THE EGO AND THE “APEX” PARADOX:  
Integrating the Structural Theory Of 
Kernberg’s Self/Object Units and Kohut’s Bipolar Self

Part I: The Tripartite Ego

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Abstract

Psychoanalytic structural theory can be questioned for the ambiguity of its component parts, particularly those most prominent: ego and self. More to the point, it can be questioned for the conflation of these component parts, by which they are frequently confused for one another. Yet, the main orientations toward the ego and self can be delineated and outlined according to a summary concept: the tripartite ego. With this clarification of psychic structure, the self/object units of Kernberg and the bipolar self of Kohut are seen in bold relief and can be examined in detail. As a result, important differences in their orientations to clinical practice are explained. Further, it is shown that these structural components are inherently compatible and can be integrated within a single theoretical framework: the “Apex” Paradox. The principle dynamics of this innovative structural theory are also outlined and shown to result from the early life experiences of the individual. Part I of this paper presents an examination of the tripartite ego, followed by a comparative study of the structural theories of Kernberg and Kohut, as well as their respective orientations to clinical practice. Part II of this paper presents a detailed account of the “Apex” Paradox, followed by the main development processes underlying the dynamics of this psychic structure, as well as its implications for clinical practice.

Introduction

Over the years, theorists have been at no loss to speculate about the basic principles which govern the operation of the psyche. Unfortunately, the array of divergent theories that have emerged from this discussion have placed psychoanalytic psychic structure in disarray and require some revision (see Boesky,
Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly seen than in concepts involving self and ego. Despite the fact that self and ego have long been topics of inquiry historically, there is little consistency among their many references: “The literature of the self is massive and confusing. Terms are not always concepts; sometimes they merely cover vacuums. A redundancy exists...enough to fill many volumes” (Spruiell, 1995, p. 430).

Indeed, equally confusing is mistaking one meaning of self or ego for another. Unfortunately, this often occurs:

Overall, probably the most significant source of confusion in the use of the terms *self* and *self-representation* centers around whether they are used as abstract, metapsychological terms or experiential ones. Most contemporary psychoanalytic theorists fail to take a systematic stand concerning the self as distinguished from the self-representations. (Cooper, 1993, p. 41) (emphasis in the original)

It is precisely such a systematic understanding of the self (and ego) that this paper attempts to provide. To do so, an examination of two of the most prominent theorists of the self will be undertaken: Otto Kernberg (1976, 1980, 1993) and Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984), who developed their ideas within the context of object relations theory and self psychology, respectively. Kernberg’s structural theory attempts to integrate classical drive mechanics and the interpersonal dynamics of object relations. In contradistinction, Kohut’s self psychology emerged as an alternative to these drive underpinnings (Ornstein, 1978, 1981). To date, no integration of these two seminal accounts of psychic structure has been presented, despite both being heavily grounded in similar object relations concepts.

The “Apex” Paradox is an account of psychic structure that provides such integration. Indeed, a principle claim of this paper is that Kernberg and Kohut each emphasize a different aspect of the same psychic structure, creating an impression of irreconcilable differences between their theories when they actually have much in common. The “Apex” Paradox is claimed to represent the overall structure of identity, subsuming the self and object representational units of Kernberg and the bipolar self of Kohut within a larger structural rubric. Whereas Kernberg’s self/object units are said to emerge within the ego and represent the basic underpinnings of one’s object relations, Kohut’s bipolar self also takes place within the ego, providing the larger structural context within which Kernberg’s self/object units are able to relate to one another—ultimately resulting in ego (i.e., self) identity.

In this way, the “Apex” Paradox provides a much needed clarification of self and ego concepts, as well as a much needed simplification of the larger structural context within which they are situated. However, to accomplish this, a
certain amount of reformulating of concepts is required. Kernberg and Kohut originated their accounts of self and ego within very different therapeutic milieus, and toward very different theoretical objectives (see Manfield, 1992). Consequently, their concepts are not merely different pieces of a jigsaw puzzle waiting to be put together. Rather, their pieces are irregularly formed and only approximate the psychic structure they are thought to represent. In order to integrate these divergent conceptions, each must be altered so as to accommodate the other.

As a result, the treatment of each theory in this paper might not appear to honor the original intent or formulation of the authors. Perhaps a better metaphor for their divergent ideas is that of medieval maps, in which the environs closest to the map-maker demonstrate an accurate account of the territory under consideration, but become ever more distorted and speculative the further away they go. By the time one reaches southern Africa or the Orient, for example, little resemblance exists to the actual shorelines being examined. Clearly, to integrate maps such as these, some reassembly is required. The “Apex” Paradox presents an adaptation of their theory, precisely in order to provide greater accord between them and psychic structure overall.

