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Reading Kohut Through Husserl

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"As primal ego, I constitute my horizon of transcendental others as cosubjects within the transcendental intersubjectivity which constitutes the world" [Husserl, 1970, p. 184].

Kohut's introduction of the empathic method has been both lauded and critiqued. At once recognized as a significant advance in psychoanalytic clinical technique, the empathic method has also come under fire for ultimately remaining within a one-person model of psychic functioning. In this article, I wish to reexamine Kohut's introduction of the method of empathy as *vicarious introspection* by taking up the seminal 1959 paper in which that term was introduced, and briefly augmenting that paper with some of Kohut's later writing on empathy. My purpose will not be to enter the ongoing debate as to whether empathy, itself, is curative or whether it reengages stalled developmental processes. I will instead concentrate on Kohut's initial presentation of empathy as a method of inquiry, in order to reassess whether claims that his was a one-person psychology hold true; and to better understand what it was that might have been meant by Kohut in his consideration of the objective and scientific use of empathy in the clinical situation. Empathy as an epistemological avenue leading to knowledge of the other, is what I wish to further investigate. Admittedly, I seek to create a retrospective reading of Kohut that may not follow his work chapter and verse, but may find in that work the seeds of what will later flower as postclassical relational theory.

It is clear that Kohut strongly advocated the employment of empathy as a facet of what he termed a scientific endeavor. As a mode of observation, Kohut (1959) did not neglect the fact that this "observational method defines the contents and the limits of the observed field" and later would more firmly locate the analyst within this field (Kohut, 1984, p. 465). Kohut (1979) claimed that it was through this empathic methodology that he was able to "perceive meanings, or the significance of meanings, I had formerly not consciously perceived" (p. 3). But his early use of language concerning fact finding, and truth claims made through the method of vicarious introspection have garnered strong critique for what reads as his definitive grasp of knowledge of others. His method, consisting operationally of putting oneself into the shoes of another through vicarious feeling and subsequent direct reflection on that feeling (i.e., vicarious introspection) has led to the critique that such knowledge is compromised, influenced, shaped and made uncertain by unacknowledged subjective aspects of the analyst's involvement. Thus, mental acts of empathy as vicarious introspection have subsequently been singled out for what appear to some critics to be

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their solipsistic character (e.g., Orange, 1995). By appearing to withdraw from the interactional field, Kohut's proposed methodology of vicarious introspection has seemed to some to be a retreat from the intersubjective encounter.

Emphasizing their own "contextual" approach, Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange (2002, p. 73) draw on an earlier comment by Bacal and Newman (1990,) who observed that "Kohut seemed reluctant to consider his framework a relational or two-person theory, probably because he wanted to preserve its link to the intrapsychic (and thus Cartesian) tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis and to prevent its being characterized as an interpersonal or social psychology" (p.18). During the period of the 1970s and 1980s, when Kohut's self psychology was developing as an alternative to classical theory, it was all the more important to retain its ties to what was then considered mainstream psychoanalytic theory in order to avoid being dismissed in the ways suggested earlier. It is not at all coincidental that post-Kohutian developments in self psychology were both reactions to and creative elaborations of a Kohutian theory of self and other. For instance, Stolorow and his group (2002), came to advocate what they regard as a more thorough going intersubjective position than the one they read Kohut presenting by "abolish[ing] the persisting dichotomies between the intrapsychic and the interpersonal, between one-person and two-person psychologies, by recognizing that the individual and his or her world of personal experience are a subsystem of more encompassing relational or intersubjective suprasystems" (Stolorow, Atwood, and Orange, 2002, p. 73).

But is Kohut's conception of empathy really a one-person conception as has been claimed? And does the knowledge gained from empathy necessarily fail to be objective and scientific as Kohut wished for it to be? In seeking to answer these questions, it will be instructive to consider the work of Edmund Husserl, the phenomenologist whose writings in this area might serve as a foundation for understanding Kohut's phenomenological approach to empathy. I believe that a more radically phenomenological reading of Kohut's project is opened up through a deep consideration of Husserl's approach to intersubjectivity. This reading allays critiques that have been brought to bear on Kohut's view of empathy as a mode of observation, characterizing it as a one-person conception. Thus, I will read Kohut through Husserl, in order to better appreciate Kohut's emphasis on the phenomenal experience of the subjective self in its experience of encounters with others.

This article contains more material exploring Husserl than Kohut because the intention is to view Kohut through a phenomenological lens. No new Kohutian text has been uncovered, and his texts can still be cited in a critique of his assumptions that vicarious empathy yields "objective" data. For this reason, the description of the lens assumes priority. It is by viewing the clinical operation of vicarious introspection through a lens provided by Husserl that the phenomenological character of the empathic data gathering process emerges.

HUSSERL AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF TRANSCENDENTAL INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Husserl's (1970) phenomenology may be divided into two phases. His first phase, clearly more under the sway of German Idealism, and based in the notion of a transcendental subjectivity belonged to a tradition of philosophy that sought after the ultimate foundation of knowledge. In this phase, Husserl indeed was aiming at a transcendental phenomenology that would reveal the Objective, the "in itself" of the world, over and above one's personal representations and understand-

ings. Husserl developed the procedure of the phenomenological epoche in an attempt to "bracket" phenomena from the external world so as to examine them just as they are given to one's own consciousness. Following in the Kantian tradition of transcendental subjectivity, Husserl understood this procedure to reveal the hidden essence of phenomena, only graspable through an interior meditation. But by seeking this "in itself" through introspection, didn't he risk losing the world? For some, such introspection marks a withdrawal, a drawing inward and eschewing of the intersubjective world for the private space of solipsistic mental life. Atwood and Stolorow (1984) write: "The practice of transcendental phenomenology presents a spectacle of thought detached from social life, circling inward upon itself and mistaking a reified symbol of its own solitude for the discovery of its absolute foundation" (p. 13).

It is Husserl's second phase that represents his true phenomenological turn, departing from an epistemic program to investigate the ontological condition of the life-world. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl (1969; see also Russell, 2007) attempts to put our minds at rest, telling us not to judge his new endeavor on the basis of his previous one; telling us not to fear that his method is suffused with solipsism:

> As beginning philosophers we must not let ourselves be frightened by such considerations. Perhaps reduction to the transcendental ego only *seems to* entail a permanently solipsistic science; whereas the *consequential elaboration of this science*, in accordance with this own sense, leads over to a *phenomenology of transcendental intersubjectivity* and, by means of this, to a universal transcendental philosophy. [Husserl, 1960, p. 168, italics added]

Influenced by his disciple, Heidegger, Husserl began to understand human intersubjectivity from the assumption that the individual subject is always already situated within a human community. Departing from a prior, more formally idealistic point of view, present in his first writings, and even found in his most important *Fifth Cartesian Mediation* (Husserl, 1969), Husserl builds a new way of understanding intersubjective experience. Husserl now viewed intersubjectivity as a being with others, and saw our capacity to constitute the world as intimately tied up with our already being in relation to other people.

Husserl (1969) introduces the term *transcendental intersubjectivity*, replacing the notion of the transcendental ego with a recognition that the constituting function of the ego must take place within a community of egos—where else could it take place? He then goes on to make this the grounding for objectivity: "Transcendental intersubjectivity is the absolute and only self-sufficient ontological foundation. Out of it are created the meaning and validity of everything objective, the totality …of objectively real existent entities, but also every ideal world as well" (Husserl, cited in Russell, 2007, p. 168).

Because consciousness is not closed in on itself, but is intersubjectively open (Zahavi, 2001a, b) the intentional structure of perception discloses objects as transcending my own individual consciousness of them in such a way as to imply their presence to a perceptibility by other possible subjects. Such a conception, according to Thompson (2007) is incompatible with any solipsism that would deny the possibility of a plurality of subjects who view the same world as I do. Thus, when I imaginatively transpose myself into your experience, I take on your spatial orientation, I see things as you might from your position in the world, and I gain the perspective of an other. Reading Husserl in this way suggests to philosophers such as Thompson (2007) and to psychoanalysts friendly to phenomenology, that empathy may provide a viewpoint in which one's center of orientation is regarded as one among others; and that this empathic operation is the basis for the

objective perception of the world and objects in that world. In this version of objective knowledge, personal process is at the center of discovery but is not a solipsistic mental operation. For Husserl, and the phenomenologists after him, knowledge and whatever can be known is understood as knowable only by virtue of one's subjectivity. Because it is impossible to know whether this is or is not something that exists independent of subjectivity, i.e., independent of our subjective knowledge of it, phenomenologists suspend judgment about the ontological status of the world, that is, they take no stand regarding the existence or nonexistence of the world independent of subjectivity.

Husserl's transcendental intersubjectivity calls for clarification of how psychoanalysts have conceived of intersubjectivity. In some discussions, intersubjectivity appears as a thematic exchange between two objectively separate individuals, where one is trying to grasp the objectively separate emotions or experiences of the other. By contrast, Husserl, following Heidegger, posited a *shared common world of engagement*. It is into this world we are born, not as isolates, but already as the inheritors of human traditions and experiences that make themselves known to us in the relating to others and the relating to objects. The philosopher, Dan Zahavi (2001b), reads and interprets Husserl to be saying:

> I live in a world which is permeated by references to others, and which others have already furnished with meaning, and I typically understand the world (and myself) through a traditional linguistic conventionality. … Husserl pointed to the fact that there, next to the tendencies originating from other persons, also exist indeterminate general demands made by custom and tradition: 'One' judges thus, 'one' holds the fork in such and such a way, etc. I learn what counts as normal from others—and indeed initially and for the most part from those closest to me, hence from those I grow up with, those who teach me, and those belonging to the most intimate sphere of my life and I thereby participate in a communal tradition, which through a chain of generations stretches back into a dim past. [p. 155]

Husserl is saying that the subject learns, thorough convention and tradition, at the level of his interaction with others who are close to him, such large and small judgments as how to hold a fork and how to judge others. Rather than an isolate, the subject enters the world and constantly remains connected to and among others. Husserl himself writes:

> What I generate from out of myself (primally instituting) is mine. But I am a 'child of the times'; I am a member of a we-community in the broadest sense—a community that has its tradition and that for its part is connected in a novel manner with the generative subjects, the closest and the most distant ancestors. And these have 'influenced' me: I am what I am as an heir.' [Zahavi, 2001b, p. 155]

One sees in this quotation not only that the individual subject is from the start situated within an intersubjective context that is historical by its nature, and partially formed by that context; but also that though our shared engagement in a common world we come to interact with others who are also situated as we are.

This feature is often overlooked in psychoanalytic discussions about empathy or intersubjectivity when interaction between two individuals for instance is discussed free from an appreciation of their situatedness in the context of a we-community (see Reis, 1999, for a critique of contemporary psychoanalytic intersubjective theories that neglect this dimension). In addition to including the already present influence of tradition and human practices, the idea of a we-community also makes central the in common embodied subjectivities of its members. This embodied linking of humans importantly creates a primordial experience of likeness between subjects that

allows us to know each other without having to make the kind of imaginative inferences we normally think of when thinking of employing empathy (see Reis, 2009, for further description of this we-community and its embodied grounding).

As analysts, we know that most often we get what the patient is experiencing by virtue of his words, articulated phantasies, and other embodied expressions of affect, posture, and tone. At times we are wrong, and sometimes we are surprised, but for the most part we really do have a reliable sense of that other person's experience. Mary is sad that her mother passed away; Jack is happy that he won a prize. Mary and Jack's affect and bodily comportment reveal their feeling states in ways that are immediately accessible to the analyst. Further, one might even say that the analyst is attuned to experiences which the patient isn't consciously experiencing, such as Mary's possible relief at her mother's death, or Jack's feeling of guilt regarding his accomplishment. This type of understanding is possible because of a primordial intersubjective openness to the other posited by the phenomenologists. Much of this idea is grounded in the capacity of perception of human bodies. Husserl wrote of a *pairing* or *coupling* that exists between bodies that allows us to get each other in the ways described earlier, prior to any concrete physical meeting of the specific other. As humans, we are born with (one might say "as") an a priori openness to the other and to the world, of which we are also a part. Thus, consciousness for the phenomenologists, is not solipsistically closed in upon itself, it is *intersubjectively open* (Zahavi, 2001a, b) and this openness cannot be reduced to any contingent or factual relation of self and other, for this openness belongs to the very structure of subjectivity in advance of such an encounter (Thompson, 2007).

If we accept that empathy has to do with bodily presence in the world, not as related to specific encounters with others; or through a perception of those others, but prior to such encounters, existing as a cosubjectivity, then how are we to make sense of the introspection that Kohut writes about as an essential feature of his observational method? As I will explicate, Husserl's phenomenology offers an opening into Kohut's work that goes beyond classifying empathy, but makes it clinically useful.

Husserl's consciousness is not closed in on itself. Indeed, to suggest this is to continue to draw a Cartesian distinction between the closed world of the mind and the world one inhabits with others. Husserl, however, was interested in leaving behind the Cartesian legacy of a consciousness positing an already existing world filled with objects. His conception of a *Lebenswelt*, or life-world, emphasized the phenomenal experience of engagement in the world, rather than the static presentation of what simply exists. Rather than conceive of objects as existing distinctly and independently of consciousness, this phenomenological approach assumes a subject situated in the world. As Macann (1993) explains, "If the self is originally an embodied being whose life is therefore manifest in action, the relation to the surrounding world will inevitably assume the form of an interaction" (p. 53).

Husserl's approach has become a foundation for post-Cartesian conceptions of enactive interpersonal relating (see Reis, 2009). One can readily see the contrast of this approach to that of classical psychoanalytic schemes that have emphasized the separation of the observing psychoanalyst from the observed patient. Kohut's (1984) conception of the analyst as a participant-observer situated him or her within the relational field; and, if we understand Kohut to be employing a Husserlian conception of consciousness as intersubjectively open, then we may also say that Kohut's mode of empathy was an intersubjective knowing of the other, a disclosure of the other's experience in a shared life-world.

THE SCIENCE AND OBJECTIVITY OF EMPATHY

How are we to make sense of Kohut's claims that the method of empathy reveals an objectivity about the world or others in that world, and is a scientific mode of investigation? If we view Kohut through a phenomenological lens, then the knowledge of the analyst would be conceived as subjective knowledge, knowable only through, or by virtue of, our subjectivity. Nissim-Sabat (2005) explains that Husserl developed an approach that suspended all judgments regarding the "existence" of the world independent of subjectivity. From Husserl's phenomenological perspective, positivism, as Nissim-Sabat (2005) observes, becomes "irrational precisely in its claim to know what is in principle unknowable—that the world exists independent of subjectivity. The phenomenological attitude is such that one puts out of play this positivist presupposition, as well as any other standpoint that lays claim to know the ultimate ontology of the world" (p. 206).

Nissim-Sabat (2005) points to a key facet of Husserl's phenomenology, which treated the world as phenomenon and not at all mere appearance as contrasted with an alleged underlying, independent reality. Objects in the world are the things themselves as we experience them, not as substitutes or stand-ins for, or mirror images or representations of something else, something more real. This method contrasts with a Kantian empiricism that maintains a subject–object gap between the knowable and the knower. Instead, phenomenology inaugurates a transcendental knowing (Husserl, 1970), creating: "a philosophy which, in opposition to prescientific and scientific objectivism, goes back to knowing subjectivity as the primal locus of all formations of sense and ontic validities [i.e., truths], undertakes to understand the existing world as a structure of sense and validity and in this way seeks to set in motion an essentially new type of scientific attitude and a new type of philosophy" (p. 99).

Extrapolating, we may say that the analyst's knowledge is scientific in just this phenomenological sense, and that its objectivity is based in a Husserlian notion of objectivity as that which is also experienced, or could be experienced, by other subjects. That is to say that our subjective knowledge of the world is an intersubjective knowledge, as it is knowledge accessible to everybody. Zahavi (2001b) writes: "I *experience* objects, events and actions as public, not as private. It is against this background that Husserl introduces the concept of transcendental Intersubjectivity. … By this, Husserl means that the objectivity of the world is constituted intersubjectively and that a clarification of this constitution calls for an examination of my experience of other subjects" (p. 159, italics added).

The Husserlian notion of subjectivity is as already a cosubjectivity. As a subject, one finds oneself already in a community of subjects. This conception, although irreducibly relational, importantly retains the autonomy of the individual ego. That is, the individual, while always among and with others, is not subsumed by some larger field; nor does it exist as an isolated mind. In establishing the subjective foundation of phenomenology Husserl, pace Levinas, relied on the egological starting point as the only conceivable manner by which to have an experience of others.[1] In this position, one's own subjective experiencing creates the ground for the perception of others and the world, rather than inhibiting or obscuring the perception of those things. Merleau-Ponty (1969) clarifies this position: "That everything which exists for me should be mine, and not qualify as a being for me except on condition of being framed in my field, does not

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[1]The egological starting point is something that I have critiqued (e.g., Reis, 2009) and sought to rethink, but which I recognize represents the overwhelmingly predominate approach within psychoanalysis.

prevent the appearance of the other—on the contrary, it makes that appearance possible" (p. 138; see also Reis, 1999). This reading of the phenomenologist's project is entirely consistent with current relational views of the analyst's empathically derived knowledge as a product of personal process (e.g., Stern, 1994).

Within this understanding of what Husserl intended, we may return to Kohut's use of empathy as an objective mode of observation. Reading Kohut through Husserl, we find an analyst phenomenologically situated as a cosubject with his patient, who uses his own subjective reactions as the indication of the experience of others, and from his particular perspective, given his personal and cultural history scientifically comes to know the mind of the other as it is instantiated intersubjectively. Beginning with his 1959 paper, Kohut emphasized process over procedure, and analytic attitude over data. In operation, as opposed to description, this is a process of intersubjective constitution and phenomenological disclosure of the world, rather than detached or withdrawn observation. The analyst's subjectivity enters into this process as an innate aspect of this intersubjective engagement. It may be helpful at this juncture to illustrate that the German word for empathy, *Einfunhlung*, a word that Kohut was no doubt familiar with, having been raised a native speaker of German, is a word belonging to the field of aesthetics. As observed by Klautau and Coelho (2009), empathy is "used to designate a mode of knowledge in which affect plays a central role. In aesthetics, the notion of empathy is related to a form of sensitivity connected to the projection of affective states in objects" (p. 10). These authors observe that it was Ferenczi (1928) who, in speaking about the "elasticity of psychoanalytic technique," postulated that the concept of psychological tact was the equivalent to "the ability to 'feel with' (Einfulung)" (p. 89).

The operation of empathy in this manner is strikingly different from the type of surgical insertion of a foreign probe into another's mind that has been critically described by others. Indeed, by reading Kohut through Husserl, we find a much more relational, rather than classical, Kohut, one based more in the tradition of phenomenology than Cartesianism, and one who takes the objective data of subjective perception to be a function of a transcendental intersubjectivity. This is a very different reading of Kohut than that made by Stolorow et al. (2002), who read him as alienated from this phenomenological foundation:

> It is the contention that the analyst's empathic immersions are objective that is especially saturated with Cartesian assumptions. One isolated mind, the analyst's, enters the subjective world of another isolated mind, the patient's, through the window, as it were. With his or her own psychological world virtually left outside, the analyst gazes directly upon the patient's inner experience with pure and preconceptionless eyes. From our vantage point, this doctrine of immaculate perception entails a denial of the inherently intersubjective nature of analytic understanding, to which the analyst's subjectivity makes an ongoing, unavertable contribution. [p. 75]

This description sounds particularly classical. But what is interesting about Kohut's technique is how he deviated from the classical conception of technique. Kohut (1959) characterized the traditional stance of the analyst to the patient as "the scrutiny by the analyst of a certain kind of behavior of the patient: free association" (p. 462). Freud described this task as one of the patient suspending his intentions (such as seeking relief or a solution to a problem), observing his own stream of consciousness, and reporting without censorship the thoughts in his mind. The analyst, for her or his part, observes the patient's narrative and affect, but by design does not share it. The analyst then scrutinizes the patient's associations for "previously unrecognized distortions" and, in bringing these to the patient's attention, engages in "resistance analysis" (Kohut, 1959, p. 464).

As Lawrence Friedman (1997) observed, this approach rests on "the cardinal concepts of transference, resistance, and objective truth" (p. 30). And in ascribing the capacity for objectivity to the analyst, "We welcome what the patient is revealing, but we think he's revealing it in order to conceal something more important" (p. 30).

By contrast, Kohut (1959) refers to free association, but only as an ancillary tool to the patient's direct introspection.

> Free association and resistance analysis, the principal techniques of psychoanalysis, have freed introspective observation from previously unrecognized distortions (rationalizations). There is, thus, no question that the introduction of free association and resistance analysis (with the resulting acknowledgement of the distorting influences of an active unconscious) specifically determines the value of psychoanalytic observation. The recognition of this value does, however, not contradict the recognition that free association and resistance analysis are yet to be considered as auxiliary instruments, employed in the service of the introspective and empathic method of observation. [p. 464]

The employment of the empathic method as described by Kohut calls for the analyst to imaginatively enter, rather than objectively observe, the patient's subjective experience. According to Kohut (1959): "We see a person who is unusually tall. … Only when we think ourselves into his place, only when we, by vicarious introspection, begin to feel his unusual size as if it were our own and thus revive inner experiences in which we had been unusual or conspicuous, only then begins there for us an appreciation of the meaning that the unusual size may have for this person and only then have we observed a psychological fact" (p. 461).

In contrast to the evaluation of Stolorow et al. (2002), I have suggested that Kohut's subject may be considered akin to the Husserlian subject, not an isolated mind entering another isolated mind, but as an embodied cosubject sharing a common world. Empathy, as used by the Kohutian may then be viewed, not as a perception stripped of subjectivity, but as relying on the very subjectivity of the observer to create the experience of a perception. Rather than turn away from the phenomenologists and toward the hermeneuticists, as Stolorow and his colleagues, for instance, have done, one can find an inherent perspectivism in the later phenomenology of Husserl, which when applied to a reading of Kohut, may open to a very contemporary psychoanalytic mode of observation.

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