Introspection, Empathy, and the Semi-Circle of Mental Health

Heinz Kohut

Twenty-five years ago, I spoke at the twenty-fifth anniversary of our Institute. That celebration contained only two presentations and lasted only one day: half the day was devoted to a paper by Therese Benedek (1960) — on a psychosomatic topic, I believe, discussed by several analysts especially interested in that field. During the other half day I presented my paper (1959) — 'Introspection, empathy, and psychoanalysis'—which was discussed by Rudolph Loewenstein, Helen McLean, Maxwell Gitelson, and Franz Alexander.

In view of the fact that my address today will take off from the point that I had reached then, I will remark briefly on the former occasion. The discussants differed widely in their feelings about my paper: from Alexander's intense, angry, almost violent objections to it, over Loewenstein's severe but respectful critique and Gitelson's middle position to, finally, Helen McLean's warmly expressed acceptance and praise. And yet, as I knew only dimly at that time but as I have come to see ever more clearly since, all the discussants, whether laudatory or disapproving, had fastened on issues that were unrelated to the subject matter of my paper. They all missed the essential, simple and clear scientific message that it contains. I will begin then, today, by spelling out this message once again, hoping that I will succeed in adding further colleagues to the list of those who have come to understand it. And I will then, today, from the secure basis that I established twenty-five years ago, proceed further and take an additional step in a new direction.

After the disappointment I experienced at being faced with a total absence of response to what I had proposed, you might expect that I would go about the task to which I decided to devote the first half of today's presentation with some diffidence. But this is not the case. Both my capacity for dispassionate reflection and my sense of humour have sustained me during the past twenty-five years, and they do sustain me now.

In one of my favourite novels, Tristram Shandy, Laurence Sterne describes an episode which is relevant in the present context. Let me retell it in Sterne's words.

'Twas nothing. —I did not lose two drops of blood by it —... thousands suffer by choice, what I did by accident. —Dr Slop made ten times more of it, than there was occasion 'The chambermaid had left no ******** ***[clearly: chamber pot] under the bed:—cannot you contrive, master, quoth Susannah, lifting up the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up the window seat with the other, —cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to ******** ** *** *******? [Clearly, the last four words are 'out of the window'—the four-lettered first, the decisive verb, I'll leave for you to fill in.]

'I was five years old. —Susannah did not consider that nothing was well-hung in our family, —so slop came the sash down like lightning upon us;—Nothing is left. —cried Susannah, —nothing is left—for me, but to run my country.' My Uncle Toby's house was a much kinder sanctuary: and so Susannah fled to it.' (Vol. V, Chapter XVII, p. 284.)

I must deprive you of all the delightfully presented intervening references to the incident in question—the guilt of Uncle Toby, and of his factotum Trim who had removed the weights and pulleys from the sash windows because Toby needed them for his war games; the father's intensive study of the ritual of circumcision in order to find out whether his son had become a Jew, an Egyptian, a Syrian, or a Phoenician, to name only a few, and the fight between Susannah and the doctor while applying a poultice to Tristram's injured penis—and turn directly to the, for us, pivotal conclusion. Dr Slop (Vol. VI,

This paper is Heinz Kohut's last and was written shortly before his death for presentation as a plenary address at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Chicago Psychoanalytic Society and the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. The paper was edited and presented posthumously in Chicago by his son, Thomas A. Kohut, on 7 November 1981.

Requests for reprints to:
Arnold I. Goldberg M.D.
180 N. Michigan
Chicago
Illinois 60601
(MS. received January 1982)
Copyright © Elizabeth M. Kohut

Chapter XIV. p. 329) had apparently spoken in an exaggerated way about 'Susannah's accident' and, within a week everybody was saying 'That Poor Master Shandy [21 asterisks] entirely.' And in three further days the rumour was established 'That the nursery window had not only [28 asterisks],—but that [21 asterisks], also.' A family council was thereupon held. It concluded with the following pithy dialogue: 'I should shew him publicly, said my Uncle Toby, at the market cross.'—'Twill have no effect, said my father.'

But now, disregarding Tristram's father's opinion that once people have espoused a certain strong belief even the most direct and plain demonstration to the contrary will have no effect, I will expose the central message of my old introspection essay, sound and undamaged in its essence like Tristram's penis after the sash came down, once more in the market place.

What does my 1959 essay discuss, what was its objective? The answer to this question was spelled out in its title. It was to be 'An examination of the relationship between mode of observation and theory.' I did not write about empathy as a psychic activity. I did not write about empathy as associated with any specific emotion such as, in particular, compassion or affection. It may be motivated by, and used in the service of, hostile-destructive aims. I did not write about empathy as associated with intuition. As is the case with extrospection, it may, occasionally, be used seemingly intuitively by experts: that is, via mental processes of observation that identify complex configurations pre-consciously and at great speed. But mostly, certainly in psychoanalysis, empathy is used non-intuitively, ploddingly, if you wish, by trial and error. I did not write about empathy as being always correct and accurate. As is the case with extrospection and external reality, introspection and empathy may misperceive the psychic reality we scrutinize (already on the level of data collection), either because we are guided by erroneous expectations, by misleading theories that distort our perception, or because we are not sufficiently conscientious and rigorous in immersing ourselves for protracted periods in the field of our observation. We must, in other words, be able to tolerate uncertainty and to postpone our closures.

