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The Problem of Self in Psychoanalysis: Lessons from Eastern Philosophy

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In the Eastern philosophical paradigm, as in psychoanalytic theory, there are two distinct frameworks for the concept of self. On the one hand, self is viewed as a construction, the aggregate of self representations acquired as a result of experiences with the object world. In contrast, a second frame of reference equates the self with the subjective center of experience. This split between subjectively and objectively referenced self functions has a parallel in the subject–object duality of personal experience. However, Eastern philosophy teaches that the subject–object distinction is illusory and that self can be transcended.

This paper reviews concepts of self derived from classical psychoanalysis as well as self psychology and object relations theory, and explores the relevance of the Eastern philosophical paradigm for psychoanalytic theory. It is argued that the experience of self arises in relation to the self-referent, self-organizing ability that is the distinctive hallmark of the human knowing system. Similarly, the human being is endowed with the tendency to conceptualize the self as agent—to infer the existence of a reified separate “someone” who experiences our experience. Implications of this view for the psychoanalytic endeavor are discussed.

Introduction

The concept of self has recently emerged, or rather reemerged, as a point of focus in psychoanalytic theory (Richards, 1982; Havens, 1986; Meissner, 1986; Tuttman,

1988). Although many would agree that the self-as-experienced is at the heart of the psychoanalytic endeavor, there has yet to be any resolution regarding a number of important theoretical questions about the self. Perhaps the most fundamental issue is the definition of self, which has a multiplicity of meanings ranging from experience-near (nontheoretical) meanings to metapsychological ones. Also, the philosophical assumptions implicit in the way we think about the self have often not been recognized, and with a few exceptions (Saperstein and Gaines, 1973; Atwood and Stolorow, 1984; Cavell, 1988; Chessick, 1988), little attention has been given to the possible relevance of the philosophy of self to psychoanalytic theory. The present paper explores sources of conceptual confusion in the psychoanalytic theory of self, with a focus on implications of the Eastern philosophical paradigm.

Objective versus Subjective "Self"

In looking at the different meanings of *self* as the term is used in the literature, there appear to be two basic domains of reference for the concept of self: subjective and objective. The subjective self is experiential, the self-as-experienced. Self experience includes subjectivity (the experience of consciousness or of the contents of consciousness); the sense of continuity (the experience of self sameness, identity, and self history); and the sense of self agency (the experience of initiating action or of having personal intentions).[1] In contrast, the objective self is a metapsychological concept which references (impersonal) functions or structures of the mind.

It is interesting to note that the split between subjectively and objectively referenced self functions in psychoanalytic theory has a parallel in the subject–object duality of personal experience (Grossman, 1982). Personal experience of self oscillates between an indwelling sense of subjectivity and an objective, outside looking in experience (May, 1983). Thus, self experience issues from two sources: (1) direct awareness of inner experience; (2) indirect self perception and introspection; that is, the perception of our bodily and mental self as an object; self-seen-through-the-eyes-of-others (Fenichel, 1945).

In general, psychoanalytic theory has been skewed toward a view of the self which is objective, using the term *ego* to describe these objectified self functions. Freud himself used the term *Ich*—*I*—for both the mental structure (the metapsychological ego) and the more personal, subjective, experiencing self, thus maintaining an ambiguity or internal tension between subjective and objective meanings (Kernberg, 1982). However, in Strachey's choice of the term *ego* as a translation for *Ich*, Freud's meaning was skewed toward the more impersonal, structural sense of the term. Thus, the subjective, experiential self was lost, implicitly hidden in the higher integrative functions of the ego (Saperstein and Gaines, 1973; Meissner, 1986).

Although Hartmann (1950) clearly articulated the different domains of ego and subjective self, subsequent psychoanalytic literature is replete with inconsistent uses of

the terms *ego* and *self*. There has been little agreement as to whether or not a metapsychological self is needed in addition to the ego, and, if so, how such a self fits into prevailing metapsychology. In the classical, drive-oriented theoretical tradition, self has been considered to be an ego structure(Kernberg, 1982), whereas others (most notably Kohut) have argued that self is the central organizing variable in mental life and, as such, is superordinate to id, ego, and superego(Kohut, 1977). Regardless of whether the concept of self is given superordinate status, it is important to maintain a clear distinction between metapsychological and subjective meanings of the concept of self.

The Subjective Self

The subjective self, our experience of being a self, derives in part from the direct awareness of inner experience. A few moments of introspection are sufficient to reveal that the most basic level of experience, phenomenologically, is the experience of the contents of consciousness, that is, awareness of *experience*. The experiences of which we are, or can become, aware include sensations, perceptions, images, feelings, memories, and thoughts. In addition, human beings have the capacity for self-reflexive awareness and can become aware of being aware. In self-reflexive awareness, the self becomes aware of itself experiencing; that is, the self becomes aware of itself as object. Self-reflexive awareness is present to a variable degree in the contents of our experience. Unfortunately, we can never know exactly how much, because, by what Ouspensky (1949) calls a “trick of nature,” the moment we turn our attention to discover whether self-reflexive awareness is present, it comes into being. In psychoanalytic theory, self-reflexive awareness is included in the concept of the observing ego. The oscillations between awareness (simple subjective experience) and self-reflexive or objective self-awareness are regulated into a pattern that is unique to a particular individual (Broucek, 1982).