The Tripartite Ego

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with prevailing concepts of self and ego is not the ambiguity so much the conflation. Not only have the self and ego been defined in a myriad of different ways, these definitions often overlap and are even applied to both terms. At times self and ego are thought to be equally indicative of the same psychic structure, starting with Freud’s seminal account:

Freud preserved throughout his writings the German *Ich*—“I”—for the ego as both a mental structure and psychic agency, and also for the more personal, subjective, experiential self. In other words, Freud never separated what we think of as the agency or system ego from the experiencing self. This use of *Ich* resulted in a sacrifice of clarity and precision, but it kept the meaning of the word open-ended. (Kernberg, 1993, p. 227)

Although Kernberg suggests that this loss of clarity and precision is worth it, for it allows the systemic nature of *das Ich* to be preserved, there is no reason not to have it both ways. It is possible to maintain the ego and self system while at the same time establishing clear boundaries between the two—as distinctive components of the overall system.

Unfortunately, the choice to translate *das Ich* as the impersonal Latin term *ego* works against maintaining the personal, subjective, experiential sense of self. Consequently, there is a need for a separate term in order to retain this absentee meaning. However, doing so ends up multiplying the terms, introducing...
ambiguity which can be put this way: “I would agree with Arlow (1991) who
distinguishes ego as theoretical abstraction from self as experiential construct,
each with its appropriate realm of discourse…. Modell (1993) makes a similar
distinction between the ego as objective and the self as subjective” (Meissner,
2000, p. 377). This position has precedence in earlier philosophical accounts of
the ego: “As a result of this analysis, Kant now has two selves: the phenomenal
(empirical) self that I sometimes can catch in introspection, and a noumenal
self…. The noumenal self is…the I am that transcendentally must accompany
every thought” (Levin, 1992, p. 40) (emphasis in the original). Likewise,
Heidegger (1927) makes a similar distinction, splitting the psyche into the
transcendental and empirical ego.

Yet, what does it mean to speak of the ego as empirical, objective, or an
abstraction—over against a self that is transcendental, subjective, and
experiential? Here the situation gets particularly confusing, for the positions of
the ego and self can be reversed, differentiated in exactly the opposite fashion:
The real self exists as a parallel partner of the ego and has its own
development, its own capacities, and its own psychopathology.
The self and the ego develop and function together in tandem, like
two horses in the same harness…. One aspect of the self could be
viewed as the representational arm of the ego…. Similarly, one
aspect of the ego, since it deals with volition and will and with the
activation and gratification of individual wishes, could be viewed
as the executive arm of the self. (Masterson, 1985, p. 22)

With this conception, the transcendental, subjective, and experiential self
is affiliated within the executive arm of the ego. Kernberg suggests essentially
the same arrangement, elaborating on the tandem nature of the two: “I propose
defining the self as an intrapsychic structure that originates in the ego and is
clearly embedded in the ego” (1993, p. 230). Like Masterson, Kernberg sees the
executive function as belonging to the ego and the ego as grounded in the
perceptual and conscious system, as originally suggested by Freud (1923, 1933).
Kernberg goes on to justify this conceptualization because it maintains Freud’s
implicit insistence that “the self and ego are indissolubly linked.”

But what is self, and what is ego? As can be seen, the above references
overlap. What is curious is that each agrees in the existence of a subjective,
executive arm over against an objective, representational arm. The only question
is which gets labeled self and which gets labeled ego, with preference going both
ways. As can be seen, self and ego are ambiguous in these accounts. But more to
the point, they are ambiguous in such a way as to produce a curious structure: the
tripartite ego, which can be diagrammed as follows:
THE TRIPARTITE EGO

Meissner

subjective, executive arm

objective, representational arm

Masterson (and Kernberg)

Simply put, each set of theorists picks the sense of self they prefer, and the remaining sense of self gets conflated into the account of the ego. This paper suggests these approaches are half-right and half-wrong in their theoretical formulations. However, to appreciate how the half-right portions can be identified and the half-wrong portions sloughed-off, one must come to an understanding implicit in the above diagram—the overall ego system does not have simply two arms; rather, it has three. Whereas there are two selves, splitting the subjective, executive and objective, representational arms between them, the ego is best thought of as another arm unto itself, indicative of a transitional structure interfacing between the two versions of self. Yet, if this is the case, the ego must be understood as something entirely different from either of the other two arms.

Such a reformulation of the ego was first suggested by Hartmann (1939), who sought to clarify the ego concept by introducing the term “conflict-free sphere” of autonomous ego functioning into psychoanalytic nomenclature. Hartmann saw the primary autonomy of the ego as not only inherently free of conflict, but also essentially synonymous with cognition: “I refer to the development outside of conflict of perception, object comprehension, thinking, language, recall phenomena, productivity, to the well-known phases of motor development, grasping, crawling, walking, and to the maturation and learning processes implicit in all these and many others” (1939, p. 8) (emphasis in the
original). It is suggested that the term “ego” be defined as synonymous with more ordinary nomenclature: *mind*.