But now, while I could, of course, go on and enlarge the list of the areas that I did not address in my original essay, I will turn from the negative to the positive, from telling you what I did not say in 1959 to what, in fact, I said. I will begin with a general statement. There are, to speak descriptively and implying no value judgment whatever, two roads in science. Let me call them the high road and the low road in science. The high road is the empirical stance—data collection and experience-near theory—vis-à-vis the field that is investigated. The high road is the epistemological stance. It examines the relationship between the data already collected and, especially, the relationship between the experience-near theories that have already been formulated. On the basis of these cognitive manoeuvres, it formulates a broad and comprehensive experience-distant theory. I believe that science needs to proceed on both of these roads. I rebel against a purely speculative stance when theory is built upon theory and the observation of the field is neglected. But I also know that every science must be aware of the experience-distant theories that provide the framework for its experience-near investigations and that it must, from time to time, re-examine the experience-distant theories it has espoused—even those that seem so basic to its outlook that they are hardly considered to be theories anymore. Luckily, there is a voice in us that will tell us, however dimly we may perceive it at first, and however reluctant we may be to acknowledge its message, that the time has come for us to question our basic theories. This voice will, in general, speak to us after we have been, persistently and increasingly, uncomfortable with the pragmatic results that we have been obtaining. It is then that we should move from the low road of pragmatism to the high road of epistemology—only to return to the first in order to test the new theoretical vantage point, that we may now have adopted.

In order to prevent confusion let me stress here that during the first half of today's presentation I will be primarily talking about empathy in the context in which I had used it in my 1959 paper and in which I have continued to use it, until very recently, almost entirely (for exceptions cf. Kohut, 1973a, (1973b). I will, in other words, be talking about empathy in an epistemological context. In this context, as should go without saying, empathy is a value-neutral mode of observation; a mode of observation attuned to the inner life of man, just as extrospection is a mode of observation attuned to the external world.

undertaking, if one keeps in mind that even with regard to this 'low road', that is, with regard to this experience-near approach, we must differentiate between two levels: (a) empathy as an information-gathering activity, and (b) empathy as a powerful emotional bond between people. Before addressing myself, as I did in 1959, to the role of empathy in the most experience-distant, epistemological sense, let me therefore briefly consider the specifics of the examination of empathy in these latter two more experience-near contexts.

As an information-collecting, data-gathering activity, empathy, as I have stressed many times since 1971, can be right or wrong, in the service of compassion or hostility, pursued slowly and ploddingly or 'intuitively', that is, at great speed. In this sense empathy is never by itself supportive or therapeutic. It is, however, a necessary precondition to being successfully supportive and therapeutic. In other words, even if a mother's empathy is correct and accurate, even if her aims are affectionate, it is not her empathy that satisfies her child's selfobject needs. Her actions, her responses to the child will do this. In order, however, to achieve their end properly, these actions and responses have to be guided by correct and accurate empathy. Empathy is thus a precondition for a mother's appropriate functioning as the child's selfobject, it *informs* parental selfobject function vis-à-vis the child, but it is not, by itself, the selfobject function that is needed by the child.

I wish that I could stop my discussion of empathy as a concrete force in human life at this point without having to make one further step which appears to contradict everything that I have said so far, and which exposes me to the suspicion of abandoning scientific sobriety and of entering the land of mysticism or of sentimentality. I assure you that I would like to avoid making this step and that it is not the absence of scientific rigour but submission to it that forces me to tell you that even though everything I have said up to now remains fully valid so long as we evaluate empathy as an instrument of observation and as an informed of supportive, therapeutic and psychoanalytic action (in therapeutic analysis the action is called interpretation). I must now, unfortunately, add that empathy *per se*, the mere presence of empathy, has also a beneficial, in a broad sense, a therapeutic effect—both in the clinical setting and in human life, in general.

Let me first support my claim that the assertion that the presence of empathy *per se* is beneficial is a scientific hypothesis and not an outgrowth of vague sentimentality or mysticism. It is the former because it suggests an explanation for certain observable contents and/or sequences of events in man's psychic life; it is not the latter because it is not the expression of hopes or wishes and/or of an openly espoused or more or less hidden morality.

For the rest, in view of the fact that I am basically dealing today, at least in the first part of my presentation, with experience-distant, epistemological considerations about the interrelationship between empathy as a mode of observation and psychoanalytic theory, I will restrict myself to enumerating a number of concrete examples of the beneficial effect of the mere presence of empathy to which I have referred in my writings. I will first mention my hypothesis that the fear of death and the fear of psychosis are, in many instances, the expression of the fear of the loss of the empathic milieu that in responding to the self keeps it *psychologically* alive. Secondly I will adduce again the experiences of the astronauts when their space capsule seemed out of control, an episode which I described in my correspondence with Professor Erich Heller. Thirdly I will again call attention to the psychologically destructive effect of having

---

1 There is a story about one of the expeditions of our astronauts that has always touched me deeply. You may remember it well enough to spare me the task of checking on the accuracy of my recall concerning the details of the actual event that took place a few years ago. When, during one of the moon shots, a meteorite smashed part of the space capsule and seriously impaired the maneuverability of the craft, the astronauts, after having safely landed back on earth, reported that during the hours of gravest danger they had felt one paramount wish: if they should have to perish, they wanted the capsule containing their bodies, however burned into dust, to return to earth. The greatest horror to them had been the thought that their remains would forever be circling in space, in crazily meaningless trajectories. I can well understand their feelings. And it is reassuring to me to know that these three human beings—they would undoubtedly consider themselves first and foremost as representatives of modern scientific technology—harbored as the expression of their ultimate deepest desire the wish to be symbolically reunited with the earth: the symbol of human meaning, human warmth, human contact, human experience' (Kohut, 1978a).