What is the relationship of self to mental or conscious experience? On the one hand, what we call our self clearly derives from our conscious experience (our mental experience of mind). In one sense, it would seem that what we later in life call our self is nothing less than the sum total of our experiences and the influence that these have on our behavior. The sense of uniqueness that each of us attaches to our consciousness of self is based on the fact that only we have experienced the world around us and our own brain activity in exactly the way we have experienced it (Eccles, 1970).

In this regard, it is of interest to note that experience is often located “in the head,” and that self appears in language as the “place” or locus of experience[2] (Schafer, 1983).

On the other hand, however, it may readily be shown that self is not identical with the universe of conscious experience. In the first place, only a small part of the functioning of the brain (mind) ever becomes conscious. Since mental process is not conscious per se, consciousness always occurs after the fact and should, correctly speaking, be called conscious

reflection (Eccles, 1970). Thus, self cannot be considered equivalent to conscious experience; rather, self emerges in relation to the *continuities* in conscious (and presumably unconscious) experience.

The sense of continuity, what Winnicott (1962) calls the experience of going-on-being, is the sine qua non of self experience. It is the experience of being an I to whom things happen. This aspect of self experience includes both continuity in physical experience—the experience of being a cohesive, discrete body—and the sense of continuity in time—the experience of having a personal history. These continuities are a given in the normal psychological development of the human being. They emerge as organizing processes in the brain-mind abstract invariants from the multitude of transformations of conscious and unconscious experience (Lichtenstein, 1965) to form a concept of I. Self-recognition is built around familiar and homeostatically regulated ongoing subjective states (Pine, 1989), including the affective colorations of self experience. The subjective self, then, derives from but is not limited to bodily, perceptual, or conscious experience.

A third aspect of self experience is the experience of personal agency (self-as-agent). Personal agency includes experiences of being "the agent of actions, the maker of intentions, and the architect of plans" (Stern, 1985, p. 5). Like the sense of personal continuity, it is constructed out of invariants in our psychological history. For example, Stern (1985) has described how one component of the sense of personal agency may emerge from the experience of invariants in voluntary motor behavior, permitting the constructed awareness of an I who initiates movement. Other aspects of personal agency derive from the interpersonal domain. For example, for an infant to develop the experience of being an "independent center of initiative," considered by Kohut (1977) to be one of the defining characteristics of the self, the mother must be able to give an adequate response to the experiences of early narcissism. Personal agency in the interpersonal domain extends to the ability to create meaning, share personal knowledge, and communicate. In its broadest sense, the experience of personal agency entails an implicit theory of cause and effect governing the relations between the person called "myself" and the universe of which I am a part.

Self Representations and Self Experience

Self experience, as the concept has been formulated thus far, derives from the direct awareness of inner experience. However, inner experience is seldom free of the influence of self representations: ideas, images, or concepts the person has about him- or herself (Schafer, 1967). Self representations arise as a symbolization or condensation of self experience or experience with others and in turn shape subsequent experience. Experientially, self representations have somatic and affective as well as cognitive aspects. They may be highly organized or archaic, secondary or primary process, conscious or unconscious(Schafer, 1967).

Self representations may refer to any aspect of oneself as a person—one's body, personality, identity, or self. Among the self representations that refer to the subjective self, Schafer (1967) distinguishes the “reflective self-representation,” an implicit representation of oneself-as-the-thinker-of-thoughts. Reflective self representations are characteristic of normal waking consciousness but not certain other states (such as day dreaming or sleeping). Another special type of self representation is the “self-state representation,” which registers changes or disturbances in familiar or homeostatically regulated subjective states (Pine, 1989). For example, one may experience oneself as fragmented or depersonalized.

The aggregate of self representations may exist with varying degrees of internal cohesiveness and integration or contradiction and disjointedness. The sense of “self sameness” that characterizes continuity of experience may perhaps itself be considered a special type of self representation(Schafer, 1967). Another related concept is that of “identity,” which is comprised in part of a complex synthesis of self representations that is constructed as “the outcome of our struggle for integrated functional and experiential unity in a changing biological, familial, cultural, and experiential past, present, and future (Schafer, 1967, p. 41).[3]

In her book *The Self and the Object World*, Jacobson (1964) elaborated on the development of internalized self and object representations as primary organizing substructures of the ego. She described the “primal psychophysiological self” as an undifferentiated psychosomatic matrix which contains both libidinal and aggressive energies. As development takes place, objects begin to be distinguished from each other and from the self, and their different representations in the new system, the ego, gradually become endowed with enduring libidinal and aggressive cathexes. Thus, Jacobson saw the origin of the ego as intimately linked to the originally fused self and object images (equivalent to primarynarcissism) (Kernberg, 1982). Self, then, was conceptualized as an ego structure.

This same concept appears later in Kernberg's definition of self as “the multiplicity of self representations and their related affect dispositions which are dynamically organized and integrated into a comprehensive whole” (Kernberg, 1982). Kernberg stressed the role of libidinal and aggressive drives on the development of (contradictory) self representations and the process by which these become integrated. As he puts it:

> *The self, then, is an ego structure that originates from self-representations first built up in the undifferentiated symbiotic phase in the context of infant—mother interactions under the influence of both gratifying and frustrating experiences. Simultaneously the system perception-consciousness evolves into broader ego functions as well [Kernberg, 1982, p. 905].*

But to deal with self as an aggregate of self representations within the ego creates several conceptual problems. First, a

self which is merely and exclusively representational cannot serve as a source of action or agency; second, an aggregate of self representations has no subjectivity and therefore cannot be self-reflective. A solution to these problems becomes possible, however, once a distinction is made between the experiencing self (which has the properties of subjectivity and personal agency) and representations of the self. As can be seen in the following quote from Meissner (1986), in self-reflection there is a split in consciousness between the experiential self-as-observer and the selfrepresentation which is observed: As Meissner says, to fail to distinguish between self (subject) and self representation (object), or to equate the self, as does Kernberg, with representations of the self, is to confuse the cognitive abstraction (self representation) for the reality. After all, the question must be answered as to what the selfrepresentation is a representation*of*(Meissner, 1986). The self is known by its representations just as the world is known through object representations. But the subjective self is more than the sum of its parts (self representations) (Saperstein and Gaines, 1973).