Likewise, the objective, representational arm can also be referred to by a more common term, which, as Kernberg says, originates and is embedded in the mind: *memory*, or better said, that aspect of memory which specifically pertains to the self: *identity*. In noting Hartmann’s distinction, he posits that the ego comes into existence as a developmental process involving a two-tiered structure:

At what point does the ego come into existence? Certain ego structures, and functions connected with them, exist from the beginning of life: perception, the capacity to establish memory traces, and the other functions just mentioned.... It is suggested that the ego as a differentiated psychic structure, in the sense of Freud’s (1923) description, comes about at the point when introjections are used for defensive purposes, specifically in early defensive organization against overwhelming anxiety. (1976, p. 35)

This second set of functions is essentially what Hartmann refers to as the secondary autonomous ego. Although Kernberg regards these two tiers to be simply two aspects of a single ego structure, they are better thought of this way: mind and memory, especially memory in the sense of identity.

Ego as Self

Kernberg claims the self is a supraordinate structure to the id, ego, and superego system: “The self is...an ego function and structure that evolves gradually from the integration of its component self-representations into a supraordinate structure that incorporates other ego functions—such as memory and cognitive structures (1982, p. 905). Unfortunately, there are serious problems with defining this sense of the self as supraordinate in this manner. First, how the self performs this reciprocal function—both evolving from and subsuming aspects of the ego—is not made clear. Second, even at the time of the panel in which he presented this paper, Kernberg’s conception of the supraordinate self was questioned. Rangell (1982) points out that being an aggregate of self-representations does not confer upon self-representations self-hood, at least not a self-hood that is in any sense different from the self-representations themselves.

It appears the only means by which Kernberg could possibly affiliate self-representations with the subjective, executive arm is via the ambiguity inherent to the term self, for the two otherwise have nothing in common. Indeed, it is suggested that identity is a better term for this aggregate of self-representations. But this leaves the remaining aspect of the ego to be considered. Again, self as the strictly subjective, executive arm can be referred to by a more common term, which represents the existential orientation to the self: *presence*. In existential
writings, presence is typically associated with authenticity: “By authenticity I mean a central genuineness and awareness of being. Authenticity is that presence of an individual in his living in which he is fully aware in the present moment, in the present situation” (Bugental, 1981, p. 102). Presence is what Heidegger (1927) refers to as dasein, or “being there”—the simple presence of conscious awareness, or being itself. Freud refers to this aspect of the ego as the system of perception and consciousness.

Similarly to Kernberg, Kohut claims the self is a supraordinate structure, however, by defining the self in terms of a bipolar arrangement of attributes—ambition and ideals—that do not correlate with the tripartite assembly of agencies described by Freud. Yet, these attributes can be thought of as pertaining to the same self-representations as Kernberg’s supraordinate self, and therefore fall prey to the same questionable affiliation with self-hood. On the other hand, Kohut introduces a concept of the self that actually can be thought of as supraordinate and subjective: the “experience-near” self. Yet, such is the case only if consciousness is separated from cognition and not considered a feature of the mind, a suggestion no doubt unacceptable to Freud and Kernberg. Nonetheless, such differentiation is precisely the position of many existential accounts of the self.

Overall, the above accounts suggest two entirely different ways of understanding the self:

If you get a sense of your self right now—simply notice what it is that you call “you”—you might notice at least two parts to this “self”: one, there is some sort of observing self (an inner subject or watcher); and two, there is some sort of observed self (some objective things that you can see or know about yourself—I am a father, mother, doctor, clerk; I weigh so many pounds, have blond hair, etc.). (Wilber, 2000, p. 33)

This clarification not only sorts out the confusion obscuring contemporary accounts of the self, but introduces a perhaps surprising implication. The subjective self is not simply an experience-near, consciously aware executive arm—it is you. And the objective self is not only a separate domain of the psyche, the aggregate of self-representations indicating one’s abilities and attributes—it is not you. That these self-representations are taken to be you is done solely as an illusion. Perhaps no concept of the self has more relevance for contemporary psychology than this dual-notion of self being both you and not you. Self-representations are nothing more than memories, coalescing over time into a coherent sense of identity. They are not the consciously aware, living person of whom they are representations—anymore than a photograph is a version of that person.
Take for example any important memory from your life, say one of particular significance: falling in love. Many people report feeling awkward approaching someone for the first time to whom they are attracted. Indeed, if they are rejected, and particularly if the rejection is severe, they may draw the conclusion that their abilities or attributes are just not good enough—which is to say, “they” are not good enough. As these conclusions pile up in memory (identity), they might even come to expect rejection. But “they” are actually the one who experiences the rejection, not the conclusions piling up in memory. It is for this reason that Kohut emphasizes the experience-near as supraordinate to the tripartite assembly of agencies, and urges therapists to take this aspect of the self into account during therapy.