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

---

faced impersonal, dehumanized 'extermination' experienced by those who survived the Nazi concentration camps—as opposed to the far less psychologically destructive experience of having been exposed to impassioned hate-motivated killing. And I remind you of the artistic renditions of the experience of exposure to the total absence of empathy (mainly by Kafka, as in *Metamorphosis*, but also by O'Neill, as in *Long Day's Journey into Night* [Kohut, 1977, p. 287]; [Kohut, edited by Ornstein, 1978b, II, pp. 680f. p. 743n, pp. 780f, 12/31/2008
and p. 872)). And, finally, I will refer to the significance for self-development of the shift from the sustaining effect of early empathy-informed physical contact between mother and child (that is, contact which occurs without direct, discrete 'responses' on the part of the mother) to the sustaining effect of the mother's empathic response itself (as when the child moves away and, turning around, sees the mother's face expressing pride in the child's achievement). And alternately I will mention that the shift from the sustenance supplied by the analyst's 'understanding' to the sustenance signified by his 'explaining' can be understood as a shift from a lower to a higher form of empathy, analogous to the aforementioned shift in early development.

It is with the foregoing considerations in mind that I will now return to the scientific 'high road', to empathy as a mode of observation, in order to spell out once more the essential content of my original essay on empathy. Specifically, I will give you my reasons for undertaking the epistemological investigation of the analyst's observational stance, for my conclusion that psychoanalysis cannot do anything but employ the introspective-empathic stance, and that it must, therefore, be a psychology, and, finally, for my assessment of the pragmatic consequences that were brought about by the consistent application of the new theory concerning the operationally defined basis on which analysis rests.

What prompted me to undertake an epistemological investigation concerning the quintessence of psychoanalysis? What prompted me, in other words, to undertake a venture in basic theorizing that in general is not to my taste? It was my growing discomfort with the fact that the significance of the quintessential best in psychoanalysis was being increasingly downplayed by modern analysis and that this process was taking place without anyone's seemingly knowing about it or, at least, without anyone's openly acknowledging its very consequential and, in my judgment, deleterious presence. While it is not only legitimate but, of course, even desirable to apply psychoanalysis to biology and social psychology, as I saw already then with reasonable clarity and as I have since then come to see more clearly still, these exports beyond the bounds of the basic rule were not acknowledged as such. Instead it was simply taken for granted that these new developments—I will provide conspicuous examples immediately—were true expansions of analysis itself.

I selected the examples that I will mention now for two reasons. First, having been formulated by outstanding minds and with courageous directness, they are easy to discern. Second, because, so far as I can judge in retrospect, they were the actual triggers that led me from my overall vague discomfort with the developments that analysis had undergone to the decisive scientific action, embodied in my essay of 1959.

The examples that I will adduce are the following three. First and foremost, Franz Alexander's application of psychoanalysis to biology, in particular his explanation of the various medical syndromes that he had selected for depth-psychological investigation via the pivotal concept of the vector of 'the drives'. Secondly, Alexander's application of psychoanalysis to social psychology, in particular his explanation of large sectors of human behaviour via the pivotal concept of man's oral-drive-fuelled inclination toward 'dependence'. And thirdly, Heinz Hartmann's introduction of the pivotal concept of an 'adaptive point of view'—as an expansion of psychoanalysis, I stress, not as an application of psychoanalysis to the field of social psychology.

But now, after sharing with you this personal information about the triggers that prompted me to embark on an inquiry into experience-distant theory, I will attempt to enumerate those factors that justified the 1959 examination on substantial, intrinsically scientific grounds. I am

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

- 398 -

using the word 'substantial' advisedly, because I would like to do what I can to prevent having my 1959 thoughts brushed aside, whether in ridicule or with respect, as being the unnourishing fruit of pedantry or purism (see Kohut, 1980, pp. 477f). Thus, had it been only for the fact that I felt that Alexander's psycho-biology and Alexander's and Hartmann's socio-psychology had introduced concepts into the framework of analysis which, belonging to a different world of scientific discourse, were foreign bodies there and could not be accommodated, I would still have been inclined to welcome these, in and of themselves, valuable and impressive contributions to science. I would not have felt the need to outline the operationally-determined borders of psychoanalysis and thus to define the essence of this science.

If it were not the need for theoretical exactitude and harmony, what was it that in fact impelled me to set out in 1959 on this excursion into epistemology? And what sustained my interest in pursuing my goal, however subordinated to other tasks, since then (see Kohut, 1977, Chapter 7)? I have no doubt that it was the fact that this unacknowledged shift in the quintessentially significant basic stance of the analyst had led not only to changes in theory but also—and this is the substantial issue for me—to a covertly proceeding, gradually increasing distortion of the analyst's perceptions in his function as a researcher in the applied field and, most importantly, in his therapeutic function as a professional practitioner.

