

Its majesty – The Self

Meir Kuzari

Summary

The goal of this article is to describe an integrative picture of the self. To achieve this goal one has to deal with number of difficult questions concerning the “self system” – self-concept, self identity, self development, and self functioning.

The central issues discussed are various psychological phenomena depending on dynamics of the self, and consolidation of the self system due to self experiences. The main component of the self system is the expert system on the life problems. Also the danger of the self expansion is accentuated.

self / ego / identity / personality / philosophy of life

Concept of self is situated at the crossroads of many issues. It is situated between idealism and materialism, between biological and psychological point of views, between existence and non existence. The covert is greater than the known. During development of the thought about essence of the self, three important aspects were raised: functional, conceptual and experiential. Experiences provide also a necessary feedback to the self about “ME”. It’s possible to see the emphasis on the functional aspect in the Socratic-Platonic thought that described by the philosopher Karl Popper in the following metaphor:

“...mind as a pilot of a ship body ...” [1]

In the same book appears the citation of the philosopher Emanuel Kant who put emphasis on aspect of the self identity:

“A person is something that is conscious, at different times, of the numerical identity of its self” [1].

Similarly, in the modern period, the psychologist Heinz Kohut defines the self as a physical and mental “...unit, cohesive in space and enduring in time, which is center of initiative and a recipient of impressions” [2]

The psychologist Joseph Lichtenberg who belongs to the school of self-psychology also put the emphasis on functional and experiential aspects of the self. So he has written:

“I define the self as an independent center for initiating, organizing, and integrating...” and “the sense of self arises from experiencing that initiating, organizing, and integrating. Experiencing has an active (agent) and passive (receptor) mode” [3] This “initiating, organizing, and integrating” activity we may ascribe to **ego functioning** of the self.

As concerning the contents of the self-concept, there were raised various ideas during the history of civilization. Different philosophers and psychologists put an emphasis on various motives. So, for example, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer puts the sexual impulse in center of “will to life” [4].

He likened “will to life” to the power of a huge blind man on whose shoulders sits an intellectual judicious dwarf. That means that the “will to life” is unconscious and blind and needs some intellectual guide in reality and with this it sometimes conflicts. Almost one hundred years later the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud described the relations between EGO and ID in a similar metaphor of a judicious rider that rides

Meir Kuzari: Mental Health Community Center, Tel Aviv – Jaffa; Correspondence address: Meir Kuzari; 8 Zliley Hanina, Tel Aviv, Israel, 67530; E-mail: merkuz@gmail.com

on vigorous horse. The concept of the "WILL" as motive power that drives man had evoked a strong echo in after generations. So, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche stressed "will to power", as main motive power. For him it is the "will" of man to go his own authentic way in spite of all difficulties and obstacles, and to be, in his words, "GOD" by himself. This man needs knowledge. Yet in fourth century B.C., philosopher Aristotle described the desire ("will") to knowledge as people's important feature. Maybe it's possible to understand also the "will" to knowledge in the general frame of the "will" to power. Between psychologists, they were Alfred Adler and Heintz Kohut who both recognised "will to power" as the important motive that controls development and behaviour of man. Kohut stressed also the other important motive – "will to recognition". According to his outlook, recognition in the importance of the man's existence is a necessary condition to the healthy development of his self. And Victor Frankl described the search for meaning of life – "will to meaning" [5]. Meaning of life gives to life the direction, taste and vitality. Man finds meaning of life when he finds that his life important to someone or to something that he estimates.

The man as a subject truly needs human objects. There are good reasons for this need, between them need for the nutrient and in security, need for recognition, and need for partnership. In other words there exists "will to relationship". According to this theory, object relations of man define his personality. A disturbance of personality finds and expresses itself in the pathology of object relations.

In the thick foliage of various "wills", the question is asked what is the tree that all wishes grow on it? Yet S. Freud has reflections in this regard. In "THE EGO AND THE ID" [6] he ascribes to EGO the self-preservative instinct and includes it in the cluster of libidinal instincts. Later he upgrades this cluster to the Eros instinct of the combining and the construction compared with instinct of the destruction.

J. Lichtenberg reports that in the psycho-physiological studies of infants were found the five motivational systems: "(1) the need for psychic regulation of physiological requirements, (2) the need for attachment affiliation, (3) the need for exploration and assertion, (4) the need to react

aversively through antagonism or withdrawal, and (5) the need for sensual enjoyment and sexual excitement" [3]. It is important to stress that in each system there exists retribution mechanism of its own kind of pleasure.