[T]he proper object of introspection is the self as introspectible, that is, the self as representable.… By implication, the representable aspects of the self that can become the object of introspection must be placed conceptually at some remove from the subjective polarity of the self that is not known by introspection.… The introspective—introspecting subject as such is neither representable nor introspectible. It can only be grasped in the immediate subjective experience of the self as a source of cognition or action [Meissner, 1986, pp. 389-390]. is not known by introspection.… The introspective—introspecting subject as such is neither representable nor introspectible. It can only be grasped in the immediate subjective experience of the self as a source of cognition or action [Meissner, 1986, pp. 389-390].

The Superordinate Self

In contrast to the tradition of drive theory, in which self is equated with its representations, radically different assumptions about the self are found in object relations theory and self psychology.

Fairbairn posited self as a structure of original wholeness, a “given” in psychological experience. This primary psychic self or “libidinal ego” was for Fairbairn the dynamic center of the whole personality; he distinguished it from that set of functions (the “central ego”) which, like the Freudian ego, mediate contact with the outer world (Fairbairn, 1952). Similarly, the personal core of Winnicott's “true self” was a structure of wholeness; he described it as the sum of the individual's inherited potential, including the basic potential for experiencing continuity of being, subjective reality, and a personal body-scheme (Winnicott, 1962). For Winnicott, self was essentially subjective in nature, a “private citadel of subjective reality” (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 197). He was less concerned with an accurate or consistent

conceptualization of self than with describing something of the subjective experience of living (Schacht, 1988).
Guntrip, too, recognized subjective experience to be the very core of the self. In his words, “the human psyche is an incipient ego, and if it were not, it would not be human” (Guntrip, 1962, p. 250). In other words, the essence of the human psyche was the experience of being the “subject” of experience. Guntrip favored the term *libidinal ego* for the pristine natural self because of its “dynamic urge to be” (Guntrip, 1962). For Guntrip as for Winnicott, the self was subjective as well as dynamic, motivated, and intentional.
Despite the prior work of Fairbairn, Winnicott, Guntrip, and others, Kohut is widely given the credit (or blame) for elevating the self to superordinate status in psychoanalytic theory. As the term *self psychology* implies, Kohut considered the self to be psychologically the most meaningful aspect of a person, and it became superordinate by subsuming everything within its fold that can be classified as mental. For Kohut, self is a depth-psychological concept that refers to the core of the personality; among its core attributes, the self is the center of initiative, recipient of impressions, and repository of the individual's ambitions, ideals, talents, and skills (Kohut, 1977).
Kohut developed in some detail an account of the development of the bipolar self around the twin poles of ambitions and ideals, and he described the formation of the self in relation to the parents' empathic responses to the child's mirroring and idealizing needs. The newborn infant, Kohut tells us, has no reflexive awareness of himself, no capacity to experience being a self. In the beginning, he or she is:

> *[F]used via mutual empathy with an environment that does experience him as already possessing a self—an environment that not only anticipates the later separate self-awareness of the child, but already, by the very form and content of its expectations, begins to channel it into specific directions [Kohut, 1977, p. 99].*

Thus, the development of the self depends absolutely on the “deeply anchored responsiveness” of the parents to as yet unformed self potential; it is these selfobject functions that evoke and maintain the self and the experience of selfhood. The child has only a virtual self in the mind of the parents (Kohut, 1977, 1984).
The shared contribution of object relations theory and self psychology to the psychoanalytic theory of the self can be summarized, then, as the recognition that (1) self experience plays the major role in the individual's psychological universe, and (2) self experience develops in the context of an interpersonal life. As much as the capacity for self may be inborn, the infant's solitary experience of behavioral and cognitive organizing processes is not sufficient; a “relational matrix,” to use Winnicott's term, is also necessary.
However, several problems and inconsistencies in Kohut's concept of self have been noted in the literature. The self of self psychology evolved from an experience-near concept (the “I-experience”), intended to form a contrast with the

metapsychology of id, ego, and superego, into the complex and experience-distant concept of the bipolar self(Chessick, 1988). And yet Kohut continued to use the term *self* to describe both mental experience and the psychological structure presumed to give rise to these experiences, thus straddling the domains of metapsychology and subjectivity. Compounding the confusion, Kohut often wrote about the self as though it were an existential agent, although a metapsychological self can have no subjectivity or agency in the existential sense. To cite an example given by Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood (1987), Kohut might say "the fragmented self strives to restore its cohesion" to mean both that the person's self-experience is becoming fragmented (an experiential statement) and that the person seeks to restore a sense of self-cohesion (personal agency). Note here the distinction between the self and the person-as-agent. Indeed, Stolorow et al. assert that personal agency as an existential issue lies beyond the scope of psychoanalytic inquiry, and that psychoanalysis appropriately concerns only the *experience* of personal agency or its absence in specific contexts of meaning (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984).