Leaving aside for this occasion the by no means second-in-importance responsibility of the psychoanalyst

vis-à-vis such fields as literary criticism, medicine, anthropology, sociology, and, par excellence, political science and history, I will turn directly to the prevalent task of the analyst: the therapeutic analysis. How have the aforementioned foreign bodies in depth psychology—the biologically understood concept of 'drive', the socio-psychologically understood concepts of 'dependence' and 'adaptation'—led, as I think they did, to the decisive shift of the essence of analysis, to an alteration of the analyst's basic stance that is more significant in the long run than external threats, such as that via its absorption by psychiatry, which are openly faced and resisted?

The answer, broadly speaking, is that they have done so by becoming the unacknowledged and unquestioned basis of an unacknowledged and unquestioned value system and of an unacknowledged and unquestioned total view of the essence of man and of the essence of his life. Despite innumerable protestations to the contrary analysis has, under the influence of the aforementioned concepts become less of a science and more of a moral system, and psychoanalysis as therapy has become simultaneously less of a scientific procedure based on the elucidation of dynamic and genetic relationships and more an educational procedure, aiming at predetermined and thus extraneous goals—which, again, are unacknowledged and unquestioned—toward which the patient is led and which, on the basis of an unacknowledged and unquestioned dimension of his transference, the patient tries to reach.

What are these values of traditional psychoanalysis which have been directing the analyst's focus of attention and thus, secondarily, the goals that he pursues, both as researcher and therapist? No one familiar with my writings of recent years can be unacquainted with my answer. It is the fact that knowledge values and independence values have been the leading values of the psychoanalyst, and that they have guided him toward selective perception and selective action within the psychological field in which he has his home. It is not that I object to these values. Indeed, I subscribe to them. Yet, I believe that their unacknowledged influence distorts the depth-psychological scientist's perception and—here the effects are even more palpable—that their unacknowledged presence interferes with the analyst's ability to allow his analysands to develop in accordance with their own nuclear programme and destiny.

I am aware of the hold that the aforementioned ideals have had on Western Man, and, as a deeply-rooted member of Western civilization, I am, myself, strongly influenced by them. I know how difficult it is for us even to be aware of these basic ideals and thus to make them the target of our scrutiny. And, within certain limits, I do indeed not question them. What I do question is their abiding primacy in the hierarchy of Man's values—their primacy at all times and under all conditions. However great their importance for Western Man, they cannot serve as the ultimate guidepost by which the depth-psychological researcher evaluates Man and as the scale on which the depth-psychological therapist marks

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

- 399 -

the goals and measures the degree of success or failure of the psychoanalytic treatment. On the contrary, I hold the view that these two values have prevented us from recognizing the central position of the self and its vicissitudes in Man's psychological make-up and, above all, concerns the man of our time and his era-specifically prevalent psychopathology. They have prevented us, in other words, from acknowledging the significance of the innermost programme of the self, and the importance which the realization or non-realization of its potential has for the individual in deciding whether he feels psychologically ill or whether he feels that he is healthy.

I will not attempt here to support my stance by adducing a series of facts about developments in other sciences that are analogous to those which, in the form of self-psychology, I am advocating for psychoanalysis. I will simply point out that twentieth-century physics, too, has progressed decisively by relegating the relevance of certain constituents of its observational and explanatory framework which up to now had held unlimited sway, such as time, space, and causality, to certain clearly delimited areas. And I also only mention in passing the, for depth-psychology, crucially important point that modern physics has, with regard to certain areas that it investigates, posited a new kind of objectivity, namely a scientific objectivity which includes the subjective.

Instead I have decided that it would be appropriate within the framework of this presentation to share with you a personal factor that may have contributed to my partial failure twenty-five years ago to make it harder for the original discussants of my 'Introspection and empathy' essay to misunderstand my intent. For reasons that I cannot explain I have, so far as I can judge, ever since my childhood been familiar with the relativity of our perceptions of reality and with the relativity of the framework of ordering concepts that shape our observations and explanations. I had always assumed that everybody else shared this knowledge. And when, later in life, during my adolescence, I studied the work of the great classical investigators of human cognition (from Plato to Kant) and talked with my friends about their writings, I was puzzled about the difficulties they seemed to have in understanding them. And the same was true when, much later, I acquired an, at least superficial, acquaintance
with the scientific outlook of modern physics—Einstein’s and, par excellence, that of Planck and Heisenberg. While the intricacies of the application of their outlook were beyond my grasp, it was always easy for me to accept their basic stance almost as a matter of course.

Twenty-five years ago in my paper on 'Introspection, empathy and psychoanalysis' I spelled out the application of this basic stance in the field of depth-psychology—namely that an objective reality is in principle unreachable and that we can only report the results of specific operations. I simply assumed that I shared this basic stance with all of my scientific colleagues and expected that they would, therefore, in their reactions to what I had to say not question the basic stance itself but only reject, approve, or partially reject and approve some of the detailed conclusions that I had drawn from my consistent application of the aforementioned basic principle. I had never seriously considered the fact that I would have to define or defend my 'operationalism', my clearly established knowledge that reality per se, whether extrospective or introspective, is unknowable and that we can only describe what we see within the framework of what we have done to see it.

