THE CROWDED MIRROR:
Heinz Kohut and the Myth of Adult–Infant Love

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Outlining the history of transformations of narcissism and through the clinical material, this contribution puts in dialogue Heinz Kohut's understanding of adult–infant relationality with that of Jean Laplanche. In an effort to evaluate the merits of Kohut's developmental model in metapsychological terms, the author is guided by two aims: to explore the clinical implications of different views on adult–infant relationality, especially as they manifest in the "mirror-hungry personality," and to formulate a psychoanalytic conceptualization of self-love that can effectively challenge the narrow-minded mantras so popular today.

Keywords: narcissism, adult–infant love, self-love, absolute perfection, mirror-hungry personality, enlarged sexuality, Heinz Kohut, Jean Laplanche

It often seems as though hardly a day goes by without a patient telling me they "know" that "self-love" is the goal of therapy. They repeat this "knowledge" confident that therapy represents a belief in the superiority of self-love over "codependence" (Strauss, 2024). Indeed, I often marvel at how easily patients diagnose themselves as suffering from insufficient self-acceptance, as when they explain that their bad romantic choices are caused by weak or undeveloped self-regard. I routinely hear, "I know I'm not supposed to need a girlfriend to feel good about myself," or "I need to love myself before I can let others really love me." I recognize the influence of wellness culture and the pseudoscientific rhetoric of romance and attachment. I consider how, as a psychoanalyst, it would be easy to dismiss this language as a dilution of our principles, to explain that the depth-psychological tradition would not endorse such superficial therapeutic goals.

But even though I could say this, would my saying it be true? What I mean is that although it is easy enough to be derisive toward popular therapeutic culture, is it intellectually honest to disclaim the influence of psychoanalysis on these ideas? I am

Psychoanalytic Review, 112(2), 131–166, 2025
© 2025 N.P.A.P. https://doi.org/10.1521/prev.2025.112.2.131

thinking of Heinz Kohut in particular, and how his radical revision of narcissism challenged psychoanalytic doxa, and the subsequent impact of these views on contemporary culture. After all, it wasn't merely clinicians outside of psychoanalysis whose "client-centered" approaches took a softer tone toward self-centeredness (Kahn & Rachman, 2000; Levine, 1986; Stolorow, 1976; Tobin, 1991), but a vigorous reformulation of narcissism from within psychoanalytic metapsychology that can be said to set the stage for today's attitudes toward self-love. To the extent we want to complicate prevailing social narratives about self-love, we need to better understand our own theoretical contributions to this landscape.

THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF NARCISSISM

We might begin by observing the major shifts that "narcissism" has undergone since Sigmund Freud's paper on the subject. As Elizabeth Lunbeck (2014) shows in her extensive history of this ideological transformation, narcissism went from being a pejorative term referring to people who were stuck at an immature developmental phase (loving themselves instead of other people) to a legitimate description of natural and necessary self-esteem. Inspired by the German psychiatrist, Paul Näcke, who coined the term *Narcismus* in 1899 and defined it as a perversion in which a person treats his own body as a sexual object, Freud (1914) set out to describe the phenomenon of people being infatuated and entirely preoccupied with themselves. Defining it as an "attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated—who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities" (p. 73), Freud set the stage for linking narcissism with pathology, and eventually with homosexuality as well (Kanzer, 1964). As Freud explained it, every infant experiences the all-encompassing love and adoration of his mother. The admiring gaze of the mother while she feeds, bathes, and sustains the infant becomes a template for how the baby learns to appreciate himself, because the mother's love gets gradually internalized as a template for self-love, thus enabling the baby to see himself through his mother's eyes. But while "normal" people eventually transfer this original self-love onto other objects and people in the

outside world—learning to love others in a mature and reciprocal way—the narcissist refuses to relinquish the intoxicating admiration he feels about himself. Like the Greek hero, Narcissus, who preferred his own reflection to everything else, the narcissist remains fixated on loving himself exclusively: Even when he attaches to new people or different relationships, they are only ever props for maintaining and sustaining his all-encompassing self-love.

Where Freud relied on a clear delineation between self-love and object-love and designated as "narcissistic" anyone found "stuck" in an earlier phase of self-love, Kohut challenged this trajectory by normalizing narcissistic needs. Instead of viewing the excessive concern with oneself as a problematic obstacle to mature object-love, Kohut painted a radically alternative portrait of human development in which narcissism was not an unfortunate detour *en route* to loving other people, but a necessary, and perfectly legitimate, dimension of self-development. It was not merely that everyone was narcissistic—Freud himself hypothesized as much—but that narcissism was uniquely instrumental to psychic growth and creativity; not just a "necessary evil," but an instrumental resource for invigorating and fulfilling personal experience (Kohut, 1966, 1984; Ornstein, 1991). As Kohut (1984) saw it, the pathologization of narcissism was no different than the pathologization of homosexuality: Both were part of "a supraordinated moral system in scientific disguise" that burdened psychoanalysis with an "admixture of hidden moral and educational goals" (p. 208). After all, homosexuality was itself routinely explained to be a consequence of pathogenic narcissism; the child's failure to transmute a love of sameness into a love of difference resulted in attraction to an object of the same sex, which, because it was at odds with the biological imperative to reproduce, was classified as a psychological perversion.

Kohut did not himself draw out the link between narcissism and homosexuality, even though homosexuality is a recurring theme in his personal life and his famously autobiographical "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z" (Strozier, 2001). Exploring the links between Kohut's interest in narcissism and homosexuality would require a separate article, but one can hear him tacitly implying that the routine dismissal of narcissism resembled the prejudicial discrimination against sexual "perverts," as when he writes: "there are many

other good lives, including some of the greatest and most fulfilling lives recorded in history, that were not lived by individuals whose psychosexual organization was heterosexual-genital or whose major commitment was to unambivalent object love" (Kohut, 1984, p. 7). What if narcissism was a vital ingredient in creative living, and what if those exhibiting so-called narcissistic behaviors—grandiosity, self-involvement, difficulty relating to others—were not suffering from too much narcissism but from too little (Kohut, 1966, 1977, 1984)? Was it possible that we could no more do without self-love than we could outgrow our need for oxygen (Kohut, 1984), and that incitements to renounce our narcissistic needs were unrealistic, unscientific, moralistic, and dangerous?

Narcissism's transformation from an unquestioned pathology to a normative feature of psychic structure generated fierce controversy, much of it focused on Kohut's deviation from Freud's conflict model, its replacement by a deficit paradigm, and the corresponding changes to analytic technique (Eagle, 1984; Gedo, 1980; Joffe & Sandler, 1968; Kernberg, 1975; Sandler et al., 1991; Wallerstein, 1983). For many psychoanalysts in the 1970s and 1980s, Kohut's reformulation of narcissism as an asset rather than a symptom was hasty, speculative, and naïve, and it risked turning psychoanalysis—as a depth psychology oriented toward fantasy and transference—into a simple-minded variation of Rogerian positive psychology (Tobin, 1991).

Indeed, most major objections to Kohut's paradigm can be said to fall into one of several recurring categories: decrying deficit as a simplistic alternative to Freud's conflict model (Eagle, 1984; Gedo, 1980; Hanly & Masson, 1976; Kernberg, 1984; Klein, 1976; Stein, 1979; Treurniet, 1980, 1983; Wallerstein, 1983); critiquing the infantilization, absence of aggression, and lack of agency in his deficit paradigm (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Kernberg, 1975, 1984; Levine, 1986; Meissner, 1993; Mitchell, 1984; Schafer, 1980; Segel, 1981); or castigating the incoherence of a "hybrid" (Freudian/self-psychological) model (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Slap & Levine, 1978). Kohut (1984) anticipated some of this pushback, frequently observing that people resisted his insights because it was easier to believe (with Freud) that man was not in total control than that man's autonomy was relative. In the last paper delivered before his death, Kohut (1982) suggests that perhaps traditional psychoanalysis rejects his insights because its perceptions are

unwittingly distorted by the "unacknowledged influence" of Western civilization and its values. "I am aware of the hold that the aforementioned ideals have had on Western man," he writes, but whereas he has been able to scrutinize their legitimacy, most psychoanalysts continue to use them as the "ultimate guidepost by which the depth-psychological research evaluates Man" (p. 399).