On the one hand, these points seem to be well taken, for if self is conceptualized as an existential agency, the danger is that the personal agentic I will itself be reified (not unlike the id, ego, and superego of classical theory). On the other hand, however, it also makes little sense to say that the experience of personal agency and subjectivity are the sine qua non of the self, but that it is the person who senses, feels, and acts. The intention in postulating a superordinate self in the first place was, after all, to accommodate the self-as-experienced, the self which is the center of the individual's psychological universe. A concept of superordinate self which relegates subjectivity and personal agency to another domain seems to offer only a partial theoretical advantage over earlier metapsychology. From a philosophical point of view, the problem is how to postulate a self that has a sense of its own uniqueness and that is actively engaged in intention and planning, without resorting to mysticism or entelechies.

Self-as-Structure versus Self-as-Process

As the discussion has been developed thus far, it would seem that self is more than mental experience; more than its representations. Further, it has been argued that a successful definition of self must center around the primary experiential data of self experience, that is, experiences of personal agency and subjectivity; and that a definition of self as psychological structure faces the challenge of giving an account of personal agency and subjectivity that makes sense both psychologically and philosophically.

The structure of the self is inferred from the cohesion and continuity of self-experience, just as the existence of electrons is inferred from a set of observations about electromagnetic phenomena (Wolf, 1988). Self structure shapes experience both positively (giving rise to certain configurations of self experience in awareness) or negatively (preventing certain configurations of self experience from

arising), without this shaping becoming the focus of awareness and reflection (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984).

As a structure, the self is presumably part of what Guidano and Liotti (1983) term the “metaphysical hard-core” of the individual's self-knowledge, a kind of implicit general view people have of themselves which is tacit rather than explicit and which includes a set of deep general rules which determine the invariant aspects of the person's mental functioning. However, while these deep structures of tacit self-knowledge include all of what is generally referred to as character or personality, the structural self is more delimited and pertains not to the shaping of experience in general but rather to the shaping of self experience (Atwood and Stolorow, 1984). Thus, in self psychological terms, a person with an adequately developed self structure experiences being alive and vigorous, balanced and organized, self-directed and self-propelling; while inadequate structuralization of the self manifests as experiences of depletion, emptiness, and fragmentation.

However, it is important to recognize that self structure is dynamic rather than static; the very term *structure* tends to imply a misleading reification of the self. Emphasis may better be placed on self as a *process* of organization, a set of functions which organize experience.

A process-oriented theory of self has been developed by Stern (1985), who posits that the most primitive sense of “self” emerges in relation to the subjective experience of the intrinsic organizing activity of the brain–mind; this “sense of self” is the very experience of self-organizing processes:

> *By “sense” [of self] I mean simple (non-self-reflexive) awareness. We are speaking at the level of direct experience, not concept. By “of self” I mean an invariant pattern of awarenesses that arise only on the occasion of the infant's actions or mental processes. An invariant pattern of awareness is a form of organization. It is the organizing subjective experience of whatever it is that will later be verbally referenced as the “self”. This organizing subjective experience is the preverbal, existential counterpart of the objectifiable, self-reflective verbalizable self [Stern, 1985, p. 7]. of awarenesses that arise only on the occasion of the infant's actions or mental processes. An invariant pattern of awareness is a form of organization. It is the organizing subjective experience of whatever it is that will later be verbally referenced as the “self”. This organizing subjective experience is the preverbal, existential counterpart of the objectifiable, self-reflective verbalizable self [Stern, 1985, p. 7].*

Thus, self emerges with the experience of the process of organization itself, and the sense of continuity (the sine qua non of self experience) emerges in relation to the ability to abstract invariants from a multitude of transformations(Lichtenstein, 1965).

Stern (1985) has elaborated on the process by which identification of invariants in experience contributes to the formation of self experience. He theorizes that the most primitive sense of self begins to form at birth (if not before) as

a function of the experience of emergent (cognitive) organization. This “emergent self” is preverbal (if not unconscious). Next, a “core self” develops as an analogue of the experience of being separate, cohesive, and bounded. Third, a “subjective self” develops as a function of the experience of intersubjectivity and the discovery that there are other minds. Last, a “verbal self” develops along with the capacity to objectify the self, to be self-reflective, to comprehend, and to produce language. Language may act to reveal senses of self that already exist in the preverbal infant, as well as to transform or create still other senses of self. This developmental conceptualization of self spares us the task of choosing criteria to decide, a priori, when a sense of self *really* begins, or which sense of self is *the self*(Stern, 1985).

It would seem that, conceived in this way, the process—structure of self precedes the development of advanced ego functions. In fact, self-as-organizing-activity seems to be prerequisite to the orderly development of various ego functions (Lichtenstein, 1965). If so, then self must necessarily be superordinate.

Thus, self experience emerges as a function of the organizing processes in the brain–mind. The formulation of self as an emergent concept is necessary if self is not to become some sort of an unanalyzable, ultimate metaphysical entity. Self emerges as an aspect of biological process as these processes achieve psychic status and in turn become the elements of our psychic life. Here begins a dynamic, complex interaction between structure and process wherein self representations, as psychic acts, begin to feed back upon themselves (Saperstein and Gaines, 1973).