Unfortunately, he at the same time muddies the water by conflating the two domains of self. By failing to distinguish conceptual levels, Kohut implies that it is possible to directly experience the state of the metapsychological, bipolar self. However, the phenomenological experience of the self is in no way the same as the self-representations that comprise the bipolar self structure: “Kohut’s…conceptualizations suffer from his attempt to mix phenomenological, experiential, representational concepts with the traditional structural-energetic metapsychological entities” (Schafer, 1976, p. 116). That is, “Kohut…has failed to provide a theoretical basis for his mixed structural-functional and phenomenological use of self concepts” (Schafer, 1980, p. 90).

These distinctions can be seen reflected in the nomenclature of the DSM (APA, 2000). For example, dissociative disorders are defined as those disorders whose predominant feature is a dissociative symptom—i.e., a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment. In other words, put in the parlance of this paper, symptoms can manifest as either disturbances in self or identity. Amnesia and dissociative identity disorder indicate disruptions in the functioning of memory and identity. Depersonalization, on the other hand, is characterized by the persistent or recurrent experience of feeling detached from, and as if one is an outside observer of, one’s mental processes or body (phenomenology). Similarly, derealization is the sense of one not being a real or actual person—i.e., a real or actual presence.

It is precisely this distinction that underscores a controversy pertaining to Rogers’ (1961) therapeutic principle of “unconditional positive regard,” often thought of as indispensable to the therapeutic alliance. Simply put, one cannot unconditionally positively regard identity. It is the storehouse of human frailty. No one is perfect, as can be seen by the myriad of conflicts and distorted thinking that get committed to memory over the course of a lifetime. Every attribute in identity exists as part of a continuum of possible referents, ranging from positive to negative (e.g., honest vs. dishonest, charitable vs. self-serving. Indeed, even honesty can be negative if done within circumstances that lead to a bad outcome.)
On the other hand, it is precisely the self as presence that can be unconditionally positively regarded, for this is one’s living being. No attributes sully its presence.

The dynamic could be thought of as a process of emancipation. Instead of conflating consciousness with cognition, the self is capable of standing back from the mind, so to speak, and operating according to its own functions—i.e., awareness and will. And in emancipating from the mind, the self experiences a therapeutic effect. Even though the process of integration is facilitated by one entering into a more profound state of consciousness, awareness is curative for a different reason as well: by expanding one’s sense of awareness the self is able to operate unimpeded. It is not merely for the sake of integration that one should become fully aware. Awareness exists for its own sake.

As a result, the tripartite ego can be diagrammed using more ordinary terms:

![Diagram of the tripartite ego](attachment:diagram.png)

Freud identified the essentially overwhelming situation of the ego (i.e., mind) this way: as “a poor creature owing service to three masters and consequently menaced by three dangers: from the external world, from the libido of the id, and from the severity of the superego” (1923, p. 46). Yet, a fourth, supraordinate master also exists, complementing the conflicts involving the id and superego of memory: the self. However, in the case of the self, the term master is a far more applicable, for it is precisely the self who is the executive decision-maker of the psyche, where will and choice originate (May, 1969; Yalom, 1980). The mind, on the other hand, is simply an automaton, a computer blindly churning out the programs with which it has been instructed. As Meissner et al. (2000) indicate, self and ego should be considered separate domains.

Obviously, the objective, representations of identity are also crucial for the operation of the psyche, as well as intimately involved in mental disorders. But, likewise, only if differentiated from the experience-near, executive arm. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate more fully on self as presence, distinct from identity, although I have addressed this subject elsewhere, as well as its implications for clinical practice (Sleeth, 2006, 2007a, b). As Kernberg and Kohut for the most part share Masterson’s differentiation of self as
representations (identity) from the experience-near, executive arm, it is not necessary to address it further here. In any event, the “Apex” Paradox pertains solely to the self as identity. Consequently, this paper will now focus on this aspect of self, which Kernberg describes in terms of self/object units and Kohut as the bipolar self.

Kernberg and the Bilateral Self

Kohut and Kernberg obscure their theories by conflating self with identity. However, with the self clearly differentiated, identity can stand more clearly in relief. As a result, the structure of identity can be more closely examined. Kernberg attempts to blend the drive theory of psychoanalysis with the more relational orientation of object relations theory, which results in the following psychic structure: a self and an object representation, attenuated by affect that gives either positive or negative valence to the overall unit. Because these representations are aligned together as two equal parts of a single structural unit, they could be thought of as a bilateral self, in contradistinction to Kohut’s bipolar self.

