SELF: A LIVING VIBRANCY

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William S. Schmidt, Ph.D. teaches in the Department of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University, Chicago, IL 60626. His article printed here offers a tightly written summary of major issues in the construction of a self including structural-process, fluidity-stability, subjective-objective polarities. The material stands by itself. However, the extent of Schmidt’s contribution is best understood and appreciated by reading his forthcoming book from The Edwin Mellen Press titled The Development of the Notion of Self: Understanding the Complexity of Human Interiority. The present article is a variation on the last, integrative chapter of the book.

ABSTRACT

This study offers a construct for self which honors both structural and process realities. In recognizing both fluidity and stability as characteristics of self both the subjective and objective contributors toward self-construction and self-maintenance are acknowledged. The study concludes by offering an ontological prescription of the fulfillment sought by self.

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Among the most persistent dilemmas which has perplexed the Western intellectual tradition has been the problem of the self. Efforts at classifying its operations range from the extremes of objectification (Behaviorism, Transcendentalism, Object Idealism), to extremes of subjectivism (Romanticism, Mysticism, Subjective Idealism, Analytic Psychology), to name but a few.

The objectivist paradigms conclude that self is essentially unknowable or that it is a static, otherworldly entity. This denies self the possibility of movement, development, or completion. The subjectivist options on the other hand may well grant self a living vibrancy by linking self with an abiding, eternal organicity, but in so doing project self into a permanent unity with itself. In both instances, however, our efforts at deeper understanding become thwarted.

The objectivist paradigms grant us no access to the self’s operations either because there is no such thing as self (William Hume), or because self (as soul) is placed in the domain of an utterly transcendent Deity (Immanuel Kant). Similarly, highly subjectivist paradigms frustrate our efforts at tracking the living dynamism of self largely because of their ahistorical tendencies. Any option which disconnects self from life, experience, and relatedness is doomed and will offer us nothing beyond an artificially imposed unity to its life.

There would likely be few who would challenge a commitment to a depth and dynamic complexity to human identity and human interiority. But it is not enough to insist that self reveal both structure and movement, however sophisticated our models for such a construct might become. An unbroken bond must be demonstrated between the self’s structure and its movement, or better said, its structural integrity can only be made visible in its movement. The task which I have set for myself is to propose a formula for self which reveals its living vibrancy. Furthermore, I intend to demonstrate that these self-propositions require a viable grounding, an ontology, which gives self its sustaining energy and persistent validation.

As I begin this task I will offer a working definition of self, not exhaustive, but one which contains its determining elements. While maintaining a commitment to its abiding fluidity, I nevertheless intend to demonstrate self’s structural integrity, one which is not separable from the energies which drive the life of self. Finally, I intend to demonstrate how the phases of the life of self reveal its yearning for connectedness, the linkages without which self cannot exist, the fulfillment without which it cannot live.

The Self Defined

No simple definition can claim to capture a reality as encompassing as self. The very demand for definition implies that it might be possible to tease out its “objective” qualities, to discover a residue of its noun-like characteristics. Such an effort is futile. Since self is not an object or thing no static
descriptions will do. However, this does not mean one must remain mute. Since it is essential to name the patterns of movement of self I offer the following working definition:

The self is the eternal desire to be known. As a center of initiative self engages its world and verifies itself therein. In coming to itself through otherness it seeks itself as self, the source and goal of its becoming.

Immediately, thorny questions come to mind. Is this self one or is it many? Is it momentary or abiding in time? Is self marked by energies of possession or by letting go? Is this self ever at rest and can it ever hope to find itself? While these questions will find answer in due course, a brief unpacking of this definition is in order.

Selfhood cannot be understood apart from the hunger which drives its life.¹ This appetite is not simply a devouring of otherness for the sake of self-maintenance, although it may come in this form, but an engagement which brings self to itself. Since self is never constructed once-for-all, its moment-to-moment reconstellation demands that its seeking be ever-present.

But a seeking of what? Any talk of self’s seeking its essential core is futile and misguided. There is no eternal core to selfhood since this would violate the fundamental principle of the self’s abiding fluidity. Rather, the self seeks itself not because it is outside of itself, but because its inwardness seeks to manifest itself, to become known. This is no reified substantiality in which its nature is simply assumed, externalized and objectified. To be sure, aspects of self can be so observed and “captured” much like a still photograph can be said to capture a moment of dramatic action. But to equate a snap-shot with the lived experience of self is unthinkable. A realized subjectivity must do just that, realize itself in its moment-to-moment gathering-up of itself.