Consistent with a holistic and process-oriented perspective on living systems in evolutionary biology, the self can best be denned in terms of the self-referent, self-organizing ability that is the distinctive hallmark of the human knowing system (Guidano, 1987). When this process–structure functions optimally, self experience is integrated and cohesive. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the possibility that mind may be a systems phenomenon, the emergent and complementary aspect of complexity in any self-organizing system. According to this idea, posited by Gregory Bateson, Arthur Deikman, and others, every living being has a consciousness appropriate to the level of internal feedback intrinsic to its organization (Deikman, 1975); the emergence of the capacity for self-reflection and hence of an objectifiable, representable, verbalizable self in the human being is simply a consequence of the complexity of organization in the human brain–mind.

Reification of the Self

Self, then, can be conceptualized as a superordinate psychological process—structure that organizes subjective experience. One salient feature of this organization of subjective experience is a split in consciousness between the observer and the observed; it is this observing, describing aspect of our mental process that we reference with the pronoun *I*, although both observer and observed are aspects

of the same underlying reality. In this way, our everyday language as well as our metapsychology perpetuates the view that there is a “self” which actually exists apart from the moment-to-moment flow of experience, an assumption which may be questioned in the context of some (e.g., Buddhist) belief systems (Hayward, 1987).

This assumption, implicit in the Western world view, may be traced to the philosophical tradition of René Descartes, which divided the experienced world into two contrasting spheres: the outer world (or, alternatively, the “material” reality of the inner world, i.e., the brain) and consciousness (or mind). As Basch (1988) notes:

> *From the time one learns to speak, one is taught to accept as natural or self-evident the division of the world one perceives into inner and outer spheres. The external world is the “real” or “objective” world—that is, the world of things that “are there,” supposedly independent of us and our observation. The “inner” or “mental” world, on the other hand, is somehow unreal, subjective.… This dichotomy is literally built into the languages of Western civilization [Basch, 1988, p. 59].*

The “problem” of the separation of subjective and objective selves is thus a direct legacy of the Cartesian model. Whether one projects perceptions onto the extracerebral world and calls them “objective reality,” or locates them in an imaginary, noncorporeal organ called *mind* and labels them “mental,” “psychic,” or “subjective,” it is essential to realize that the reality to which one responds—the only reality we know—is a construction created by the brain of the beholder. As Bertalanffy (1964) notes, the essence of the Cartesian fallacy is that the classic conceptualization of matter and mind no longer corresponds to available knowledge; what to us are exterior objects, on the one hand, and our conscious self on the other, both slowly differentiate or crystallize out of an originally undifferentiated matrix of exteroceptive and proprioceptive experience. The borders between consciousness, the physiological body, and outside objects are not fixed; these categories of experience arise in close interaction with social and cultural factors, and the structure of language is both a conditioning factor and an expression of how the universe is organized.

The “breakdown” of the dualistic Cartesian universe is most apparent in modern physics, in which the ultimate components of physical reality are not small bodies any more, but rather dynamic events; the universe can be described only in terms of relationships among entities which, in their ultimate being, remain unknown (Bertalanffy, 1964). Our perception of the universe, the universe as we conceive it, is simply a “mask fitted on the face of the unknown universe” (Hayward, 1987). Analogously, id, ego, superego, self are hypothetical constructs or models invented to describe and bring into a rational system certain relationships in experience. All too easily we forget that these “structures” are conceptual rather than real, “located,” not in the mind, but rather “within textbooks and monographs on psychoanalytic

theory (Arlow [1980], personal communication cited in Richards [1982]).

Since subject and object are *not* separate, the objective–subjective distinction is illusory; “objective” merely refers to the public status of an observation and is conferred by symboliccommunication between observers (Eccles, 1970). The individual mind cannot be thought of as any more ultimately real than the external reality it supposedly represents.

Perspectives from Eastern Philosophy

In Buddhist philosophy and the metapsychology inherent within it, self is not reified; rather, self is seen as a concept or perceptual pattern, an accumulated assumption about the nature of reality built upon experiences mediated by the sensory apparatus and cognitive processes. An analogy is given of the “existence” of the Big Dipper, which can be clearly “seen” but yet which exists only in the seeing. In a similar manner, self is a conceptual center of being, an inference of a reined someone in the center of experience. In the words of Jack Engler, who has made an extensive comparison of the view of ego in psychoanalytic object relations theory and Theravada Buddhism, “this ‘self’ which we take to be me and which feels so present and real to us is actually an internalized image, a composite representation constructed by a selective and imaginative ‘remembering’ of past encounters with significant objects in our world” (Engler, 1984, p. 22). In short, self is a concept; an illusion.

Engler further calls attention to important parallels between the Buddhist and psychoanalytic models of self. Both consider self representations to be literally constructed out of our experience with the object world. The essence of these self representations is even viewed in a similar way, as a process of synthesis and adaptation between the inner life and outer reality that produces a sense of personal continuity and sameness (Engler, 1984).

According to this view, we have not one self, but many, functionally organized; the way in which we perceive the world is a function of the particular self (organizing process) we are operating out of, which both calls forth a particular world of perception and is sustained by that perception(Deikman, 1982). Our most fundamental concepts of self are built upon the equation object=body=self. This is clear developmentally in the sequence of development of the pronouns *mine, me, you*, and *I* which come into use in approximately that order. “Mine” and “me” refer to me, the object; “you” means you, the object; and last comes “I,” the subject(Deikman, 1982). We are very identified with and dominated by the object-self, which is fundamentally dedicated to survival of the self (or anything we take our self to be). However, there are other selves, other modes of consciousness, and these other modes call forth very different views of the world.