While Kohut dismissed his critics as insufficiently self-critical, and critics rejected Kohut as simplistic, naïve, and confused, there has been limited focus on how Kohut views the mother–infant relationship, even though interactions at this stage form the metapsychological basis for his ontogeny of narcissism. I am thinking specifically of his early claims that the mother must mirror back to the infant an image of "absolute perfection" (Kohut, 1966, 1971) because such an experience is formative of the development of healthy narcissism. Kohut declares that it is the specific feeling of *being seen as perfect by one's mother* that forms the basis of a "narcissistic libidinal suffusion," such that, when later in development the mother and baby separate, it will be the "gleam in the mother's eye" that offers a substitute for this early idealization (Kohut, 1966, p. 252). Lest it seem like the concept of "absolute perfection" is just a minor moment in the sequence of infant–adult relating, it not only forms the basis for the feeling of being seen as perfect, but also represents what can be missing from infancy and reexperienced in adult treatment. As Kohut understands it, the mother's failure to adequately convey a feeling of the developing infant's "absolute perfection" can leave the adult patient casting about for a feeling of wholeness that they do not know how to obtain.

It is not hard to see the connection between contemporary ideologies of self-love and Kohut's belief in the necessity of narcissism. Consistent with how wellness gurus talk today about one's God-given right to abstain from "toxic relationships" and have romantic relationships that respect appropriate "boundaries," Kohut can be seen as describing a version of infant–adult love in which mirroring the other's "absolute perfection" is a developmental necessity that, if unmet, haunts the adult later on. The individual's putative entitlement to such a relationship—first in infancy, and then in treatment—makes it imperative to wonder how we can understand this state of "absolute perfection" in metapsychological terms. Specifically, what makes "absolute perfection" a necessary component of infantile experience? How can we recognize when this feeling

occurs, or fails to? Moreover, even if we decide that this experience is essential for the infant, how can we be sure that the mother is capable of supplying it, and doing so consistently?

KOHUT MEETS LAPLANCHE

In what follows, I will be approaching this question by putting pressure on Kohut's understanding of mother–infant love through Jean Laplanche's alternative paradigm of mother–infant relationality. Although Laplanche and Kohut hail from radically different psychoanalytic traditions—Kohut being a postwar American psychoanalyst who rebelled against ego psychology, and Laplanche a post-1970s French psychoanalyst who was primarily in conversation with Freud and Jacques Lacan—Laplanche's focus on the "seduction" inherent in the mother–infant relationship offers a compelling and refreshing perspective on Kohut's myth of "absolute perfection." Whereas Kohut describes a mother who idealizes her baby, lavishing a sense of "perfection" on him that he will eventually grow to internalize, Laplanche proposes a model of mother–infant relationality that is "parasited" by the complex dynamics of *enlarged* sexuality. Rather than entirely discounting the possibility of maternal idealization, Laplanche's theory of seduction complicates the romance of "absolute perfection" by helping us see that the mother is always a sexual being, and therefore whatever attunement or admiration she feels is necessarily and inevitably compromised by her own sexuality.

Given that there are so many major categorical differences in their respective models, the goal here is not to compare and contrast Kohut and Laplanche per se. After all, Kohut's self psychology takes the self as its object while Laplanche does not mention the self at all. Moreover, while Kohut saw the expansion and strengthening of the self as the primary goal of psychoanalytic treatment, Laplanche (following Lacan) would have seen the self as an imaginary construct that needs to be weakened and deconstructed before real analytic work can begin. These divergent paradigms are not reconcilable, nor should they be. But in the spirit of our current postpluralistic age where comparative psychoanalysis has an increased relevance and value, we might use Laplanche as a resource for evaluating some of Kohut's most far-reaching

metapsychological claims. This is especially important because, to date, self psychology has primarily been in conversation with infant research (Magid & Shane, 2017; Magid et al., 2021), an encounter that has dramatically transformed Kohut's original paradigm from a "one-person" to a "two-person" psychological model (Magid & Shane, 2017, 2018; Stolorow, 1995).

While the empirical findings of infant researchers are crucial for the development of psychoanalysis, they are not the only source of information about infantile life. As many French analysts have been arguing for decades, psychoanalysis as a science of unconscious life cannot be properly practiced through empirical studies alone (Green, 1995). That is why it is extremely important for laboratory studies not to substitute for rigorous metapsychological and clinical investigation, a point that Laplanche (2011) reiterates in his call for *new foundations for psychoanalysis*.

With this in mind, I will be putting Kohut's model of adult–infant relationality in conversation with Laplanche's radical and alternative paradigm in an effort to evaluate the merits of Kohut's developmental model in metapsychological terms. The aim here is twofold: to explore the clinical implications of different views on adult–infant relationality, especially as they manifest in the "mirror-hungry personality" (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), and to formulate a psychoanalytic conceptualization of self-love that can effectively challenge the narrow-minded mantras so popular today.

NARCISSISM: HEALTHY OR PATHOLOGICAL?

If you were a patient at any time prior to the 1970s, self-love would have been pathologized, and the explicit aim of treatment would have been to identify your latent immaturity and convert it into healthy, wholesome self–other relationships (Gedo, 1980; Joffe & Sandler, 1968; Sandler et al., 1991; Wallerstein, 1983). Specifically, there would have been a clear delineation between self-love on the one hand, and object-love on the other, and anyone found "stuck" in a phase of self-love (instead of object-love) would have been designated as "narcissistic" (Freud, 1914). Today, by contrast, psychologists mostly treat narcissistic behaviors—grandiosity, exhibitionism, fragility, difficulty forming object relational bonds—as symptoms of developmental deficits that

require special analytic tools such as empathy, optimal frustration, and introspection.

The story of how we went from seeing narcissists as unfit for analytic treatment to universalizing narcissism as a normative developmental need has Kohut, the midcentury émigré psychoanalyst, as its central protagonist. "Mr. Psychoanalysis," as he was often called (Strozier, 2001), Kohut began his career as a devoted follower and teacher of Freudian theory. But over time, he found himself struggling to apply classical technique to patients whose needs revolved around their wounded self-esteem instead of their oedipal conflicts. Committed, at least initially, to preserving the centrality of Freud's psychosexual conflict theory, Kohut wondered if there was another line of development that was concerned with the maturity of selfhood.

Explaining his burgeoning conviction that drive theory could not account for "self-disorders" and that a distinctive developmental trajectory would be needed, Kohut (1977) writes: "I would formerly have attributed to a fixation of the drive organization at an early level of development (orality), and to the concomitant chronic infantilism of their ego" but clinical experience "has increasingly taught me that the drive fixation and the widespread ego defects are neither genetically the primary nor dynamic-structurally the most centrally located focus of the psychopathology" (p. 74). What Kohut discovers is that "the mother is not only responding to a drive. She is also responding to the child's forming self" (p. 75). Treating the patient as though his "drives" are dissociable in any meaningful way from the particular quality of his mother's responses mistakenly attributes to the "drive" that which is only a derivative of it. For Kohut this meant that "two complementary approaches were needed: that of a conflict psychology and that of a psychology of the self" (p. 78).