Self, then, is a process of becoming which requires otherness to come to itself. In going out of itself it finds what is other to it. In being found it finds itself thereby gaining its constituent nature. If self is constructed through otherness, how can it be said that self finds itself? Is its nature inherent to it and only confirmed by otherness, or is its nature realized as it encounters otherness?

If the primary principles of (1) eternal movement and (2) inherent relatedness, are trustworthy, then my answer must lean toward the latter. While there is an intactness to self, this so-called stability is only realized in the moment. As self moves from moment to moment it takes-in otherness and in so doing shapes itself into being, only to reconstitute itself anew—even as it carries its prior moments within it.

But how can it be said that self seeks itself as source and goal of its becoming if its constituent nature is shaped by otherness? My preliminary answer centers upon the factors of process and content.

The self seeks itself as living movement, to know itself in its sheer vibrancy. These patterns of movement called self have a particular content which are determined by the objects of its life. The “river” of self is filled with its object history which both binds it to its past and opens it to its future. I find my self when I embrace both the internal seeker and the otherness which has been found, or more accurately said, that which has found me.

The Structure of Self

Throughout the Western tradition it has been generally assumed that self is structured along so-called bi-polar lines. Whether understood as a simple subject-object dichotomy or in various forms of ego-environment polarization, self has been presented as a duality. Agreement, however, abruptly ends here.

As Catherine Keller so ably reveals, the subject-object structuring of selfhood has generally been envisioned in dualistic terms, a subject in oppositional polarity with object.² I am convinced that a self structured along polar lines only is condemned to fragmentation and truncated selfhood. The principle of relatedness and engagement becomes diminished the more polarized the constituting elements become.

Another possibility with a far more enduring potential to “carry” the movements of self is to envision its structural elements as dyads. As dyads the organizing centers of self are in a continuing relationship in which they interact with each other. Only a structure which allows for reciprocal influence can hope to carry the multifarious nature of self.

There are various dyadic arrangements which may require inclusion in any comprehensive model of self. Although limited by dualist presuppositions, the ancient matter—spirit
dichotomy may require incorporation into any self-structure. The Biblical reformation of these themes into the flesh-spirit dynamism representing factors of constriction and expansiveness, deserve recognition in any structure of self. Kierkegaard’s polarities called (1) possibility-necessity; (2) finitude-infinitude; and (3) temporal-eternal represent another effort at naming the dual themes of openness and restriction which frame the life of self. Other structural possibilities include the dyadic relationship between intimacy and separation as presented by 20th century Ego Psychology, as well as the bi-polar elements Self psychology calls ambition and ideal. Other possibilities include the wide range of archtypal dyads found in Jungian thought.

I therefore propose the following dyads as vital structural units within which the life of self moves: (1) singular and multiple; (2) validated and validating; (3) open and closed; (4) intimate and separate.

The tone of these dyads reveals a departure from static structural terms implying solidity and firmness toward fluidity. This is intentional. The verb-like quality of self cannot be approximated if one seeks fixed barriers upon which the characteristics of self can be hung. The dynamism of self demands that its structural integrity not contradict its inherent principle of freedom.

Self as Singular and Multiple

To have structure has traditionally meant a fixed and abiding essence, an unchangeable core to personhood which guarantees the self’s identity. This option must be discarded. In its place I am proposing a structural meaning which allows us to acknowledge the self’s stability over time, its consistency, while in the midst of its ever-present changeableness. Structure, then, has to do with a self’s particular organization as it goes about its life. By naming four dyads as the structural framework of self, I am suggesting that these elements constitute the primary themes defining the life of self.

Theories of abiding/static selfhood rely upon the solitary oneness of self as the means of maintaining the self’s identity over time. Such a self needs nothing to sustain it since its stability is guaranteed. Early challenges to stasis (such as Mysticism and Romanticism) which insist upon movement for self, fall short because self remains closed within its self-contained operations. As experience-near paradigms emerged with the onset of subjective Idealism (Hegel), selfhood was released from its solitary confinement. A subject-object linkage from henceforth became the sine qua non of self.