This idea of multiple, functionally organized senses of self in Buddhist psychology is strikingly reminiscent of the conclusions reached by Daniel Stern within a psychoanalytic developmental framework (Stern, 1985). Indeed, Stern

seems strikingly (if unintentionally) Buddhist in his thinking when he argues that the concept of self-as-agent comes into being as a *causal theory* to account for the invariants of experience. The experience of behavioral and cognitive organizing processes alone, Stern reasons, is not sufficient for the development of the self; it is also necessary that adults attribute meaning to these processes and respond to them *as though they represented the activities of a self-aware, self-directed person*. Thus, the interpretation by the object of this preadapted organization becomes a part of the reflection of the self which helps to constitute it (Grossman, 1982).

The view of self as a construction, and, moreover, as an interpersonal construction, further implies the importance of language and communication in the construction of the self. The most important characteristic of language is meaning, and the creation of meaning implies an experiencing subject; therefore, the evolution of language and the evolution of consciousness of self are intrinsically related (Hayward, 1987). This relationship is recapitulated in the parallel developments of language and verbal self in the child. Moreover, in a very real sense, self is a singular narrative, the biographical story we tell about ourselves and to ourselves; in Roy Schafer's words, the self*is*, in fact, a story; “the story that there is a self to tell something to; a someone else serving as an audience who is oneself or one's self” (Schafer, 1983). Thus, the human being is endowed with the ability to *conceptualize*the self as agent, a cognitive construct that is fundamental to the communication between self and other. In this way, the self in both psychoanalytic and Buddhist theory may be defined as a constructed framework of reference for inner experience.

Although there is no self in Buddhist philosophy, there is, however, a paradigm in which the experience of subjectivity is the undefinable and absolute center of experience. The quintessential essence of the Buddhist self (which is no self) is located in awareness itself rather than in any particular organizing processes of the brain–mind. The self of Buddhism (Self) is eloquently evoked by D. T. Suzuki (1963) when he says that:

> *The Self is comparable to a circle which has no circumference…. But it is also the center of such a circle, which is found everywhere and anywhere in the circle. The Self is the point of absolute subjectivity…. But as this point can be moved anywhere we like, to infinitely varied spots, it is really no point. The point is the circle and the circle is the point [Suzuki, 1963, pp. 25-26].*

The self of Buddhism (Self) cannot be known or defined because knowledge implies a dichotomy between the knower and the object known, and this duality violates the nature of the Self. The Self can only be *experienced* in the transcendence of the duality of subject and object (as in meditation, for example); the Self abides in a realm of absolute subjectivity(Suzuki, 1963).

To summarize, then, in Buddhist psychology as in psychoanalytic theory, there are two distinct frames of

reference for the concept of self. On the one hand, the self is seen to consist of self representations which are constructed out of our experience of objects and the kinds of interactions we have with them; this self comprises a frame of reference for the organization of experience. On the other hand, the self (Self) is equated with the subjective center of experience. What distinguishes the Buddhist psychology of self, however, is the claim that, through the experience of meditation, the entire process by which the self is constructed can be brought into awareness, including the moment of the first split between self and outside world, thus permitting an experience of awareness of Self beyond subject and object. In other words, in the Buddhist view, self experience is a construction which can be transcended.

Implications for Psychotherapy

The self-as-experienced is at the heart of the problem of psychotherapy. Patients come to treatment with complaints about specific subjective experiences—painful emotions, worries, or bodily experiences—or of distressing self states described as feeling empty, fragmented, disconnected, or depersonalized. They suffer over discrepancies between what they believe themselves to be (their self representations), what they expect themselves to be, and the unfolding of events in their lives. Some experience is recognized as belonging to the self and some, too incongruent with self representation, is disowned and projected outward. In a general sense, psychotherapy seeks to heal these splits within the self and to empower the self as existential agent. Implicitly or explicitly, the goal is to reshape the patient's self representations to be more consistent with needs, affects, aims, and goals, and free of the dominance of dysfunctional identifications and introjects.

Both in the Western (psychoanalytic) and Eastern (Buddhist) views, but for different reasons, the problem of self stems from the fact that we *identify* with certain aspects of our self-representations, certain models of who we think we are. If self and object representations are constructed to make sense of patterns of experience, identity is constructed in response to the need to maintain consistency and integration among self representations, the need for coherent self structure. We construct an identity, a self, by identifying with the occupations we perform, the things that we own, the reflections of others, and above all, our personal history, and we cling to this reified self in the struggle to avoid collapsing into (depending on one's point of view) ego loss, fragmentation, or existential despair. While it is perhaps true that the struggle becomes more desperate the greater the underlying ego weakness, Eastern philosophy teaches that such clinging is inherent in ego and part of the fundamental illusion of self.