I have paid dearly for my naive assumption that all my colleagues shared this knowledge of the unknowability—the unknowability in principle—of reality. I was completely unprepared personally for the misunderstanding from the side of my colleagues of the issues—the debatable issues—that I had presented to them. I was completely unprepared for the fact that the only thing discussed was for me a non-issue, hardly in need to be stated at all. Yet, in retrospect, I have come to see that I could probably have done nothing at that time that would have prevented the storm. I have come to see that indeed the gradual explanation and elucidation of my basic stance, as now undertaken by me and by an increasing number of those among my colleagues who do understand it, constitutes a phase of scientific working through that might ultimately facilitate the thoughtful consideration of the changes in theory and practice in psychoanalysis that self-psychology is proposing.

But now, finally, into medias res and to some

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

- 400 -

of the concrete issues which twenty-five years ago prompted me to start on the scientific road that I have been following since. For our present purposes I will concentrate on a single issue: the drive concept in psychoanalysis and its consequences. And I will immediately emphasize once again that it is not the presence of the drive concept per se, not the isolated inconsistency of the intrusion of a vague and insipid biological concept into a marvelous system of psychology that would have spurred me toward scientific action—and the same can be said with regard to my attitude vis-à-vis the concepts of 'dependence', 'autonomy', 'identity', and 'adaptation' imported from social psychology. It was not theoretical inconsistency that prompted my reflections but only my conviction that the drive concept (as well as the aforementioned sociological intruders into depth psychology) has had significant deleterious consequences for psychoanalysis.

Under normal circumstances we do not encounter drives via introspection and empathy. We always experience the not-further-reducible psychological standpoint of a loving self, a lustful self, an assertive self, a hostile-destructive self. When drives achieve experiential primacy, we are dealing with disintegration products: in the realm of Eros, the fragmenting self watching helplessly as it is being replaced by a feverishly intensified pleasure experience, by the ascendancy of a pleasure-giving erogenic zone, and thus of the drive over the self; or, in the realm of Thanatos, the fragmenting self watching helplessly as it is being replaced by a feverishly intensified rage experience, by the ascendancy of a destructive and/or self-destructive orgy, and thus, again, of the drive over the self.

All the foregoing conclusions were stated (or, at least, clearly implied) in my 1959 essay. And I also showed then what the specific deleterious consequences are that forced me to underline the fact that 'the drive' does not belong in a system of psychology. Specifically, I showed the distortions of our psychological perceptions in the area of 'independence', 'dependence', 'free will', and in the area of the set of phenomena we have now come to call selfobject transferences.

And what have I said since then in support of my viewpoint, and what remains to be said today? A good deal, indeed, not only as concerns yesterday and today but, above all, as concerns the tomorrow in which the work begun by my colleagues and me must be continued by a younger generation of self-psychologically informed psychoanalysts.

Again, I am forced to assume that many of you are familiar with my work—even though I know full well that while many may have quickly sampled my writings, there are only a few who have immersed themselves into them by devoting sufficient time and energy to the task to be able to say that they have actually read them. But since I can obviously not repeat here what I have now said in hundreds of pages during the last ten years or more, I will restrict myself to identifying more or less briefly certain important areas on which I cannot focus.
extensively today.

As the first of these I will mention the interrelatedness of drive-psychology, on the one hand, and the hidden morality—courageously-facing-the-truth morality and independence morality—on the other hand, that characterizes traditional analysis. And, secondly, I will remind you of my previous efforts to raise into my colleagues' awareness the view of man, of the essential nature of man, of normal man, as it were, that traditional analysis has espoused: namely, man as an insufficiently and incompletely tamed animal, reluctant to give up his wish to live by the pleasure principle, unable to relinquish his innate destructiveness. Since the second of these two basic characteristics of psychoanalysis will form the starting point of the second major topic of today's presentation, I will, in preparation for the step into new territory that I promised you for today, elaborate my thoughts concerning the view of man that traditional analysis had adopted from the Zeitgeist in which it arose—a view of man to which most analysts subscribe as a matter of course. I will first remind you that we are referring to the concept of man's psychological nature espoused by traditional analysis as the concept of 'Guilty Man', while we designate the corresponding view of self-psychology by the term 'Tragic Man'. I will not discuss these two views of the nature of man again but will only add a comment that, so far as I know, I have not made before. Even though Freud professed the belief that the subject matter of psychoanalysis was homo natura and that the investigation of his inner life should, therefore, be