If self can no longer be affirmed through solitary oneness is it only at the mercy of its object-determiners? As recent developments in psychoanalytic theory have demonstrated, selfhood is first “carried” within states of merged oneness. The selfobject construct has emerged as the most helpful vehicle for naming the infusion of object material as self metabolizes itself into being. The particular developmental station where self happens to find itself will significantly determine the ratio of differentiation - fusion lived-out by self. However, even states of the highest autonomy or so-called singularity cannot be confused with solipsistic self-sufficiency. No self is an island as the well-known phrase declares! The selfobject matrix is operative throughout the life of any self. The more differentiated a self becomes, i.e. the more it owns its singularity, the greater will be its honoring of all the actual entities which are part of its life.

All moments of a self’s life carry within them the inheritance of prior attachments. These accumulated “states of merger” have wrought their influence upon the self even if they have been long negated and superseded. It is for this reason that Hume’s “empirical self” yields no attraction. Such a self dissolves at every moment only to be re-constellated in the next moment according to its current functional potential. But personhood is not only governed by linear, chronological events but by its structural unity, the evolving themes which reveal one’s current attachments and hungers. These themes cover the full range of desires, repulsions, conflicts, and transformations which fill every self.

There is no objective yardstick which dictates the particular ratio for separation-individuation arrangements for self. Within certain cultures fullest selfhood is seen in those who live out the highest communal values, while in others so-called autonomy is given highest approval. The various labels of diseased selfhood are laid upon those who violate the norm in either instance.

My insistence upon a dyad of reciprocal relation intends to maximize the range of movement for self as it arranges itself along this continuum of singularity-multiplicity. This allows self to find an authentic “spot” for itself along this continuum.
self whose history has reinforced patterns of enmeshment with its determining objects will need to come to terms with this its reality, even as it takes a stance toward the new possibilities which forever present themselves. Conversely, a self shaped around residues of isolation, even abandonment, will find itself drawn toward a different range of possibilities for self-realization. This could take the form of either object-hunger or various forms of object-annihilation, i.e. efforts at correcting object-deficiency. These object-devouring efforts are attempts at correcting imbalances in object-presence for itself. The developmental requirements of various stations of selfhood will of course determine the amount of object-supply needed by any self. Furthermore, a self’s capacities for integrating object elements also determines the manner in which selfobject material is used and absorbed.

In short, every self is both singular and multiple. It is its very own self, even as it is nourished or starved through the manifold infusions of selfobject content.

**Self as Validated and Validating**

I wish to declare my assumptions that selfhood is guided by libidinal interests. That desire is the “engine” of the self has been affirmed by virtually every explorer of selfhood who has been willing to grant any legitimacy to the self construct. Desire and its objects are birthed simultaneously, claimed Kierkegaard, and this indelible link is at the heart of the life of self.\(^5\)

If desire is the organ of object-engagement, it remains to be demonstrated how this hunger becomes translated into structural patterns. While Aristotle and Augustine were among the first to insist upon defining self according to its style of moving toward objects, its object attachments, it took Freud and his followers to provide a more experience-near map for this process. The key which unlocked this possibility is the concept of narcissism.

Augustine had long-ago noted the pervasive nature of self-investment, but unfortunately linked the phenomenon with inordinate self-exaltation by identifying narcissism with pride as our primary form of self-relatedness. Even Freud could not grant narcissism any permanent legitimacy by insisting that narcissistic investment in self was incompatible with mature object-love.\(^6\) Nevertheless, Freud drove home the point that selfhood is inevitably constructed along narcissistic lines even if these inclinations are to be superseded.

It took the efforts of Heinz Kohut to fully reverse this negativity toward narcissism. For Kohut the self-selfobject relationship determines the health and vitality of the self. The selfobject, is not a person or an interpersonal construct, but the internal, **subjective function of self-harmonization and self sustenance**. Selfobjects, for Kohut, provide the narcissistic validation so necessary for self-maintenance.

Kohut, unfortunately, only sees self organizing itself around bi-polar lines, these being (1) **ambition** and (2) **ideal**, two modes of engagement with needed selfobjects. The first involves the seeking of mirroring by a selfobject which affirms the goodness of one’s self. While the first form thereof is grandiosity, its more mature manifestations includes all creative, externalized activity for which affirmation is sought. The second pole, idealization, represents the factor of merger in which a self desires union with selfobjects carrying those characteristic for which the self yearns.