Freud's thinking on narcissism is complex and revolutionary (Sandler et al., 1991), but there was one specific aspect of it that Kohut challenged relentlessly: the idea that narcissism was a "halfway phase" between the infant's autoerotism and object-love. As Freud (1914) saw it, "there comes a time in the development of the individual at which he unifies his sexual instincts (which have hitherto been engaged in auto-erotic activities) in order to obtain a love-object; and he begins by taking himself, his own body, as his love-object, and only subsequently proceeds from this to the choice

of some person other than himself as his object" (p. 611). "This half-way phase," writes Freud, "may perhaps be indispensable normally; but it appears that many people linger unusually long in this condition, and that many of its features are carried over by them into the later stages of their development" (p. 612). Within Freud's psychosexual economy, one way of understanding the problem of narcissism was as the patient "getting stuck" in the "half-way phase" between autoerotism and object-love. Whereas the healthy individual transitioned effectively from taking his genitals as his primary love objects to taking in the other person, the narcissist remained preoccupied with his own body. Crucially, the infant starts out in a state of global undifferentiation from the mother, meaning narcissism is not primary (prior to autoerotism), but a developmental stage that comes after the infant can distinguish between self and the outside world (Etchegoyen, 1991; Ornstein, 1991). Given that the infant begins in an undifferentiated state, narcissism is only a possibility once the body (genitals) become an object. What Kohut consistently rejects is not the movement from autoerotism to object-love, but rather the idea, which he designates a prejudice (smuggled in through "deeply ingrained" Western moralism), that the narcissistic phase is transitory, temporary, merely a "half-way phase" between undifferentiation and mature object-love.

In an important sense, Kohut agrees with Freud about the infant's original undifferentiation, but whereas Freud treats this phase as prior to the ego's formation, Kohut posits that a self is there from the beginning. This is significant because it is the quality of this early undifferentiated experience that affects the infant's narcissistic health. If the state of undifferentiation is experientially neutral for Freud, for Kohut it is anything but neutral. In fact, through the "selfobject" concept, Kohut (1966) will claim that what matters is how the self is treated *before* it was a separate self at all (p. 245). As Kohut writes, "the baby originally experiences the mother and her ministrations not as a you and its actions but within a view of the world in which the I–you differentiation has not yet been established" (p. 245). Indeed, it is precisely because the "I–you differentiation has not yet been established" that the mother can have such a decisive impact on the infant's "virtual" self. Although it is inevitable that the "equilibrium" of this original undifferentiated phase will be "disturbed by the unavoidable shortcomings of maternal care," the infant has recourse to

reestablishing this perfection through (a) "a grandiose and exhibitionistic image of the self," and (b) "giving over the previous perfection to an admired, omnipotent (transitional) self-object" (Kohut, 1971, p. 25).

As Kohut sees it, the infant—for the sake of its own developing narcissism—has a fundamental need to experience the other as an extension of its own grandiose perfection. There is, after all, no meaningful distinction between the self and the other, and therefore the infant's need to experience its own grandiosity is indistinguishable from the need to experience the other as absolutely "perfect." The problem arises, however, if and when the mother cannot do her part to sustain this experiential state, for it is then that the infant is left with a deep and powerful yearning for perfection but without an available or operational outlet.

THE TRAJECTORY OF NARCISSISM IN KOHUT

Arnold Modell (1993) describes Kohut's view as that of a "radical phenomenologist whose theory of the self is, as near as possible, congruent with the subject's self experience" (p. 73). That is, what matters in Kohut's developmental paradigm is how the infant experiences the undifferentiated state, specifically, how its experience of the selfobject affirms a quality of "absolute perfection." While Kohut agrees with Freud about the general outlines of narcissism's trajectory—undifferentiated, to autoerotism, to object-love—he differs sharply from Freud in how he characterizes the undifferentiated state. Whereas Freud, and later Margaret Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman (1975), treated this early state of fusion as merely a psychobiological phase that gradually and independently gave way to differentiation, Kohut invested these exchanges with narcissistic significance.[1] In a metaphor that Kohut (1977) uses repeatedly throughout his work, narcissistic needs are on par with "oxygen" for the developing psyche, which is why

> the child that is to survive psychologically is born into an empathic-response human milieu (of self-objects) just as he is born into an atmosphere that contains an optimal amount of oxygen if he is to survive physically. His nascent self "expects" . . . an empathic environment to be in tune with his

> psychological need-wishes with the same unquestioning certitude as the respiratory apparatus of the newborn infant may be said to "expect" oxygen to be contained in the surrounding atmosphere. (p. 85)

It is for this reason that Kohut's descriptions of early mother–infant relating are filled with vivid accounts of the mother's *joy*, *enthusiasm*, and *affection* for the infant. It is in these emotional responses that Kohut locates the success or failure of narcissistic development.

To substantiate these bold and counterintuitive claims, Kohut introduced the word "selfobject" to refer to how objects that are technically outside the self are nevertheless experienced as functions of the inner self (Kohut, 1971, 1984). Robert Stolorow (1986) notes that "the term *selfobject* does not refer to environmental entities or caregiving agents—that is, to people. Rather, it designates a class of psychological functions pertaining to the maintenance, restoration, and transformation of self-experience" (p. 389). This important clarification underlies how actions committed by the *other* person are actually experienced as *me*, as a "vital, functional component of a patient's self-organization" (p. 389), such that impairments in the selfobject relation spell out impairments in self-organization. Not only is the mother of early infancy functionally and experientially indistinguishable from the infant's experience of self, but something crucial happens as a result of this phase: The infant gradually becomes able to take over the task of nurturing the self, eventually seeing itself the way the early, loving mother did.

Whereas at first, the baby has no meaningful sense of self, no discrete entity that could be separated from its experience of the external world, the mother's constant attentiveness, ministrations, and attunement give the baby shape, teaching him to regulate his own needs, recognize his own emotions, differentiate himself from others around him. It is the mother's capacity to continually see and treat the infant *empathically* that reinforces the experience of oceanic oneness he so desperately needs. The infant needs and craves an experience of original merger with the idealized mother because this is the first step in any maturational trajectory: The infant must idealize the mother and *be idealized in turn* in order to establish a foundation of felt security, cohesion, and regulation. It is

only by getting to have this experience of original selfobject oneness (undisturbed and uninterrupted) that the infant becomes able to form the template for being a loved, desirable, and worthwhile self (Kohut, 1971, 1977). Confirming the role of selfobject responsiveness, Kohut (1977) writes that "it is the experience of this sequence of psychological events via the merger with the empathic omnipotent self-object that sets up the base line from which optimum (non-traumatic, phase-appropriate) failures of the self-object lead, under normal circumstances, to structure building via transmuting internalization" (p. 87). These vivid descriptions of early mother–infant love exemplify the quality of idealization, and in particular how the narcissism the adult requires (to be creative, ambitious, and engaged) originates in feelings from early childhood.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF KOHUT'S MODEL

If in his early writing Kohut delicately tried to balance his criticism of Freud with loyal adherence to classical formulations, by the time *The Restoration of the Self* (1977) is published, Kohut is unambiguous about the divergence of self psychology from classical theory. Moreover, as Kohut's thinking develops, the distinction between self disorders as a discrete class of illnesses, and ordinary suffering begins to fall away so that deficiencies in self-esteem are universalized and applicable across a range of pathogenic symptoms. Indeed, the more clearly Kohut sharpens the differences between classical and self psychology, the more palpable his irritation and indignation at traditional technique and theory become. In "The Two Analyses of Mr. Z" (1979), a case study that compares a classical treatment with a modern self-psychological one in which the patient is Kohut himself (Strozier, 2001; Strozier et al., 2022), Kohut shows just how extensively classical theory fails to meet the needs of patients struggling with narcissistic ailments. Whereas these patients can be easily misunderstood as belligerent, defensive, self-aggrandizing, and demanding, Kohut shows that what underlies their "resistances" are not instinctual or drive-related conflicts but the fragility of their self-cohesion, itself the consequence of inadequate selfobject affirmation and attunement (Goldberg, 1978; Kohut, 1971, 1977). In one of Kohut's clearest explications of the child's needs, he (1977) writes:

> it is not, we will say, the child's wish for food that is the primal psychological configuration. . . we will affirm instead that, from the beginning, the child asserts his need for a food-giving self-object. . . . If this need remains unfulfilled (to a traumatic degree) then the broader psychological configuration—the joyful experience of being a whole, appropriately responded-to-self—disintegrates and the child retreats to a fragment of the larger experiential unit. (p. 81)

As Kohut (1984) sees it, the child's future cohesion totally depends on having had early experience of cohesion, merger, and idealization, which is why it is a category error to accuse patients of "resistance" or conflict when the very continuity of their selfhood is compromised or undeveloped.