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

regarded as falling within the domain of the natural sciences, integrated, in particular, as closely as possible, with biology and medicine, the espousal of the quasi-biological concept of drives processed by a neutral apparatus has in fact not led to a biological concept of man. What emerged was not homo natura, a biological unit interacting with its surroundings, but 'Guilty Man', a psychological and moral view of man, a conception of man seen as reluctant to give up his old pleasure aims, however non-adaptive, and thus 'resisting' therapeutic analysis; a conception of man seen as unwilling to allow his aggressive-destructive aims to be tamed, and thus engaging in wars and/or prone to self-destruction (Freud, 1933). Within certain strict limits the explanatory framework of 'Guilty Man' has been very useful. But, unless it is supplemented by, and subordinated to, the self-psychological viewpoint which can put the self experience into the centre of a psychological view of man, the traditional outlook will be misleading. Self-psychology has freed itself from the distorted view of psychological man espoused by traditional analysis because, having accepted the fact that the field-defining observational stance of introspection and empathy is absolute and indeed axiomatic, it does not pose as biology or psychobiology but accepts itself as psychology through and through. Traditional analysis, on the other hand, had to carry the burden imposed on it by its need to make a bow to biology—via the quasi-biological conception of primary drives which are seen as being processed by a mental apparatus. The end result is, as I said before, not homo natura but a distorted psychological view which will be misleading because it considers a frequently encountered set of pathological phenomena as constituting 'normality' and leads thus to a serious misunderstanding of man in the therapeutic setting and of man in the arena of history.

The new step that I will now take, a task of reformulation that I have up to now only alluded to, is the re-evaluation of man's intergenerational relationships and, *par excellence*, the re-evaluation of the depth-psychological matrix in which, in the view of traditional analysis, certain crucial normal developments of childhood are embedded. It is, of course, the Oedipus complex that I will be talking about.

And how does the self-psychological evaluation of the centrality of the intergenerational conflict, in particular in the specific form of the Oedipus complex, compare with that of traditional analysis? In a nutshell: (1) it agrees with the estimate of the near-ubiquity of its occurrence, it agrees that, at least in traces, its presence can very frequently be ascertained. And it also agrees, though its agreement is based on the significant modification that it is only a link, and not the deepest one at that, in a causal chain, that the Oedipus complex is a constituent in a set of causal factors and that it contributes to the *vis a tergo* that results in deleterious action and/or neurotic suffering. (2) Self-psychology, however, disagrees completely with traditional psychoanalysis concerning the *significance* of human intergenerational strife. Specifically, traditional analysis believes that man's essential nature is comprehensively defined when he is seen as 'Guilty Man', as man in hopeless conflict between the drives that spring from the biological bedrock of homo natura and the civilizing influences emanating from the social environment as embodied in the superego. Self-psychology believes that man's essence is defined when seen as a self and that *homo psychologicus* (if you excuse this term that is meant to contrast with *homo natura*) is, on the deepest level, 'Tragic Man', attempting, and never quite succeeding, to realize the programme laid down in his depth during the span of his life.

What stands in the way of the acceptance of our outlook, why can we not convince more of those who have espoused the traditional psychoanalytic outlook that intergenerational strife, mutual killing wishes, pathological
'Oedipus complex' (as distinguished from the normal 'oedipal stage' of development) refers not to the essence of man but, that they are deviations from the normal, however frequently they may occur? Why can't we convince our colleagues that the normal state, however rare in pure form, is a joyfully experienced developmental forward move in childhood, including the step into the oedipal stage, to which the parental generation responds with pride, with self-expanding empathy, with joyful mirroring, to the next generation, thus affirming the younger generation's right to unfold and to be different? We believe, in other words, that in the last analysis we are not dealing with an uninfluential conflict of basic opposing instincts (Thanatos battling Eros) but with, at least potentially remediable, interferences that impinge on normal development.

I will not, as some of you might now expect, talk about 'resistances' to our view. Instead, I would like to turn to a feature of Freud's skills as a promulgator of his ideas, a feature which was deeply rooted in his personality yet which has not been given the attention it deserves. It is his great ability to mythologize the key concepts of his scientific system and thus to plant them firmly, via name and ingrained cultural association, into the minds of the ever-broadening circle of his followers. Although the means by which Freud achieved his historical stature in the history of thought are worthy of psychological investigation, I will not dwell here on the possible genetic roots and dynamic functions of this aspect of Freud's genius but will fasten only on a specific feature of its scientific results: namely, that the critic who wishes to question certain basic views proposed by Freud confronts a task that is vastly more extensive than that aspect of it that requires logical argument and the presentation of supportive clinical evidence. After all is said and done, and however carefully and convincingly the argument may have been presented—after a while Freud's formulation asserts again its old hold on our minds via a deeply-rooted attraction, and the logic and evidence recede.

You realize, of course, that I am raising this issue not in abstracto, but in order to illuminate our difficulty when we attempt to reassess the explanatory power of Freud's concept of 'Guilty Man', his view that man's essential nature is defined with reference to intergenerational strife, above all and in particular, when we attempt to reassess the paradigmatic intergenerational conflict between father and son—in short: the 'Oedipus complex'. How flat do our arguments sound when we assert a textbook normality in analogy to 'normal' anatomy, 'normal' physiology, 'normal' metabolism (a normality so beautifully defined by Daly King [1945] as 'that which functions in accordance with its design') by comparison with Freud's pithy and powerfully evocative terminology. How insipid is the normality of an oedipal stage, joyfully experienced by parent and child, against the dramatic silent background of the Oedipus complex: King Oedipus, the mythologized exalted figure who in Sophocles' tragedy is presented to us as an automaton who inexorably makes step after step to a pre-ordained doom and whose humanness and freedom are confined to the ability to react to his unspeakable pain via word and communicative action.