Kernberg’s theory builds upon the account of early development of Jacobson (1964), who focuses on the interior representations of one’s interpersonal relations. For Jacobson, these representations are differentiated by the principal categories of the individual’s experience: self and objects.

A self representation is an unconscious, preconscious, or conscious representation within the ego of the physical and mental self (Jacobson, 1964, p. 19)…. In the beginning, they are not firm units (Jacobson, 1964, p. 20) but are gradually built up…. An object representation is an image of a person or part of a person. The earliest object representations are usually fused with images of the self in a single image of self and object, with no mental boundaries between them. Only with time do these early self-images that are fused with images of objects differentiate into representations of the self and representations of the object. (St. Clair, 1996, pp. 92, 94) (emphasis in the original)

If all goes well and the units do not stay fused, the individual develops constancy among their various representations, starting with their objects: “[T]he eventual…integration of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ self-representations, that is, the achievement of object constancy [which] corresponds roughly to the separation-individuation stage of development of Mahler” (Kernberg, 1976, p. 72). From here, the constancy extends to include self-representations, resulting in what Kernberg refers to as “ego identity.”

However, a serious confusion must be addressed at this point which is not adequately resolved in object relations theory. Technically, self representations
are no less an object than object representations. Indeed, the overall arrangement should be referred to this way: self and non-self objects. To understand, the term “object” must be contrasted with the more common usage which depicts objects as three-dimensional things. As with many of the tenets of psychology, Freud originated the concept of object (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). The meaning intended for object is the same as that of language (Hamilton, 1992). Consider the following sentence: “The boy hit the ball.” The “boy” is the subject and the “ball” is the object—of that subject. Given this meaning, objects are actually one’s interest in some aspect of reality, toward which they could be said to be oriented—indeed, even to the extent of having an objective: “The second meaning...conveys a sense of an object as a goal or a purpose of activity.... Human beings fashion a world of things and stimuli into a world of objects because they act with purpose toward it” (Hewitt, 1994, p. 63).

In other words, to be an object actually means a complex relationship exists between the individual and their world, which can be depicted as follows:

**OBJECT RELATIONS**

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boy    hit    ball

Self        objective
           --------
          interest

object    (three-dimensional thing)
          --------
         self    (abilities and attributes)
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As can be seen, to be an object requires some combination of interests or objectives emanating from the self as directed toward either three-dimensional objects or the individual’s own abilities and attributes. For example, a ball can be an object only by virtue of its relationship to the subject (i.e., self)—via the interests or objectives of that subject. Otherwise, there is no object. Similarly, one’s own abilities can be an object, for example, wanting to become a better hitter. In this way, drives (i.e., instincts) can be thought of as always directed toward their objects (Freud, 1915). When these relations are internalized and committed to memory, they become representations.

Clearly, having so many different meanings for the word object can result in a bewildering ambiguity. An issue of special concern to the present discussion is that contrasting self representations with object representations creates the illusion that self representations are something other than objects, which is false. More accurately, even if awkwardly, said would be self and non-self object
representations. When self representations are allowed to be contrasted with object representations, as if they were something different, the door is open to define that difference in terms of the subjective, executive arm. But the subject is in no way an object, and confusing them only allows the attributes of one to mingle with the attributes of the other—where they do not belong.

A similar confusion obscures the account of ego identity:

Different childhood periods determine different integrations of ego identity, and the general integration of ego identity stemming from all these partial ego identities normally operates as an attempt to synthesize them into an overall harmonious structure (Erikson, [1993]).... This is a very complex development because, while object relations are continuously internalized (such internalizations take place at gradually higher, more differentiating levels), at the same time the internalized object relations are also “depersonalized” (Jacobson, 1964) and integrated into higher level ego and superego structures.... (Kernberg, 1976, p. 32)

Of course, to speak of ego identity in this way is at best redundant, and, given the discussion thus far, probably a misnomer. After all, it not the ego per se but the objective, representational arm to which identity pertains. Therefore, this aspect of psychic structure is better referred to simply as identity, dropping the word ego entirely from the reference as it is no longer relevant.

Further, comparing higher level ego and superego structures, as if on a continuum of different internalizations, confuses the issue in a completely different way, for the ego as mind is utterly different from internalizations represented in memory. That identity arises and is embedded within mind is precisely what characterizes the relationship between mind and memory, and also what differentiates ego (as mind) from superego. Nonetheless, the arrangement suggested by Kernberg between the two sets of self/object units seems appropriate. Indeed, the situation for development could be put this way: as higher levels of structure emerge, these sets of self/object units piggy-back, so to speak, upon prior, established self/object units.