On a psychological level, the goals of both psychoanalytic treatment and Eastern philosophical practices can be described in terms of a reorganization of self structure.[4] But whereas psychoanalytic treatment aims toward the development of coherence in self structure, toward the resolution of internal contradiction, disjointedness, or lack of

integration in the aggregate of self representations (Schafer, 1967), Eastern philosophy speaks to the importance of the fundamental relationship between the subjective self and the contents of experience. This change or shift in the locus of subjectivity is not readily described in psychoanalytic (or any) language. A good metaphor is that of images seen in a mirror, where suddenly there may be a new awareness of the surface on which the images appear. Analogously, our self representations (the contents of our experience) dominate our awareness, obscuring the experience of *self as the context of experience*(Schuman, 1980). To experience the self-as-context is an evolution of self-awareness beyond the experience of thinking one's thoughts and feeling one's feelings to intentional self-reflection. This enhanced capacity for awareness-of-awareness is predicated on the construction of a observing self (Deikman, 1982) and an increase in the psychological distance between consciousness and the contents of consciousness. This expanded subjectivity is very aptly described as an advance in the development of self. By analogy to early development, it is marked by an increase in "potential space"; an increased capacity to distinguish between one's thought, that which one is thinking about, and the thinker (the interpreting self). Potential space, mediated by an experiencing self, is space in which we are other than reflexively reactive beings and in which we can become the creator and interpreter of our experience (Ogden, 1985). Thus, to the extent that one is able to transcend the self-as-represented (or, ultimately, to transcend all concepts including "the self," and experience what the Buddhists call absolute subjectivity) one also commands enhanced self-agency, self-autonomy, and intentionality.

This expanded subjectivity might also be described in terms of a process of "disidentification" in which the identifications by which we define ourselves begin to lose some of their power. "Disidentification" in the sense described is not quite precisely the opposite of "identification" in the usual psychoanalytic sense. To identify is to internalize an external object and represent that object within the subjective self; that is, as an aspect of the selfrepresentation(Schafer, 1967). By comparison, in the process of disidentification described here, the identification remains intact as an aspect of the selfrepresentation, but there is an increase in the potential space between this self representation and the interpreting self. "Disidentification" refers, then, not to the identification between self and the object identified with, but rather to the identification between self and self representation.

This shift in self might also be described using various other psychoanalytic concepts or definitions of self, for example as a change in the fantasy-of-self which forms a framework of interpretation of inner experience (Grossman, 1982) or as a change in the story that we tell ourselves about ourselves (Schafer, 1983). These psychoanalytic concepts are essentially compatible with the Eastern philosophical goal of expanding subjectivity; that is, an enhanced ability to identify increasingly with self as the center of observation of

experience. (This is the self evoked by the Sufi saying, “What you are looking for is who is looking.”)

Much has been written about the role of the therapist–analyst in the transformations of self in psychotherapy; in a sense, the entire literature of psychoanalysis addresses this subject. As the importance of relationship to self function has come to be increasingly recognized, in self psychology, object relations, and self-in-relation theories, it has become clear that the work of psychotherapy depends upon the ability of the therapist to be in relationship with the patient. Guntrip, to give just one example, describes this as “the capacity of the therapist as a real human being to value, care about, and understand the patient as a person in his own right … to share in the same humanity with the patient … to identify with him in order to know him … in other words, the *capacity of the therapist to be with the patient*” (emphasis added) (Guntrip, 1962, p. 350).

Analogous to the mother's ego support of the baby, Guntrip further describes the function of the therapist as “ultimately being there for the patient in a stable and not a neurotic state,” a process of holding which “enables the patient to feel real and find his own proper self” (Guntrip, 1962, p. 360). “No sense of self emerges,” he writes, “except on the basis of this *relating* in the sense of BEING.” These statements clearly point to the importance of the *quality of being* in the therapist, and it is very interesting to consider this within an Eastern philosophical perspective on the self. In Zen Buddhism, pure Being (as experienced) is called the space of “no mind” (Suzuki, 1983), so Guntrip is not far from advocating the same goal as Zen Buddhist practice: freedom from the prison of conceptual thought. In psychotherapy, as in meditation, being is more important than doing; that is, the being is the doing!

Once accepting Guntrip's view of the importance of Being in the process of psychotherapy, we might go further and posit that the value and power of the psychotherapy relationship hinges upon *who* the therapist is being when he or she is being a therapist. In a Western framework, we do not ordinarily question *who* we are being in any explicit way. We take it tacitly from our Western concept of self that who I am *being* is “myself,” someone with a more or less coherent identity. Moreover, this (inferred) self called “I” is represented in “my” mind by a vast repertoire of self representations, including the representation of myself-as-therapist, with which I identify to varying degrees. Ironically, however, it seems clear from an Eastern perspective that the more I am identified with my self representations when I am with a patient, the less I am able to *be with* the patient! Thus, the expansion of subjectivity which is the goal of Eastern philosophical practices applies to the transformation of self of therapist as well as self of patient, and the subjectivity of the therapist stands along with empathy as an essential condition of psychotherapeutic change.

Moreover, if the function of the therapist vis-à-vis the patient's development of self is analogous with maternal function, we are reminded of Kohut's statement that insofar as the infant's

“self” exists as an idea, it is a product of the mother's mental life (Kohut, 1977). Thus, the interpretations that the therapist (adult) makes regarding the patient's (infant's) self experience will become a part of the reflection that helps to constitute it (Grossman, 1982). (Presumably, even the therapist's understanding of the concept of self will be embedded in the therapeutic communication!)

The importance of self and being in psychotherapy can be (and has been) argued in almost any theoretical context. Existential psychologists, for example, point to the importance of the I/Thou relationship in psychotherapy; the need to *authentically be* with the patient. At the most basic level, I can readily notice that to the extent that I am (narcissistically) preoccupied with myself, I simply cannot be with another person. This in turn leads to the whole issue of the analyst's attention in analysis. It seems fair to say that the therapist's capacity to be with the patient is intimately related to the capacity to attend to the present moment. Following a similar line of thought, Epstein has suggested that the quality of “evenly suspended attention” recommended by Freud is essentially similar to the basic skill involved in the practice of Buddhist mindfulness (vi-passana) meditation (Epstein, 1988).