What instruments does a critic have at his disposal to counteract Freud's magic? Two, I believe: one weaker and one stronger. The weaker one is the attempt to undermine the power of the myth that has supported Freud's concept by analysing it in order to demonstrate not only that it does not support the original theory but that in fact, it supports the new one that is now advanced to supplant the old. This is the rational approach. The stronger one—you must drive out the Devil with Beelzebub, as the saying goes—is to present a dose of counter-magic in order to neutralize and overcome that which supports established rule. I will for the moment postpone the first task, the re-interpretation of the myth, and will turn directly to the second one, which, I will add, has provided me with the undoubtedly puzzling final part of the title of my paper. I will, in other words, now turn to the 'semi-circle of mental health'.

My counter-magic is derived from a story told by Homer. It is not a tragic story in the sense of tragos, the sacrificial he-goat of the Dionysian cult, from which tragedy, as represented by Sophocles, evolved and got its name, but tragic in a human sense, as represented by Euripides—striving, resourceful man, attempting to unfold his innermost self, battling against external and internal obstacles to its unfolding; and warmly committed to the next generation, to the son in whose unfolding and growth he joyfully participates—thus experiencing man's deepest and most central joy, that of being a link in the chain of generations.

Have you guessed by now who the embodiment of my counter magic may be? And have you hit on the solution of the riddle that I posed for you when, in the title that I gave to this paper, I spoke of the 'semi-circle of mental health'? If not, I will no longer keep you in suspense and will tell you the story that will relieve you of uncertainty.

It is, I like to think, the first story concerned with an individual who, although still

surrounded by demi-god heroes, is a modern man. And we can thus, I think, identify with him more easily than with the ritually destroyed victim of Sophocles' tragedy, and can understand him and his human trials and tribulations more easily and reliably than we can King Oedipus, who is propelled toward his doom. It is the story of the first would-be draft evader in literature, the story of Odysseus.

When, as told by Homer, the Greeks began to organize themselves for their Trojan expedition, they drafted all the chieftains to join them with their men, ships and supplies. But Odysseus, ruler of Ithaca, in the prime of young adulthood, with a young wife and a baby son, was anything but enthusiastic about going to war. When the delegates of the Greek states arrived to assess the situation and to compel Odysseus' compliance, he malingered, faking insanity. The emissaries—Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Palamedes—found him ploughing with an ox and an ass yoked together, and flinging salt over his shoulders into the furrows; on his head was a silly, conically shaped hat, as usually worn by Orientals. He pretended not to know his visitors and gave every sign that he had taken leave of his senses. But Palamedes suspected him of trickery. He seized Telemachus, Odysseus' infant son, and flung him in front of Odysseus' advancing plough. Odysseus immediately made a semi-circle with his plough to avoid injuring his son—a move that demonstrated his mental health and made him confess that he had only feigned madness in order to escape going to Troy.

Here then is the solution to the puzzle. It is the semi-circle of Odysseus which, as the semi-circle of mental health, I am holding up against the father murder of Oedipus—non-scientific, perhaps, and emotional in its appeal (and appealing in its simple humanness); but then, so is the appeal of King Oedipus and his complex. The semi-circle of Odysseus' plough proves nothing, of course, but it is a fitting symbol of that joyful awareness of the human self of being temporal, of having an unrolling destiny: a preparatory beginning, a flourishing middle, and a retrospective end; a fitting symbol of the fact that healthy man experiences, and with deepest joy, the next generation as an extension of his own self. It is the primacy of the support for the succeeding generation, therefore, which is normal and human, and not intergenerational strife and mutual wishes to kill and to destroy—however frequently and perhaps even ubiquitously, we may be able to find traces of those pathological disintegration products of which traditional analysis has made us think as a normal developmental phase, a normal experience of the child. It is only when the self of the parent is not a normal, healthy self, cohesive, vigorous, and harmonious, that it will react with competitiveness and seductiveness rather than with pride and affection when the child, at the age of 5, is making an exhilarating move toward a heretofore not achieved degree of assertiveness, generosity, and affection. And it is in response to such a flawed parental self which cannot resonate with the child's experience in empathic identification that the newly constituted assertive-affectionate self of the child disintegrates and that the break-up products of hostility and lust of the Oedipus complex make their appearance.

And now a few words about the re-interpretation of the Oedipus myth that I promised you before. It is a remarkable fact that nobody, as far as I know, has pointed out, at least not in an effective way, a feature of the Oedipus myth which refers to the intergenerational relationship—an aspect of the story which is truly remarkable, especially by comparison with the parallel aspect of the intergenerational story about Odysseus and Telemachus as told us by Homer. It is as if analysts had reversed their usual stance as regards King Oedipus by taking the manifest content—father murder, incest—as the essence, while disregarding clues, in particular genetic clues, that may allow us to see the relationship between parents and son in a different light. Is it not the most significant dynamic-genetic feature of the Oedipus story that Oedipus was a rejected child? Never mind the all-explanatory oracle that served as a convenient vehicle for rationalizing a human failure as obedience to the gods. The fact is that Oedipus was not wanted by his parents and that he was put out into the cold by them. He was abandoned in the wilderness to die. While his appealing-assertive baby self found substitute parents—down deep the sense of his original rejection must have remained. Does our attention to this part of the story not allow us to see King Oedipus 'Oedipus complex' in a different light? And does it not, by stark contrast, illuminate even further, how Odysseus' normal intergenerational response, the semi-circle of his plough, led to a relationship between father and son—I remind you of their shoulder-to-shoulder fight against outside disturbers, thus re-establishing the interrupted intra-familial bond—which, I submit is the true and nuclear essence of humanness. This nuclear essence of man is not a surface phenomenon, not part of a precarious maintained civilized crust of the personality or of a reaction formation. It constitutes the essential
nucleus of the self and the access to it in our patients is often attained only with the greatest difficulty.