Kohut and the Bipolar Self

Kohut (1971, 1977) posits that the self is comprised of a bipolar structure, two separate parts joined together. On the one hand, there are ambitions, which are the various interests and objectives originating within the self. On the other hand, there are ideals, which are those admirable qualities in others to which the self aspires. Kohut refers to the initial formation of this bipolar conjoining as a nuclear self, which comes into being as a result of its various interactions with selfobjects (i.e., significant others):
This structure is the basis of our sense of being an independent center of initiative and perception, integrated with our most central ambitions and ideals and with our experience that our body and mind form a unit in space and a continuum of time. This cohesive and enduring psychic configuration, in connection with a correlated set of talents and skills that it attracts to itself or that develops in response to the demands of the ambitions and ideals of the nuclear self, forms the central sector of the personality. (1977, p. 177)

Like the nucleus of an atom, which is comprised of innumerable particles swirling around a central core, the bipolar self represents a sustained pattern around which all the attributes of the individual gather and coalesce, forming the foundation of identity. Through this clustering of attributes, two polar aspects emerge, the first of which indicating the ambitions of the grandiose-exhibitionistic self and the second of which indicating the ideals of the child’s idealized parental imago.

But, again, Kohut is enmeshing self and identity in the above passage, as if the “independent center of initiative and perception” could “attract to itself” the ambitions and ideals of the bipolar self. Better said, ambitions and ideals exist separately from the center of volition and perception as an independent structure within the psyche, however intimately the two might operate in concert. Only in this way can one make sense of Kohut’s seminal contribution to psychoanalytic theory: the self and selfobject relationship. Simply put, it is via the relationship of the self to its selfobjects, as an experience-near phenomenon, that the bipolar self is internalized into identity in the form of self representations.

What Kohut wants to indicate above all else is that both aspects of identity—ambition and ideals—require direct contact and interaction with a selfobject. By this he intended to indicate the inherently conjoined nature of the self and their significant others. The selfobject is, therefore, something of an “auxiliary ego” (A. Freud, 1936), which is internalized into the bipolar self. If it turns out that this auxiliary ego is deficient in any way, then, unfortunately, so too is the bipolar self.

This process of internalization occurs by way of interactions between the self and selfobject referred to as “mirroring.” Essentially, mirroring is the manner in which the selfobject reflects to the self a sense of their own image, by presenting the opinions and judgments that the selfobject has, what Sullivan (1953) calls “reflected appraisal,” Cooley (1902) calls “the looking glass self,” and Rogers (1961) calls “conditions of worth.” It is precisely for this reason that children are so unabashedly desperate for the attention and approval of their parents. They are not the sole decision makers in their behavior. They must also take into account the judgments of others.
But, clearly, such judgments do not always take the individual’s best interests into account. Sartre (1957) is known for an infamous axiom: “Hell is other people.” By this, he meant that the individual can be reduced to a compromised state (i.e., object) while in the presence of others. Sartre employed the following analogy to demonstrate this point:

Imagine yourself in a hallway, peeking through a keyhole, observing the events inside. You feel in control and in charge. You are also anonymous and invulnerable. Now imagine someone turning the corner of the hallway and noticing you there. Suddenly, the tables are turned. You are the exact opposite of what you were before, with the other now in the position that you previously enjoyed. Now they have control and are in charge, while you are exposed and vulnerable. Perhaps more to the point, you have been caught. As a result of such positioning, you are made an “object” within their view.

Such an act of positioning is typically thought to be dehumanizing and degrading to experience—although, paradoxically, at the same time, it is the exact dynamic by which one is also felt to be loved. This circumstance is self-evident to any child who has ever implored of their parents, “Look at me!” The only difference is the kind of attention being paid. Indeed, if the individual in Sartre’s example were standing on a stage receiving an award amidst loud and appreciative applause, their experience of the situation likely would be dramatically different.

Again, a serious confusion crops up at this point, which requires a short detour in the discussion. Technically, one cannot be made an object by another object. This procedure requires a different kind of entity entirely: an other. The difference between objects and others can be seen to conform to the concept of part and whole objects. For Klein (1984, 1988), the quintessential example of a part object is the mother’s breast, as seen in relation to the suckling infant. In this understanding, the mother’s “whole” identity is unknown to the infant, who simply relates to a “part” of the whole. However, the difficulty with such a position is this: part objects are whole objects—to the infant. In other words, the breast is not a part object to the infant. It is a whole breast. It is only in relation to some other—specifically a “human object” (Kernberg, 1976)—that objects are seen to be parts and not wholes.