Today, the claim that environmental quality impacts self-development may seem intuitive, obvious even, but Kohut was not merely arguing that the outside world can impact the psyche. He argued that our ideology of "normal" growth is wrong, unrealistic, and hampered by moralism. If Freud (1914) saw growth as a demand on the child to replace the "narcissistic perfection of his childhood" with figures outside of himself, like "an ego ideal" (p. 94), Kohut, by contrast, saw growth as the eventual internalization of this narcissistic state. If for Freud the development of ego maturity hinges on the adult's capacity to resist the lure of this "blissful state" (Sandler et al., 1991, p. xiii) because excessive self-love precipitates perversion, Kohut makes the startling (and entirely opposite) claim that the infant's archaic narcissism can only subside once it has been "transmuted" into psychic structure, and it can only be internalized as psychic structure if it has been nourished and protected from the traumas of premature disruption. One of the most significant distinctions from Freud is that the goal is never to redirect or subsume narcissism entirely, but to access one's narcissism for more adaptive purposes, such as creative work and public self-expression (Kohut, 1977; Layton, 1990; Sass, 1988).

Kohut (1972) takes what he calls an "affirmative attitude toward narcissism," seeing it as a singular resource for "mature, adaptive, and culturally valuable attributes" (p. 363). As Ornstein (1991) confirms, "the analyst was no longer to expect (and subtly push) the patient to give up a narcissistic position in favor of object-love. He had to conduct the analysis in such a climate and in such

a manner as to facilitate the transformation of archaic to more mature forms of narcissism" (p. 190). For Kohut, the ideal trajectory of narcissism was not, as Freud saw it, from "self-love" to "object-love" but the transformation from immature forms of narcissism that debilitated creativity to "mature forms of narcissism" that facilitated joy and creativity.

Kohut (1977) writes that

> the successful end of the analysis of narcissistic personality disorders has been reached, when . . . the analysand's formerly enfeebled or fragmented nuclear self—his nuclear ambitions and ideals in cooperation with certain groups of talents and skills—has become sufficiently strengthened and consolidated to be able to function as a more or less self-propelling, self-directed, and self-sustaining unit which provides a central purpose to his personality and gives a sense of meaning to his life. (p. 139)

For Kohut, narcissism is natural, an essential component of early relating. The mother treats the baby as a "virtual self" long before the baby's idiosyncratic personality emerges, lavishing love and adoration on the baby, which the baby, in turn, experiences as a feature of his own absolute perfection. This phase of "absolute perfection" (Kohut 1966, 1971) forms the template of the baby's budding narcissism. In optimal conditions, the baby gradually internalizes the feeling of mother's loving gaze, and this feeling becomes the core of his future narcissism. However, in circumstances where the supply of idealizing love is compromised, either because it is interrupted or qualitatively deficient, the formation of narcissism—of which idealization and loving affirmation are the building blocks—is unable to develop. The result of insufficient narcissism is emptiness where a robust "self" should be (Kohut, 1991), leaving the child debilitated in the realm of self-worth, self-love, and self-esteem (Kohut, 1966, 1971, 1977). Whereas "under favorable circumstances the neutralized forces emanating from the narcissistic self (the narcissistic needs of the personality and its ambitions) become gradually integrated into the web of our ego as healthy enjoyment of our own activities and successes," the consequences of impeded narcissistic development include the experience of shame at being unable "to provide a proper discharge for the exhibitionistic demands of the narcissistic self" (Kohut, 1966, p. 254).

In "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage," Kohut (1972) contrasts his views on aggression with those of Melanie Klein in order to emphasize his radical reformulation of narcissism. Specifically, he shows that whereas Klein treats aggression as a primary instinctual force, inherent to the baby as a biopsychological creature, Kohut instead views rage as fundamentally a "reaction" to the failure of maternal empathy: "Rage and destructiveness . . . are not primary givens, but arise in reaction to the faulty empathic responses of the self-object" (p. x). As he reiterates in his final paper (1982), the force that impels individuals to be protective of their offspring is "the most central core of our self," whereas our violent actions are "a more superficial layer of the self that covers the core" (p. 405). This distinction between rage as primary versus rage as a reaction is crucial to Kohut's paradigm insofar as it shifts the responsibility for healthy narcissism from the adult to the external world (Federn, 1928). In Freud's model, it is the *child* who must make the journey from self-love to object-love. In Kohut's view, it is the *external* world that must effectuate the transformation of idealization into healthy narcissism.

Repeatedly comparing his liberation of narcissism with Freud's scandalous normalization of sexuality, Kohut (1966) argues that our skittish embarrassment about our own self-love, our shame at grandiosity, and our punitive relationship to narcissism are not informed by empirical psychological evidence, but by the "prejudice" imposed upon us by the "improper intrusion of the altruistic value system" (p. 243). Returning to this value-laden "intrusion" again in a more direct and polemical tone, Kohut (1972) writes that the "attitude in certain layers of society toward narcissism resembles Victorian hypocrisy toward sex," by which he means that the manifestations of narcissism are vigorously denied even while "their split-dominance everywhere is obvious" (p. 365). "We should not," Kohut asserts, "deny our ambitions, our wish to dominate, our wish to shine, and our yearning to merge into omnipotent figures, but should instead learn to acknowledge the legitimacy of these narcissistic forces as we have learned to acknowledge the legitimacy of our object-instinctual strivings" (p. 365).

Lest it seem as though Kohut is merely iconoclastic—affirming narcissism simply because Freud denied it—he reiterates that narcissism represents a force for passionate engagement with the world, which we would easily recognize were we not so terrified

of being castigated by "deeply ingrained" Christian norms with their valorization of "altruism" and self-belittling "concern for others" rather than ourselves (Kohut, 1972, p. 364). Indeed, sounding almost Nietzschean in his disdain for the pieties of Western moralism (Kohut, 1972, 1977, 1984), Kohut links self-love with the healthy development of humor, creativity, empathy, and wisdom, arguing that the capacity to obtain genuine pleasure in oneself is a vital developmental achievement (Schwaber, 1983). Although untransformed narcissism makes the individual feel enfeebled, depressed, unmotivated, and brittle, the achievement of loving oneself unapologetically strengthens and expands one's range of feelings and experience. For this reason, the goal of treatment should never be the repudiation or renunciation of early infantile narcissism but the adaptive consolidation of narcissism into one's psychic structure.

READING KOHUT WITH WINNICOTT AND LATER SELF PSYCHOLOGY

Given the extent to which Kohut's paradigm of narcissism relies upon a speculative reconstruction of the infant's experience of "absolute perfection"—in which a particular quality of mother–infant relating serves as the foundational template for future narcissistic development—it is remarkable that so few critical engagements have addressed the metapsychological assumptions undergirding Kohut's views. The claim that early mother–infant relating can be described as a phase of "absolute perfection" assumes that a mother can (a) idealize her baby for long stretches of time, (b) take unconflicted pleasure in her baby's body and company, and (c) is able to sustain a loving and affirmative image of her baby's activities and needs. But while Kohut asserts that, under optimal conditions, a mother should experience her baby this way, nowhere in his oeuvre does he explain *why* he thinks the mother is capable of this relating. In fact, nowhere in his many articulations of this scene does Kohut ever describe the mother as anything but a selfobject whose sole purpose is to provide, as Stolorow (1986) describes it, "a class of psychological *functions* pertaining to the maintenance, restoration, and transformation of self-experience" (p. 389). Stolorow also reminds us, "it is often forgotten by self

psychology's critics and defenders alike that the term *selfobject* does not refer to environmental entities or caregiving agents—that is, to people. Rather, it designates a class of psychological *functions"* (p. 389). What matters about the mother–infant relationship is not the mother as an "agent" or a "person," and certainly not the mother as a particular woman in time, but her "function" in facilitating the baby's self-experience.