But now I will stop. My main message today is the same that I gave twenty-five years ago when I was jarred into action because I saw that the operational mismatch that led to the psychobiological framework of analytic theory, had brought about severe distortions of our perception of man's psychological essence without yet achieving a true integration of analysis with biology and medicine. It was, in particular, Freud's positing of the primacy of the drives that had provided the basis for a specific, incomplete concept of psychological man—Guilty Man, told to be civilized, and unwilling to comply. On the other hand, I felt that the two universes accessible to science are defined operationally via the basic stance of the observer. The sciences which explore the fields that are accessible via extrospection: the physical and biological sciences. And the sciences which explore the fields that are accessible via introspection: psychoanalysis par excellence.

The first part of my paper repeated what I said twenty-five years ago. And I hope that I have now stated my message regarding the basic experience-distant theory of psychoanalysis clearly and intelligibly.

In the second part I re-interpreted the position and significance of an experience-near theory, the theory of the Oedipus complex, in the light of the shift that I advocate—from psycho-biology to psychology, from homo natura to homo psychologicus. And I advanced the claim that the force that impels us to carry out the semi-circle of Odysseus' plough lies at the most central core of our self, while the forces that motivate us towards the deeds of King Oedipus constitute a more superficial layer of the self that covers the core.

Is this conclusion motivated by the falsifying need for an optimistic outlook on man? It is not. Science must be neither optimistic nor pessimistic—it observes and explains. As a depth psychologist I observe regularly that behind the oedipal disturbance lie flawed selfobject responses. And that behind them the primary hope for a normal, self-growth-promoting milieu is still alive. Should, in the future, data become available that demonstrate still deeper layers, we will verify the evidence and change our theory.

What I cannot see changing, however, is the psychological outlook. If such a change were to come about, it would indeed mean that analysis, that depth-psychology has been superseded and a thing of the past. But this possibility need not concern us now. Analysis is in its childhood. Hampered by such misleading medical analogies as the removal of disease instead of the reestablishment of psychological health by the interpretive, empathic responsiveness to its claims, psychoanalysis has hardly yet scratched the surface of the fascinating mystery of man.

And how can analysis return to its nuclear self, move on to fulfill its destiny by realizing its essential programme of action? It can do so only if it can make the decisive developmental step of the full transmuting internalization of the great parental selfobject of its past. If it succeeds in this task, it will be able to do what it must in order to stay alive, to reach its peak before it declines: it must turn from the study of Freud to the study of man.

SUMMARY

Written shortly before his death, Heinz Kohut's last paper opens with a discussion of the paper 'Introspection, empathy, and psychoanalysis', written in 1959, which he presented at the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Meeting of the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis. In his first essay on the role of empathy in psychoanalysis, an essay that according to Kohut provided a foundation for many of his subsequent investigations in the field of depth psychology, he advanced the thesis that the introspective-empathic stance of the observer defines the science of psychoanalysis. The author explains that he was moved to propose this operational

**WARNING!** This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

---

The final section of the paper is devoted to a re-examination of man's intergenerational relationships in light of the shift Kohut advocates from psychobiology to psychology. The Oedipus complex is not to be understood as the end product of the uninfluential conflict of basic opposing instincts but as the result of interferences that impinge on man's development. Acknowledging the mythic power of Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex, the author offers a dose of mythical counter-magic (to which the 'semi-circle of mental health' in the
paper’s title refers) and a re-interpretation of the story of King Oedipus. Kohut believes that the essence of human experience is not to be found in the biologically inevitable conflict between generations but in intergenerational continuity. Access to this essential nucleus of man’s self can best be gained if psychoanalysis shifts from psychobiology to psychology. In this way, Kohut concludes, psychoanalysis can return to its own nuclear self, can realize its own essential programme of action.

REFERENCES
BENEDEK, T. 1960 The organization of the reproductive drive Int. J. Psychoanal. 41:1-15
FREUD, S. 1933 Why war S.E. 22
KOHUT, H. 1973a The future of psychoanalysis Annual Psychoanal. 3:325-340
KOHUT, H. 1973b The psychoanalyst in the community of scholars Annual Psychoanal. 3:341-370
KOHUT, H. 1978a Letter to Eric Heller Critical Inquiry 4 441
WATT, I. 1965 Editor The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Volume 5 Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Editions.

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.

Article Citation [Who Cited This?]

Copyright © 2008, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing.

WARNING! This text is printed for the personal use of the subscriber to PEP Web and is copyright to the Journal in which it originally appeared. It is illegal to copy, distribute or circulate it in any form whatsoever.