As the child grows, they must undergo a process of maturation by which they not only separate and individuate from others (Mahler 1968, 1975), but also attribute a similar process to certain objects in their world. In other words, they must see these objects as possessed of the definitive attributes of a living human being: sentience and volition. It is in this way that objects become others. Indeed, children typically over-generalize as they first begin to attribute sentience
and volition to their objects, magically regarding even inanimate objects as harboring intent. Put somewhat differently, part objects are those objects that have yet to emerge into others, but remain objects. Whole objects, on the other hand, have become others. In a sense, others represent an integration of self and objects, whereby the essential nature of the self is imparted to the object.

It is in this manner that others can make objects of the self—precisely by having the self be an object of their interest or intent. Unfortunately, the linear nature of language makes capturing this reciprocal feature of one’s object relations very difficult. But the significance of this development can be seen in a very ordinary example: although people are reluctant to undress in front of others, especially others they don’t know, they are typically indifferent to undressing in front of a dog or cat, regardless of how well they know them. Indeed, a fly on the wall represents virtually no intrusiveness at all. As can be seen, there is a sliding scale to otherness, with those most like the self afforded the greatest distinction until sentience and volition diminishes to a point so foreign and alien that the other might as well just be an object. It is according to this process that the unfortunate atrocities so often inflicted upon other human beings can occur: they are not seen as others but as objects, and anything is allowable to an object.

As can be seen, to be an other actually means a complex relationship exists between the individual and their world, significantly extending the nature of one’s object relations, which can be depicted as follows:

**OBJECT RELATIONS REVISITED**

```
boy         hit          boy
\downarrow     \downarrow     \downarrow
object           other        (sentience and volition)
---------  objective        --------
Self  ------------     object      object        (three-dimensional thing)
interest  --------  self        (abilities and attributes)
```

The defining feature of others is not only that they possess sentience and volition, but that they have the self as their object, certainly at least potentially. Consider the following sentence: “The boy hit the ball—but without permission
from the other boy, who then hit the first boy back.” Now the second “boy” is the subject and the first “boy” is the object—of that subject.

Yet, as stated thus far, this reciprocity merely superimposes another linear relation upon the situation, whereby the self is oriented toward their objects and others are oriented toward objects. Selfobjects, on the other hand, go beyond simply being an other. According to Kohut, the mirroring function (i.e., reciprocity) of the selfobject is essential to one’s well-being—and the source of the ambition feature of the bipolar self. If this function occurs properly, the self will develop an exuberant delight in being thus admired by others. The individual’s ambitions will be seen as acceptable to others and, therefore, reasonable goals for them to pursue. Consequently, the self draws the conclusion that all is right with the world—and, precisely because this is so, all is right with the self as well (Erikson, 1993, 1994).

However, with the ideals aspect of the bipolar self, the situation is reversed. The self comes to idealize certain qualities of others—as a result of its admiration of others. In this case, the individual sees value in the qualities of others and wishes, therefore, to incorporate them into the self as their own. This aspect of the bipolar self comes about as an inherent impulse on the part of the self to enhance its situation. It is precisely this aspect of the self that allows one to learn from others, indeed, perhaps even to the point of emulating others.

However, Kohut is not always consistent in his use of the term selfobject. Indeed, at times, selfobject is used to mean almost any kind of relationship with an other, particularly if the relationship is dependent in nature (Grotstein, 1983). But, overall, Kohut speaks of the selfobject in two basic ways (Ornstein, 1978, 1981):

1. As an object which is an extension of the self, and
2. As an object which materially affects the self.

Although this account is thought to elaborate on the existing term “object,” little seems added. Objects are already those aspects of reality toward which the individual has some interest or objective. The very being interested in or an objective of the self makes the object an extension that materially affects the self; it’s just a matter of degree. Indeed, even others materially affect the self through reciprocity, by their interest in the self as their object. But the relationship between the individual and their selfobjects takes into account a further feature: selfobjects have the interests and intentions of their objects as their object. It is precisely by virtue of adding responsiveness to reciprocity that selfobjects act in ways that materially affect the self.

Indeed, in this sense, selfobjects are probably better thought of as selfothers, for they not only represent the subset of objects that has become others, but the subset of others that has become significant others. In this way, selfobjects are defined primarily by a function they play that refines the variety of possible objects
down to a particular subset within this class. Put somewhat differently, even an other can pay attention. But the selfobject *gives affection* when they pay attention. Although it is often stated that acting out children are simply engaged in attention seeking, this misses the point of their motivation, for in reality they are *affection* seeking— but may be willing to settle for attention, if that is the best they can do.