Indeed, so identified is the mother with her functionality, that the entire trajectory of narcissism is defined according to the various stages of receiving, internalizing, and solidifying what the mother offers. Kohut (1977) acknowledges that frustrations and intrusions do occur, and he even says that "optimal frustrations" are growth opportunities for the child's budding narcissism. But he still believes in a quality of mother–infant love in which the mother sees the child as representing "absolute perfection." Even though this phase cannot last forever, Kohut does not say that the child needs it any less, but rather that the child goes from feeling that his perfection originates in him to realizing his mother looks at him a certain way.

According to Kohut (1966)

> before psychological separateness has been established, the baby experiences the mother's pleasure in his whole body self, as part of his own psychological equipment. After psychological separation has taken place, the child needs the gleam in the mother's eye in order to maintain the narcissistic libidinal suffusion which now concerns, in their sequence, the leading functions and activities of various maturational phases. (p. 252)

Interestingly, while criticism of Kohut's paradigm has focused extensively on its supposed incoherence, simplicity, and speculativeness, the presumption of an original "absolute perfection" has gone almost entirely unchallenged. I am referring specifically to Kohut's idea that early mother–infant love includes the mother's idealization, which, even if it does not last long enough, is nevertheless powerful enough in its purity to form the template for all future narcissism. This idea is of central importance to Kohut's paradigm because the adult's *later* self-enjoyment is thought to be a replication of the mother's *early* enjoyment of the child. In other words, a centerpiece of Kohut's theory is the belief that every child

needs a certain quality of love and idealization in order to love and idealize itself in adulthood; as Kohut says repeatedly, the child needs *this* kind of love just like the body needs oxygen to breathe. By retroactively observing the qualities that make narcissism a healthy feature of adult creativity, Kohut conjectures that this particular kind of love and admiration has to be introduced at some point in development, and this is where the mother assumes her particular selfobject functions. But Kohut nowhere elaborates on what he thinks makes the mother qualified to provide this peculiar kind of idealizing love. Is it an organic feature of motherhood, or of caretaking generally? Is it equivalent to the hormonal changes a mother undergoes as a result of giving birth, as though her feeling that the baby is "absolute perfection" happens because she is flooded with oxytocin? If pure idealization is like "oxygen" to the baby, is there something about the condition of motherhood that renders mothers uniquely capable of supplying the baby with what he so desperately needs?

In many crucial ways, D. W. Winnicott was engaged with very similar questions. Winnicott's concept of the "primary maternal preoccupation" (1965) was his attempt to explain how the mother went from being a separate individual who was concerned with her own well-being to someone whose self-interest could be suspended and momentarily redirected toward the baby's basic dependencies. For Winnicott, maternal attunement was not necessarily endogenous to women, but it was a natural result of pregnancy and childbirth. "Something would be missing," Winnicott (1965) writes, "if a phrase such as 'maternal instinct' were used in description" because such a formulation emphasizes the biological aspect of the maternal capacity for attunement whereas Winnicott is conceptualizing "these changes in psychological terms" (p. 53). Winnicott is clear that the mother becomes capable of the requisite attunement as a result of changes in her own body and mind, and unless she struggles with "mental ill-health," she should be able to "alter her orientation" and become concerned with the child she is carrying and eventually taking care of. But while Winnicott and Kohut are both concerned with the early mother–infant relationship, there is a crucial difference between the scenarios they describe. Whereas Winnicott describes a mother's general sensitivity and capacity to offer "holding," Kohut is imagining a mother who feels that her baby is "absolute perfection."

These differences may seem inconsequential. Surely a mother who is sensitized to the nuances of her baby's gestures will also be infatuated with his bodily self. But there is an important difference between imagining the mother's state of being (sensitive, holding, attuned) and ascribing particular emotional experiences to her (admiring, idealizing, in love). That is, Kohut is not merely saying that the mother of early childhood passively gazes at the infant while she cares for him, but that she gazes at the infant while *feeling* intense love and admiration. This ascription of powerful emotional experience to the mother may seem compatible with Winnicott's views, but it is distinctive in important ways. Winnicott's concept of "primary maternal preoccupation" can satisfactorily explain how and even why the mother becomes "preoccupied," but it cannot explain the sudden emergence of idealization and admiration. While it is true that Winnicott (1965) describes the mother's capacity to empathize with the infant as born of her identification with him, and while it is possible to imagine that identifying with the infant explains how the mother's own self-idealization could be transferred to the infant, such a route is (a) circuitous, insofar as it requires the mother to draw on her own narcissism in order to bestow it on the infant, and (b) presupposes the universality of narcissistic love.

But does not the same set of conjectures suggest it is possible that deficiencies in the mother's own narcissism would impede her capacity to project pure admiration onto the infant? Moreover, if narcissistic impairments are as widespread as Kohut claims, wouldn't it be extremely rare to find a mother truly capable of feeling (and therefore projecting) the kind of idealizing love the infant needs?

These questions about the viability of idealizing love lead to deeper questions about the role of "absolute perfection" in Kohut's developmental paradigm, specifically, whether the mother is structurally available to provide the kind of love that the infant's budding narcissism requires. I focus on the putative quality of mother–infant relationality—the scene of a mother feeling that her baby represents "absolute perfection."

In his critical assessment of Kohut, Morris Eagle (1984) is among the few readers to single out the uniqueness of this formulation. "What is the evidence," Eagle asks, "that children require the unconditional admiration of their caretakers and that failure

to provide such unconditional admiration has significant developmental consequences of any kind? . . . All these psychoanalytic characterizations of infancy—primary narcissism, omnipotence, and, I would add, absolute perfection—are 'adultomorphic' in that they imply adult standards" (p. 51). As such, they are thus constructed to align early occurrences with Kohut's "idiosyncratic" view of narcissism (Eagle 1984; Gedo, 1980). In other words, Kohut's therapeutic paradigm insists on the patient's need for a reparative infusion of idealizing love because, according to its developmental trajectory, an adult patient requires this if his burgeoning self did not receive enough of it in infancy and childhood. But while self psychology claims that therapy ought to supply something missing from childhood, that reasoning doesn't explain *why* the infant needs such a peculiar quality of love in the first place.

Questions about the plausibility of Kohut's account have mostly been sidestepped by developments in the second-generation (post-Kohutian) self psychology. Intersubjectivity theory and relational self psychology take as their starting point the refutation of Kohut's early assumptions about the baby's passive receptivity. Drawing on the empirical findings of infant research, newer theories in the self-psychological tradition, such as that of Magid et al. (2021), begin by observing that "Kohut's 'baby' was a metaphorical baby, derived not from infant observation but extrapolated from the transference configurations emerging in his consulting room" (p. 12). As a result, Kohut saw his patients as "primarily recipients of, not participants in, the relationship, and it was the presence, absence, or quality of what was received that was crucial. The unidirectionality of provision was inherent in Kohut's one person psychology" (p. 13). Rather than perpetuating this view, developments in self psychology have sought to upgrade Kohut's "one person" model to a "two person" model: Instead of seeing "mirroring as providing the 'gleam in the mother's eye' that encourages the emergence of the child's new capacities," a newer generation of relational self psychologists encourages us to think instead of "the co-creation of those capacities in the crucible of interaction with another subjectivity" (p. 14). This critique of Kohut's views from within self psychology effectively neutralizes one of the most dubious and problematic aspects of Kohut's developmental telos (the myth of "absolute perfection" and consequent necessity of

mirroring). But, while it diversifies the source of idealization (from a one-person "provision" to bidirectional intersubjectivity) it doesn't problematize or in any way challenge Kohut's underlying assumption that healthy narcissism depends on the experience of a mother's idealizing love.

Therefore, while post-Kohutian self psychology concedes that the "gleam in the mother's eye" should not be viewed one-sidedly—as something that the active/attuned mother bestows upon her passive/receptive baby—but as a dynamic and co-constructed process that mother-baby generate together, there is still no explanation for *why* such a quality of adult-infant is necessary and, if so, how it can realistically be obtained. It is hardly a secret that the expectation of idealizing love is harder to come by than Kohut makes it sound. And yet, so far that has not stopped certain major factions of psychoanalytic theory from putting the experience of idealizing love at the center of development and treatment.