In spite of that all living world is involved in the activity of reproduction in order to continue the species, this activity does not provide capacity for individual survival. And still the question is asked whether there is something common in all the kinds of "wills". If we will return to A. Shopenhauer, we will discover that along with accenting the sexual wish, he had written:

"...what will wants is always life" [4]

Here there is a place to expand and to insert a wider content in the concept of human life. Human total existence is not only existence of the body but also and maybe more important existence of the whole self together with all its feelings, memories, goals, beliefs, and values. The man searches for his place in the world, he wants "to be there", put down roots in the world. He wants not only to exist bodily but also to influence the environment and if it's possible also to control his close environment and to belong to the wide environment. In general, we may say that **influencing means existing**. This phenomenon is quite common in Nature. Even in the inorganic world things are not 'indifferent' each to other, but exert the gravitation or electromagnetic fields around. Additionally, people are able to increase their influence on the world and by this to entrench themselves deeply in the world.

Let us relate to the question, how the self is created and developed. Originally we have nuclei of the self. It is known that there is a nucleus of the functional self in the area of the medium brain called PAG (Peri Aqueductal Gray) [7] in the intersection of ways of sensory, emotional and motor information. In this area exists a diagnosis of different affective states and the managing of body reactions accordingly. When the frontal lobe of the Cortex is developed, it takes on itself the responsibility of goal-directed activities. Principally, we may say that the nuclear self includes three constituents – nuclear content, nuclear sensitivity to this content and nuclear activity. With the development all three constituents are enriched. Around this physiological nuclei will be built a large network of contents. At first it includes only inner feelings

of body and feelings of its contacts with the environment. After a while, the person's actions, emotions, decisions, and beliefs are integrated into the self. Accumulated experiences are transformed into values, beliefs and rules. Oedipal experiences are transformed into superego system of values. Early object and self experiences are transformed into introjections and identifications. The person ascribes also to the self certain things and people. The person tries to expand the basis of his control and influence. So it happens that the subjective contents regulate objective activity of the person. Therefore, subjective contents and objective functioning are two stages of the same self. Separation between them, as professor Pinhas Noy [8] suggests, does not reflect accurately enough the deep interaction between the contents and the functioning. But yet we may make a distinction between sense of self and managing **ego function** of the self. As P. Noy marks, S. Freud had used both meanings alternatively for the ego.

The subject becomes the relevant expert on problems of life. In the field of the AI (artificial intelligence) the self would be defined as self-organizing expert system. It deals with energetic control and also with information processing. The self is psycho-physiological creation. It goes and is built. Metaphorically, the self building process is similar to the formation of a pearl inside an oyster or formation of a snowball from several flakes clustered together. But unlike a pearl, a person might discard the wounded parts of the self.

When man obtains the desired goal, he is rewarded by a feeling of pleasure. Additionally to this feeling of the specific pleasure, there is an intense "seeking" experience of excitement which is also retribution by itself.

In general, the subject prefers that others would live according to his values and that others would be partners to him, so that there would be a close relationship between him and the others. People find certain identity with the spouse, with a group of soccer club, with a political party, with a religious group and with a nation. In this way people expand boundaries of self control and self influence and put down deep roots in the world. This phenomenon is familiar also in the behaviour of animals that mark their "own" territory. There are people whose ideological self is more impor-

tant than their bodily existence. A person is liable to sacrifice himself for the sake of "future victory" of the collective self. Wars happened not only on account of territory, but also for sake of the ideological victory (religious or political). In the past Christians and Moslems show mercy to those who converted their religion. Too close merging of a feeble person's self with a group could be dangerous. Man might search for prominence and respect through his ability to mingle with a specific group and to hate whoever does not belong. The other pathological phenomenon is expanse of the self through absorbing other's self into the subject's self. So might happen when the infatuation is not reciprocal. One more example of narcissistic expanse of the self is the case of the King of France, Louis XIVth, who claimed: "France, it is me".

But sometimes there is a process of the withdrawal of the self. It happens, for example, through applying defences to the self. Due to the big importance of the self in the life of the subject, the self defends itself by different manoeuvres in cases when the self is threatened by failure. In the state of psychosis, a person is liable to disown the part of the self and to claim that there inside him exists some cockroach or demon which is responsible for the subject failures. In general, in psychosis there is a defensive attempt to move the border between the self and its environment inward or outward, or to destroy the border altogether. When the defences are ineffectual and when the gap between the ideal self and the daily existence is insufferable and there is no hope of improvement, the subject is liable to commit suicide in order to avoid the pain of the self. In the offensive rage resulting from sudden collapse of deep aspirations of the self, the man might feel as if he loses the control of his life and falls into an abyss. In the situation like this, he is liable to attack the other who is connected circumstantially to his condition and would try to kill the other and to commit suicide.

There is also phenomenon of change of the self. If man changes a profession or changes a state and changes his friends, nothing in this is unusual. By changing of profession it's possible to see also an enrichment of the identity. But if the borderline personality undergoes a complete change in relationship to the other and "forgets" the previous positive emotions, then the other

can not identify the same personality. And if the person in the circumstances that reminds him previous traumas becomes somebody else, like those that suffer from multiple personality disorder, we would be surprised by the flexibility and creativity of the wandering self.

Yet in 1930 S. Freud wrote in "Civilization and its Discontents" [9]:

"Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact. What can be done temporarily by a physiological [i.e. normal] function must also, of course, be liable to be disturbed by pathological processes. Pathology has made us acquainted with a great number of states in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly. There are cases in which parts of a person's own body, even portions of his own mental life – his perceptions, thoughts and feelings – , appear alien to him as not belonging to his ego; there are other cases in which he ascribes to the external world things that clearly originate in his own ego and that ought to be acknowledged by it. Thus even the feeling of our own ego is subject to disturbances and the boundaries of the ego are not constant."

The philosophy of life that defines style of the intertwining of the person in the life constitutes the recognition mark of the personality. A. Schopenhauer said: "By character we mean in general the representation of will at the highest grade of its objectification ..." [4]. It is something that A. Adler called as "style of life". The stability of the man's values and beliefs gives an important contribution to personal identity. Generally we may propose the four clusters of attitudes that characterise a personality: physiological needs and attitudes, subject (object) relations attitudes, sense of self attitudes and ego function attitudes. Subject (object) relations cluster includes such axes as: dominancy-obedience-dependency, belonging-individuality, egocentrism-sociability, basic trust – withdrawnness-paranoid relation, etc. Self sense attitudes include such axes and branches as: self esteem, self-concept, agency, authenticity, identity, vulnerability, etc. The ego function attitudes include such axes and branches as: assimilation-accommodation preferences, skills, persistence, coping techniques, defences, etc. In ad-

dition there are various chained combinations of various attitudes that form the new ones. So, the earlier described "self expansion" trait created by inclination to assimilate the world by the self.

We said previously that the self is similar to Expert System on life problems. This is a special expert system because its rules are based on beliefs how to deal with life problems. Yet before 1975 the American psychiatrist Kenneth Colby had built the computer program Parry that simulated a paranoid character personality [10]. But the human expert system (self) has different emotionally coloured preferences for different values and beliefs and in that it is more flexible than a computer expert system. Some shift in preferences may change the personality. If it will be possible to build such self organising expert system that in its basis will be goals and beliefs that provide its existence together with rewards on the achieving the goals, then it will be possible to talk on a building of an Automatic Self. But before it should be learned how to give the appropriate answer to the aspiration of the human self to find a worthy place in the world for this person, but to restrain too wide expansionism of individual or collective selves.

REFERENCES

1. Popper K, Eccles J. The self and its brain. Berlin, London, New York: Springer-Verlag; 1977.
2. Kohut H. The restoration of the self. Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press; 1977/1990.
3. Lichtenberg JD. Psychoanalysis and motivation. Hillsdale, NJ: The Analytic Press; 1989.
4. Schopenhauer A. The world as will and idea. London: Everyman; 1995.
5. Frankl V. The will to meaning. London: Souvenir Press; 1971.
6. Freud S. The ego and the id. The essentials of psychoanalysis. NY: Penguin Books, Hogarth Press; 1923/1986.
7. Panksepp J. The periconscious substrates of consciousness. Journal of Consciousness Studies. 1995, 5(5–6): 566–582.
8. Noy P. What is it 'the self' psychology of the self. Sihot-Dialogue. 1995, 9(2).
9. Freud S. Civilization and its discontents. New York and London: Standard Ed., 21. 1930/1963.
10. Colby KM. Artificial paranoia. New York: Pergamon; 1975.