Therefore, one’s object relations must be augmented by selfobject relations, which can be diagrammed as follows:

![Diagram of SELFOBJECT RELATIONS]

Kohut was always most interested in outlining the dynamics of a healthy self in his theory and his formulation of the term selfobject reflects this. Rather than being neutral in their orientation to their objects, and thereby having some effect, selfobjects inherently move their objects (i.e., the self) toward some optimal state. Consequently, any aberrated states that might occur are failures of the selfobject to perform this necessary function (Tolpin, 1978). For this reason, the selfobject is a required feature of the individual’s development and essential to their ultimate well-being:

A child born into a normally caring family is responded to from the beginning by a matrix of selfobjects as if he already had a rudimentary self…. If good-enough mothering is available and a good-enough fit between the child and the mother prevails, these virtual selfobject relations enable the infant’s proto-self to develop psychic structure… (Bacal & Newman, 1990, p. 231)

As a result of this intimacy between the child and their emotional environment, a sense of ownership about the selfobject develops. The selfobject
is not so much merely an extension of the individual as a differentiated object that belongs to the individual—and with whom the individual belongs. However, this sense of ownership is better thought of as taking the selfobject for granted, a sense of a relatively unquestioned and comforting entitlement to the resources of the other, as opposed to control over an undifferentiated extension of one’s self.

Unless, of course, things go wrong. Then, possession and ownership is precisely the nature of the self-selfobject relationship, compensating through power and control for the responsiveness on the part of the selfobject that the self no longer expects to be forthcoming. It is exactly this sort of deficit underlying the power struggles so indicative of the “terrible twos,” and which extend into childhood and adult disorders involving problems with authority. However, if things do proceed unimpeded and without undue trauma, the child can expect to make certain assumptions about their selfobjects: that they are looking out for the child’s best interests. In other words, the child can trust their selfobjects (i.e., parents) and, as a result, trust their world (Erikson, 1993, 1994). It is in this manner that the child develops confidence—and a reliable expectation that things will work out for the best.

Conclusion

Kernberg and Kohut are essentially in agreement that the self as subjective, executive presence represents a supraordinate structure to Freud’s tripartite assembly of agencies, albeit each in his own way. Yet, both do so by enmeshing the subjective, executive arm with the objective, representational arm—in Kernberg’s case by equating the aggregate of self/object units of the objective, representational arm with the subjective, executive arm (and thereby subsuming the computational arm of the cognitive ego within it), and in Kohut’s case by focusing on the experience-near phenomenology of the subjective, executive arm that is supposed to attract the bipolar self of the objective, representational arm to it. However, it is suggested that the subjective, executive arm should be treated as an independent aspect of psychic structure, precisely so that the objective, representational arm can be viewed unimpeded. In this way, their orientations to identity can be understood as highlighting two aspects of the same structure.

Yet, their respective orientations are telling, in that the aspects of identity to which they affiliate fit together in a particular way. Kernberg’s self/object units provide the necessary structural underpinnings to the bipolar self of Kohut—but only relative to the ambition side of the concept. However, although Kohut augments the ambition side of the equation with ideals, he does not indicate the dynamic operating within them, which Kernberg describes with his self/object units. In other words, whereas Kohut focuses on the bipolar self of identity, Kernberg can be thought of as giving emphasis to the bilateral self of identity. But both are
essential components of psychic structure and neither can be overlooked or eschewed, at least without undermining a full account of psychic structure.

In a sense, whereas Kernberg’s bilateral self/object units represent the periphery of identity structure, Kohut’s bipolar poles of ambitions and ideals could be thought of as representing the core of identity structure. Indeed, Kernberg gives particular emphasis to self/object units, while essentially overlooking the presence and significance of units comprised self and other. Consequently, Kernberg not only highlights the periphery of identity in his theoretical formulations, but in doing so also focuses on that aspect of identity which is objective and impersonal. Kohut, on the other hand, takes the opposite tack, stressing the subjective and personal nature of the bipolar self, and in doing so extends the position of others into selfobjects. In this way, Kohut could be said to have specialized in a subset of identity, its bipolar aspect. Unfortunately, in his zeal to bring this neglected aspect into prominence, he typically steps over the line and mistakenly attributes features of the subjective, executive arm to the objective, representational arm.

As can be seen, each theorist provides an essential account of their aspect of the overall structure of identity—albeit by overlooking the essential contributions of the other. However, these two aspects can be subsumed within a larger theoretical framework, taking into account the features of both: the “Apex” Paradox. Although Kohut and Kernberg both conceive of the components of their bipolar and bilateral selves in a somewhat static manner, as simply existing side by side, the arrangement is far more interactive and perplexing than that. The two sides (i.e., bipolar self) of the “Apex” Paradox can be thought of as taking turns providing context for one another, oscillating something in the way of a binary sun. In other words, like figure and ground, the two fade into and out of awareness, in a sense, passing through each other along the way. In fact, the two sides of identity structure could be said to turn into one another, something like an Escher print. The exact dynamics of this paradoxical structure will be examined in greater detail in Part II.
References:


