importance for the development of an adequate awareness in the patient, compared to the much humbler empathic attitude on the part of the analyst. It is precisely in connection with this point that Kohut's opponents usually employ the pejorative term "corrective emotional experience" which they allege characterises his method.

Many analysts may find it difficult to make use of Kohut's ideas about the analytic process, since they refer essentially to the function of support and do not seem to have much specific relevance to psychoanalysis. It should be noted that Kohut is convinced that his conception of the analytic process (which is situated in the area of psychological support, that is, in the evolution of narcissism and selfobject relations) is also valid for those analyses which are not inspired by his *Self psychology*. Indeed he maintains that all successful analyses follow that same healing process, irrespective of the theories held by a single analyst. Thus some analysts might fear that Kohut is trying to raise the old spectre of suggestion. It is true, I think, that by stressing the role of the selfobjects Kohut's conception blurs the usual distinction between psychoanalysis and supportive psychotherapy (or even other forms of social support). One should bear in mind, however, that Kohut does not deal with this area of support in a monolithic way: he analyses it in detail, outlining the various ways in which it can develop in terms of narcissistic transformations and evolution of ties with the selfobjects. Thus he has saved the whole field of psychological support

from theoretical indifferenciation (and from scientific disrepute), and has conferred a certain theoretical dignity on it.

The methodological aspects are certainly least suited to being discussed on a purely theoretical level. Instead they need to be tried out by unprejudiced analysts who are willing to test their own technique. This is certainly no small undertaking. It is difficult for an analyst to adopt an alternative method in order to test its results, if he has already developed his technique on the basis of hard-won theoretical principles. However there is one thing to be said for Kohut's method: he described it simply, clearly, and in detail; thus any analyst who is not content merely to discuss these theories from a logical point of view has been given the opportunity to try out Kohut's method and to draw his own conclusions about its therapeutic and scientific usefulness on the basis of his own experience.

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