We might also look at quality of being in terms of the vicissitudes of countertransference feelings; the ability to stay centered in the midst of sometimes complicated emotional transactions between the patient and ourself (selves!). Along similar lines, the concept of the *intersubjective field*(Atwood and Stolorow, 1984) provides an explicit framework for taking into account the ways in which the therapist's quality of being and self representations influence the therapeutic encounter. This is relatively obvious in the extreme case where the patient's perception threatens the “therapist's objectifying reifications of his own personal reality,” thus tending to destabilize the intersubjective field (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987). It may be more difficult to remain aware of the many subtle ways in which the therapist's self and object representations influence the intersubjective field (and thus the patient's representation of self) on a moment-to-moment basis. To give one common example, reified diagnostic concepts tend to validate themselves through self-fulfilling prophesy. In any case, the principle of intersubjectivity in psychoanalytic treatment, and its corollary, that “intrapsychic” mechanisms are not located solely within the patient, is wholly consistent with the Eastern philosophical paradigm and the realization in modern quantum physics that there is no such thing as an “external world” and an observing mind separate from it (Hayward, 1987).

Summary and Conclusion

The concept of the self is one of the most problematic issues in psychoanalytic theory. The failure to distinguish between objective (metapsychological) and subjective (phenomenological) concepts of self, and the related tendency to collapse together concepts of self and self representation, contribute to tremendous conceptual confusion. Moreover, the Western philosophical (Cartesian)

paradigm continues to influence the psychoanalytic concept of self implicitly, obscuring the fact that self is a conceptual and somewhat arbitrary separation of the human being from the highly interrelated linguistic and social systems of which he or she is an integral part. The self, which both is created by and creates us, is necessarily superordinate to id, ego, and superego, or any other metapsychological structure that encompasses less than the totality of our being.

It has been argued that the self-as-experienced is at the heart of the problem of self; self cannot be grasped as object, but only as immediate subjective experience. Self emerges from processes of organization characteristic of the self-referent, self-organizing abilities of the human brain–mind which generate experiences of separateness, continuity of being, and self-agency. From these experiential invariants, occurring in a relational matrix, “self” emerges in part as the result of the *interpretation* (as a causal theory) that these processes belong to a self-aware, self-directed person.

The Eastern philosophical paradigm contributes greatly to clarity of thought regarding the “problem” of self. It leads to the conclusion, foreign to us in the Western paradigm, that self is an illusory construction, an inference of a reined separate “someone” who experiences our experience. Self may be defined in this framework as the subjective context of experience. Alternatively, we may properly conclude simply that *experience is*.

Psychoanalytic treatment entails many concepts of self both implicitly and explicitly. In a general sense, psychopathology can be understood in terms of dysfunctional self representations, lack of coherent self structure, and the need for expanded subjectivity. One aspect of the basic dysfunction is the tendency, as Roy Schafer puts it (1983), to exclude certain actions from the concept of oneself (and others) as active and responsible beings and, in so doing, to deny responsibility for what gets created in one's universe. To the extent that we are ruled by the selfrepresentation “I am not the master of myself,” we become victims, blind to the process of projection by which, as Joseph Chilton Pearce puts it, “man's mind mirrors a universe that mirrors man's mind” (Pearce, 1971). According to Schafer, psychoanalytic interpretation begins to tell a different story about reality, one which demonstrates the patient's participation in every significant event, including the very action of disclaiming. Paradoxically, on the other hand, patients often exhibit excessive claiming of agency, as, for example, in narcissistic dysfunctions. In its most universal form, excessive claiming of agency may be seen in the human tendency to view life through a filter of egocentricity that makes us seek to dominate events over which we have no control and blame ourselves for the failure to do so. The embedded fantasy of self here is a reified “I” which pits itself against a universe of which it is an inextricable part. This may be contrasted with the Buddhist view that personal agency is an illusion in a universe in which all events are part of a great chain of cause and effect, a universe in which one cannot do other than what one is doing.

From either side of the responsibility paradox, the clear conclusion is that the sharp split between subject and object must be systematically rejected(Schafer, 1983). The shared vision in psychoanalysis and in Buddhism is for self-as-subject to become more empathic with (compassionate toward) self-as-object(Schafer, 1983); in Eastern philosophical terms, to cultivate an unconditional friendliness toward our experience, not because we are necessarily enjoying it, but just because it is what we are experiencing (Welwood, 1983b).

Footnotes

1 Distinctions between different self experiences are pertinent to the major points in this paper and will be discussed further below.

2 While this is a given in the experience of adults in our culture, it is interesting to note that, when asked, children will often localize experience to the stomach or to another part of the body; similarly, the Greeks apparently thought that the heart was the seat of consciousness(Mettler, 1947).

3 A full discussion of the concept of identity is beyond the scope of the present paper. Suffice it to say, however, that a mature and stable sense of identity seems to go along with a well-integrated and cohesive self.

4 It is important to note that the ultimate goals of Eastern philosophy are spiritual rather than psychological, a difference with far-reaching implications beyond the scope of this paper (see for example Welwood [1983a]).

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