This raises some questions: What does it mean to say the baby "needs" something that clinical experience shows us is exceedingly rare (if not nearly impossible) to obtain? On what grounds can we persist in claiming that healthy narcissism *requires* an experience of idealizing love? What is the metapsychological theory that supports these claims?

READING KOHUT THROUGH THE LENS OF LAPLANCHE

If we now turn to Jean Laplanche, it is because his theories of adult–infant relationality are unique in their focus on the complexity of this psychic encounter. As Laplanche (1998, 2011) tells the story, Freud had the radical insight to suggest that the origins of infantile sexuality could be traced to what transpired between the adult and infant during early childhood, but he retracted this view when it seemed to allege that every child was the victim of sexual abuse. Freud moves on to the concept of *unconscious fantasy*, an idea that relocates the source of sexuality from the adult to the child's own mind, thereby relieving the adult of responsibility for "sexualizing" an innocent child. Although by most accounts, psychoanalysis as we know it emerges at the moment Freud turns from reality to fantasy—therein bequeathing the field a rich tradition of turning inward to account for motivation and desire—Laplanche

sees this as a moment when Freud (and the field that follows in his footsteps) "goes astray."

According to Laplanche (2011), whose self-professed "faithful infidelity" to Freud situates him as, at once, the fiercest defender of Freudian psychoanalysis and its most vigorous critic (Ashtor, 2021), "enlarged" sexuality is the fundamental innovation of a genuinely radical "Copernican" revolution (Ashtor, 2021; Laplanche, 1998).

What is enlarged sexuality, and what makes it the centerpiece of a radical psychoanalysis? Laplanche (2011) describes it in the following way:

> 1. A sexuality that absolutely goes beyond genitality, and even beyond sexual difference; 2. A sexuality that is related to fantasy; 3. A sexuality that is extremely mobile as to its aim and object; and 4. [a point on which I myself lay great emphasis] a sexuality that has its own "economic" regime in the Freudian sense of the term, its own principle of functioning, which is not a systematic tendency towards discharge, but a specific tendency towards the increase of tension and the pursuit of excitation. In short, it is a sexuality that exists before or beyond sex or the sexed, and which may perhaps encompass genitality but only under the very specific modality of the phallic. (p. 142)

What makes "enlarged sexuality" so radical is that it undermines the individual's every effort at self-centeredness and self-begetting. As Laplanche (2011) explains, two totally different versions of the story could be told about sexuality: The first—Ptolemaic version—is that the individual's psychic life is dominated by repressed sexual wishes that are endogenous and instinctual by nature. The second—Copernican version—is that the individual's psychic life develops in relation to the unconscious sexuality of his earliest objects and that this "enlarged" sexuality extends beyond genitality or reproduction. The Ptolemaic story locates the genesis of sexuality within each individual, and as such runs into considerable incoherence in its attempt to account for the cause of sexuality's origins. In sharp contrast, the Copernican reformulation claims that in spite of how personal my sexuality feels to me, it actually comes at me, first, from another person. With this categorical distinction firmly in place, Laplanche becomes able to identify what

constitutes the specifically Copernican discovery (the primacy of otherness-in-me) versus what merely seems revolutionary but is in reality yet another iteration of Ptolemaic ideology.

Crucially for Laplanche, the difference between the Ptolemaic and Copernican ideologies hinges on how we understand what happens in the scene of early mother–infant interaction. Laplanche (1998) writes that

> it is the adult who brings the breast, and not the milk, into the foreground—and does so due to her own desire, conscious and above all unconscious. For the breast is not only an organ for feeding children but a sexual organ, something which is *utterly overlooked by Freud and has been since Freud*. Not a single text, not even a single remark of Freud's takes account of the fact that the female breast is excitable, not only in feeding, but simply in the woman's sexual life. (p. 78)

According to Laplanche, we already know the adult is responsible for meeting the infant's attachment needs. What we refuse to acknowledge is that *in meeting those attachment needs*, the adult's own *sexuality is provoked*. In other words, the paradigmatic scene of an infant's helplessness being met by the adult's caretaking totally obscures the fact that adult caretaking, "reciprocal as it may be, is nevertheless parasited by something else, from the beginning" (Laplanche, 2011, p. 103). This "something else" is the adult's sexuality. As Laplanche argues over the course of his extensive oeuvre, the adult's every communication to the infant is parasited by noise arising from her own unconscious mental life; feeding, changing, and playing with the baby are accompanied by a steady stream of "messages" that are unconscious to the adult but communicated as "enigmas" to the infant (Ashtor, 2021; Laplanche, 1998, 2011). The mother is not consciously seducing the infant, but the fact of her communicating enigmatically forces the infant to set about "translating" the meaning of these bewildering communications (Ashtor, 2023).

Moreover, the very fact of attending to the infant's helplessness ensures that the adult's own unconscious will be provoked. Just as there is no such thing as an adult devoid of an unconscious, there is no such thing as an adult–infant interaction without an

unconscious dimension. The inescapability of this scenario enables Laplanche (2011) to claim:

> Seduction is not a relation that is contingent, pathological (even though it can be) and episodic. It is grounded in a situation from which no human being is exempt: the 'fundamental anthropological situation,' as I call it. This fundamental anthropological situation is the adult–*infans* relation. It consists of the *adult*, who has an unconscious that is essentially made up of infantile residues, an unconscious that is perverse in the sense defined in the *Three Essays*; and the *infant*, who is not equipped with any genetic sexual organization of any hormonal activators of sexuality. . . . As we know, infantile sexuality is what is most easily denied and Freud even made this point one of its characteristics: the fact that the adult does not want to see it. Might this be because it derives from the adult himself? (p. 102)

From this perspective, there is no such thing as a mother who provides for the baby's needs *without also assaulting him with her own infantile sexuality*. The structural dynamics of the adult–infant relation guarantee that sexuality will be a part of everything the mother says and does to her infant because to the extent that the caretaking adult is psychologically real, there is no escape from the impact of her sexuality on her, and on the objects of her care.

When we now consider Laplanche's sequence of seduction alongside Kohut's scene of "absolute perfection," we can observe the extent to which Kohut's genealogy of narcissism is incompatible with the structural demands of enlarged sexuality. Not only is the mother in Kohut's paradigm desexualized in the sense that consideration of her sexuality never occurs, but even the impairments that inevitably arise in mother–infant care are typically attributed to her own pathologies, to the manifold and inescapable deficiencies in her narcissistic arsenal, rather than to the conflicts and fantasmatic intrusions of her sexual life. Even when Kohut is empathizing rather than blaming the mother—in many ways he seems intent to steer clear of blaming anyone—it nevertheless remains the case that the totalizing denial of her sexuality deprives her of a complex and dynamic psychic life.

This negation is all the more astonishing given that Kohut's trajectory expects the mother to idealize, admire, and express

infatuation with the baby as a love object without imagining that these feelings (of idealization, admiration, and infatuation) would involve her sexuality. It is as though the mother should perceive the baby's extraordinariness but then dissociate these feelings from her vast repertoire of feelings, needs, and longings, accrued over a lifetime and then triggered by the baby's extraordinariness.

Even if the mother can idealize the baby in the way Kohut suggests, how could her expressions of admiration be separated from the communication of other "enigmatic" messages? Is it really necessary to look for events that interrupt the baby's experience of "absolute perfection" as though they are "external" incidents when the mother's very idealization is never pure or free of sexuality? While correctly intuiting that idealization cannot last forever—the outside world impinges with its own demands—Kohut nevertheless believes that sustained experiences of "absolute perfection" are natural and sufficiently extended to let the baby feel as perfect in the mother's eyes.

Kohut's claim that healthy narcissism requires an early period of "absolute perfection" fails to consider that *the mother who idealizes is a woman with a sexuality too.* Just as the breast is never just a source of nutrition but a source of the woman's own excitation (Laplanche, 1998, 2011), so too, the mother's idealization is never just an environmental function but also of a woman with her own needs, fantasies, and longings. It is not, as Kohut said, only the mother's coldness or aloofness that interrupts her capacity to gaze lovingly into the baby's eyes, but the fact that, even when she lovingly gazes, her gaze is irredeemably and incontrovertibly *sexual* because *she* is incontrovertibly sexual. Therefore, even when she communicates love and admiration, her sexuality "parasites" communications to the baby.

Laplanche's centralization of seduction as the bedrock of adult–infant relationality challenges Kohut's genealogy of narcissism: While Kohut describes a quality of healthy narcissism that is endogenous to early interactions, Laplanche demonstrates a counternarrative in which every communication—including expressions of love and admiration—are freighted and scrambled by the "noise" of an adult mother's infantile sexuality (Ashtor, 2023).

Laplanche's challenge has implications for Kohut's clinical concepts. It no longer seems feasible to claim that treatment should

reestablish a healthy narcissism that was impaired or interrupted in childhood. After all, how can the analyst as selfobject be reasonably expected to model a version of idealizing love that wasn't merely interrupted or deficient but impossible in childhood, and therefore, quite likely, impossible in treatment as well? Once we accept the theorization of mother–infant relationality as riven with the adult's sexuality, we can no longer conceive of the analyst's role as picking up where mothering left off. Or, if we do, the analyst's role is that of a significantly more complex mother than the one Kohut describes.

CLINICAL EXAMPLE: THE "MIRROR-HUNGRY PERSONALITY"

In the decades since Kohut introduced self psychology as an alternative to classical psychoanalysis, extensive critiques have been made that largely focused on the vagueness of empathy, denial of aggression, and implausibility of using a self-psychological model for patients with narcissistic personality structures (Gedo, 1980; Kernberg, 1975; Mitchell, 1984). Many of the critiques have also focused on the undervaluation of ego functions, specifically on how tracing regulatory difficulties to narcissistic deficits misapprehends the ego's role in managing intrapsychic conflict (Gedo, 1980). According to many of these critiques, maintaining regulatory functions is the ego's responsibility; problems that arise in this domain require a defense analysis rather than empathic justification for "narcissistic" symptomatology.

I would like to use a clinical example to explore our approach to patients who convey an intense need to be idealized and idealizing, a type of patient called the "mirror hungry personality."

In an article Kohut coauthored with Ernest Wolf (Kohut & Wolf, 1978), they write that

> mirror-hungry personalities thirst for selfobjects whose confirming and admiring responses will nourish their famished self. They are impelled to display themselves and to evoke the attention of others, trying to counteract, however fleetingly, their inner sense of worthlessness and lack of self-esteem. Some of

> them are able to establish relationships with reliably mirroring others that will sustain them for long periods. But most of them will not be nourished for long, even by genuine accepting responses. Thus, despite their discomfort about their need to display themselves and despite their sometimes severe stage fright and shame they must go on trying to find new selfobjects whose attention and recognition they seek to induce. (p. 421)

Jeff is a man in his late 50s who sought treatment to help him understand his difficulties sustaining romantic relationships. He is a professional musician who played at local bars and clubs, semi-pleased with himself for pursuing his artistic vocation in some form, while also prone to bouts of depression that he wasn't more successful. He is affable, mild-mannered, and responsible, always attentive and respectful, eager to convey that he takes treatment seriously and wants to improve. He complains of being unable to maintain long-term relationships, difficulty being honest with his partners, having a chronic need to ruin whatever positive romantic connections he formed, and a tendency to betray his partners with casual affairs. He has never married or had children, and his longest relationship lasted a year. Extremely intelligent, witty, and amiable, he frequently hypothesized that the reason he struggled so much to find a partner was that he craved the love his mother lavished on him.

The only son of two narcissistically fragile older parents, Jeff describes his early childhood as an extended period of basking in his mother's idealizing gaze. "She was obsessed with me," he says proudly. "She saw me as the perfect man, much better than my father, and she always looked at me as though I was incredible. Actually, she's the same way now. Even when I call her now to tell her something, she laughs in a kind of flirtatious way and tells me that she's amazed at everything I'm doing. She just adored me when I was little, and I think maybe I'm looking for another woman to make me feel that way as well."

When I ask Jeff why he thinks he "needs" to feel this way in romantic relationships, he explains that he feels too insecure otherwise, that these are the only moments when he gets to really feel "whole," "loved," and seen as "special." He worries about whether this is a legitimate expectation—trying to find a woman

who will admire him with the same quality of extreme idealization his mother showed him—but he also tells me that nothing else appeals to him.

I observed this pattern playing itself out in his relationships over several years. Jeff would become attracted to someone, and do whatever he could to win them over, often camouflaging his more authentic feelings in order to seem more endearing. In one relationship, he let his girlfriend believe he was a staunch Republican, so that she would fall in love with him. In another relationship, he pretended to like European soccer in order to impress, and in yet another he found himself disavowing his favorite musicians—again, to please the girlfriend. In all of these relationships, Jeff did not consciously decide to lie about his real feelings; instead, he often found himself unconsciously becoming whomever someone else needed him to be for the duration of their relationship. Invariably, when the relationship ended, the totality of his deceit came crashing down, and he was shocked that he had strayed so far from his real opinions.

When we tried to understand this pattern, he explained that his desperation to impress and seduce a woman often caused him to say and do things he didn't mean. This desperation was, in turn, explained as a survival mechanism he acquired in early childhood in response to a narcissistic father and a loving, idealizing mother. Given his father's volatility and self-centeredness, he depended on his mother to sustain his burgeoning self-esteem, and to this day he looks to women to replenish his endlessly empty sense of self. So far, these relationships have all ended badly. Sometimes, women notice that his feelings are not inauthentic; more frequently, he gets restless and bored with trying to please them and sabotages the relationship prematurely. He complains of being lonely and frustrated at his inability to find someone who will give him what he so desperately needs, and he asks me how he can find someone who will do this for him.

And then one day, Jeff also asks why *I* can't do this for him. He wonders whether I am the right "shrink for the job" because I never make him feel "special" in the way he really needs. When I invite him to talk more about this, he complains that I don't look at him as though he's special. In fact, because he is on the couch, I don't look at him at all. But this is not just a visual or logistical problem (one that could be corrected with him sitting up)

because he feels, from my interpretations and interventions, that I do not admire him the way his mother did when he was younger. I point out his flaws, challenge him, and fail to convey a quality of idealization that makes him feel special and loved. I understand right away that he is complaining that he does not feel the "gleam in the mother's eye," and I can readily see that he is right about this. I *don't* approach him with this quality of maternal affection, and his request makes me feel immediately defensive. Not only do I agree with him that this quality of interpersonal affection is absent from our interactions; I am struck by my resistance to his wanting it from me now.

I wonder: What is my countertransference reaction all about? Why am I reluctant to oblige his request for idealizing love? I notice that I do not agree with his assessment that what is needed in his life is a woman who can look at him the way his mother did, but I feel instantly guilty for having this conviction. Is it based on some objective assessment of the case, or on some personal issue on my part? Am I always this withholding if a patient tells me what they need, or is there something about Jeff, or this moment in the work, or this particular request, that is making me unduly resistant?

In many ways, Jeff resembles the "mirror hungry personality" that Kohut and Wolf (1978) describe: someone who keeps searching for selfobjects to regulate his self-esteem, whether in drugs, alcohol, work, or damaging relationships. It was only if they were able to receive a version of the missing feeling from their treatment that this need could be met, internalized, and finally transformed into permanent psychic structure (Goldberg, 1978; Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1991; Ornstein, 1991; Stolorow, 1986). In other words, the patient is compelled to pursue selfobjects as vital sources of narcissistic sustenance. The only thing therapy can do is help channel this pursuit into a more qualified object (the analyst) with the aim of weaning a patient, eventually. In such a paradigm, Jeff's mirror-hunger is emotionally innocent—not to be viewed as a defense against conflict, but as the expression of a basic emotional need.

We can understand why Kohut felt it necessary to reframe narcissistic needs as emotional needs rather than as defenses against conflict, but with Laplanche in mind it suddenly seems harder to justify the adult's mirror-hunger as merely a wish to restore an experience that existed, in some form, in childhood. According to

Laplanche, *the experience of "absolute perfection" did not exist in childhood either.*

What Laplanche has shown is that an extended experience of feeling perfect always includes "noise" that sends other, potentially contravening, messages. The mother who gazes at her child lovingly, who sees the child in adoring and idealized terms, is also a sexual subject with her own unconscious; her love and adoration automatically includes other, perhaps more vexing, fantasmatic elements. Although the "mirror hungry" adult believes that he is craving selfobjects who will "confirm" and "affirm" his "famished self," what if the craving is not for something that existed, but rather for something elusive he insists he needs? What if the quality of idealizing love that propels the adult's future self-esteem and creativity is, in actuality, the product of illusion and therefore necessarily contingent, precarious, susceptible to fragmentation?

Kohut often makes it seem as though any good-enough mother automatically projects "absolute perfection" onto the infant. The universality of this projection further enables him to claim that, if it is absent or interrupted, the baby's narcissism is compromised, as though absence or interruption is anomalous and "absolute perfection" is the norm. With Laplanche, we see that "absolute perfection" is neither normative nor universal, but just one way of experiencing some of the moments in mother–infant relationality, perhaps itself the result of amplifying one aspect of the adult communication and tuning out the rest as "noise." Reframing mother–infant relationality in terms of seduction and the mother's "enigmatic messages" illustrates the profound complexity of adult communications to the infant. It complexifies the narrative of a mother who transmits pure love and admiration, exposing it for what it is: a myth, and retroprojection of what the adult strives to feel about himself later in life. This is not to say there are no moments of basking in the mother's joy and affirmation. But these moments are themselves constructed out of larger experiences in which the joy and affirmation are laced with something else.

With such a reframing in mind, we might hear the mirror-hungry craving differently—less as a plea to provide something missing than as a claim that the patient is struggling to experience his own "absolute perfection" against the backdrop of other, and incessant, "noise." Maybe the mother is indeed idealizing toward her baby, but her sexuality is saying something else, something

that dilutes or confuses the feeling of "perfection." Maybe the feeling that idealization was disturbed or insufficient means that other features of the mother's mind were overwhelming, and the quality of admiration felt tenuous, or hard to sustain. In any of these versions, the therapeutic goal would not merely be for the therapist to provide the missing sense of affirmation; doing so would foreclose an analytic opportunity to access the fuller recreation of what the patient experienced in relation to the mother. Instead, the analytic work might involve an exploration of what else it felt like to be in relation to the mother; doing so would address not only the putative absence of admiration, but also the presence of unwanted and distressing other messages.

Had I approached Jeff's mirror-hunger as a craving that I *could* fill and keep refilling, our work would have missed the other dimensions of his early experience, namely, how his mother identified her infant son with her charismatic and philandering husband. Her admiration was intermixed with fear (that Jeff would grow up to be like his father), attraction (to Jeff's beauty), and longing (to be idealized and loved). While Jeff remembered his mother as a source of admiration that he needed to have replicated in adult relationships, it was never just admiration that his mother transmitted. What compelled him to seek admiring selfobjects had more to do with his difficulty integrating other facets of his early emotional world; the wish to remain in a state of "absolute perfection" expressed his need to flatten and dismiss an overwhelming scene of maternal sexual complexity. In the relationships he recreated with women, I observed a similar pattern unfold, whereby he would work hard to impress a woman so she would be enamored with him, and then get dejected and terrified when this early admiration admitted more reality. His need to remain in an extended state of idealizing love was a defense against enigmatic signifiers that threatened to overwhelm him.

If seen in this light, my reluctance to satisfy his self-described need for idealizing love may have had something to do with his pattern of seeking affirmation at the expense of more in-depth relating. His desperate need to see an image of "absolute perfection" mirrored back to him in the transference repeated his interpersonal style with the women in his life, in which the most important experience was that they gave him a feeling of being admired and loved. But because so much of his behavior was inauthentic

(calibrated specifically to elicit their admiration by suppressing his own subjective reactions and needs), the "gleam" in their eye was never quite "trustable" either. He sought it out, but not necessarily because he needed something he desperately lacked (although this is how he interpreted it). Rather, he sought it out because the idealization did not satisfy his insecurities. Consciously, Jeff thought that his need for affirmation could be quenched by self-objects who mirrored his "absolute perfection," but unconsciously, he kept recreating scenarios in which this quality of love—even when it *was* felt —was not entirely "trustable." Unconsciously, Jeff was enacting the experience of his mother's gaze, which may have seemed like it was one of idealizing love but was actually filled with distracting and uncomfortable "noise."

The work of treatment was to facilitate his growing access to these fantasies and failed translations. This would not be possible if we believed, with Kohut, that "absolute perfection" was obtainable.

All this is not to say that the sensation of feeling perfect in mother's eyes is purely illusory, nor is it to argue with Kohut's insight that access to self-love can be a tremendous source of confidence, creativity, and joy. But instead of universalizing self-love as a normal part of psychic development, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that "absolute perfection" is an extreme and never the entire story of what the mother feels toward her child. There can be productive uses for the feeling of self-love—Kohut enumerates the vital role it plays in creative and political life—but the fact that it can be a source of confidence and motivation does not mean that everyone must have it, or that having it is not premised on a selective experiencing of mother–infant love.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The critique of "absolute perfection" is not that it is regressive, fixated, or narcissistic, but that it is a categorically false and problematic fantasy of mother–infant relationality. The myth of an "absolute perfection" that is prematurely interrupted misconstrues psychic development. Mother–infant love is not characterized by a natural idealization that is later compromised by the mother's intrapsychic failures. Rather, it is an asymmetrical relation in which the mother's communication of love, gratification, and admiration is

bound up and indissociable from sexuality, from a vast arena of unsymbolized and unmetabolized feelings, fantasies, and needs. Placing "absolute perfection" as the origin point of healthy narcissism simplifies mother–infant relationality, transforming it from a scene of emotional complexity and conflict into a straightforward transaction in which the mother gives the baby the kind of love he needs. The problem with this model is not that mothers fail to idealize their babies, or cannot do it for long enough, but that no mother only loves her baby; love, or idealization, or adoration, is never free of the mother's adult sexuality.

Heinz Kohut's insights into the role of narcissism in healthy development are resonant and useful, showing us that patients who lack sufficient self-esteem and affirmation are vulnerable to psychic fragility and fragmentation. But perhaps the analytic answer is not to restore the affirmation they were deprived of, but to better understand the specific quality of mother–infant care, what was communicated, overwhelming, confusing, or left out. Perhaps the problem is not that a phase of "absolute perfection" was prematurely interrupted, but that it was too "noisy" and scrambled by other feelings that have remained entirely unprocessed. Perhaps the difficulty in forming a coherent self is not contingent, but structural—a consequence of the fact that we are shaped by adults with unconscious lives whose sexuality parasites the dynamics of care.

While it has become popular to equate healing with self-love, the formulation "self-love = security" misses the fact that self-love is always also other-love. We love ourselves the way our mothers loved us, which is inevitably flawed, imperfect, and riven by an adult's fantasy and conflict. Perhaps healing requires changing one's relation to this adult love, finding ways to accept and make room for the fact that we are never only ourselves, but are shaped and cared for by sexual others. Perhaps healing necessitates finding ways to love the other in ourselves; not quite to attain self-love but to understand its limits.

NOTE

1. It is important here to note that infant research mounted a powerful challenge to Freud's and Mahler's characterization of the early undifferentiated state as "normal autism" by demonstrating that infants were prepared from the beginning to make preliminary differentiations between self and non-self.

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