Two factors, however, prompt me to adjust Kohut’s structural scheme. On the one hand, Kohut’s reliance upon polar models diminishes the reciprocal mutuality within self. This artificial distance between poles makes the necessary integration all the more difficult. On the other hand, Kohut’s so-called “poles” are not differentiated enough. Ambition and idealization, or if one wishes, mirroring and merger, are both forms of validation. What is vital is for self to be affirmed.

But validation is only one piece of the dyadic partnership. Validation alone leaves the self passive, strictly at the mercy of object-determined confirmations. A self as center of initiative also engages its world and seeks to confirm its place therein. Not only is self passively acted upon, it seeks to find itself in its world, to create an image of itself in that world. This factor within the dyad I wish to call the **self as validating**.

Psychoanalytic self psychology has seemingly recognized this need in its more recent offerings. Ernest Wolf, collaborator with Kohut, acknowledges that selfobjects contain what he calls “adversarial” and “efficacy” needs.\(^8\) The need to have an impact upon one’s defining selfobjects is also vital for self-construction. Whether in the simple form of being able to elicit
a response from one’s environment, or through the more intense need to gain mastery over one’s world, both styles are reminders that self is structured according to its capacities and potentialities which it seeks to live out. The quest for self-sufficiency implies that a self demonstrate its capacities to itself, even, as Hegel so ably noted, such a self remains reciprocally linked and dependent upon its needed validators.

The second structural requirement, then, is self’s ever-present need to be confirmed even as it seeks to present itself to its world. Both aspects, the need to be validated and the need to be validating, are filled with selfobject content, the legacy of a self’s confirmations and/or disappointments within this dyadic requirement.

Self as Open and Closed

A third structural requirement for self is the capacity for boundary maintenance. The developmental fluidity of self necessitates that this requirement be phase-appropriate even as a wide range of possibilities exist at all levels of development. But what does it mean for self to be structured in boundary-sensitive ways?

Catherine Keller illustrates this requirement through the framework of gender. Her claim is that masculine selfhood is predominantly separate, constructed around oppositional transcendence in which the self (as male) posits another (as opponent) through which this self finds itself. Conversely, female selfhood reveals a soluble self which loses itself in immanent identification with and absorption by its world. These socio-political analyses are valuable and confirm that all self-construction crystallizes around the prevailing patterns of power-powerlessness and the subsequent validation or negation experienced by a self. Certainly, a self will align itself according to the criterion for normative selfhood placed before it whether this be in accommodating (soluble) or negating (separate) ways.

Most self-models agree that the first form of self involves states of merger. Kierkegaard’s dreaming desire, for example, describes a self immersed in total non-differentiation. Such a state can hardly claim the label self, and yet this phase is the inevitable precursor to all which follows.

It is perhaps understandable that all declarations about states of oceanic oneness for self (such as mystic pronouncements), are often confused with this prepersonal kernel of selfhood. States of prepersonal merger are a given for every self, our continuity with which we never lose. If our self were only attracted to historical residues of merged states then the matter would indeed be closed. But archaeological states of union alone do not seem to be an abiding source of nourishment for self which also seeks itself in the not-yet.

States of merger are not simply boundary-less, however, but represent the expansiveness within which is self “carried”, so to speak. Psychoanalytic Object Relations theory offers us rich images for naming this reality such as Winnicot’s “nursing couple”, or Mahler’s “symbiosis”. These first forms of self are fully embedded in a relational matrix and are carried within in. In having no “membrane” around itself, such a self is fully open to its world, ready to be impacted by it.

The rhythms of care and distress, along with self’s emerging capacities, force the first boundary between a self and its world. This self-other boundary is simultaneously matched by an internal boundary in which a self arranges the satisfying and non-satisfying elements of its experience. The world, in its frustrating and gratifying moments, brings the self to itself. Straddling this internal boundary is the selfobject, the gatekeeper who directs this process of sorting out the residues of experience into their welcome and unwelcome elements.

Boundary, then, refers to the spaces “carved out” within the self for collecting its experiential legacy, even as it refers to the differentiation between subject and object accomplished by self.

Boundary intactness becomes a supreme measure for assessing the health or disarray of any self. Extreme environmental impingements, when added to limited selfobject resources for managing such distress, results in a self with destroyed, or at best, violated boundaries. A self constantly fighting intrusion will likely have a thick impermeable wall between itself and its world, matched by the wall erected around its own inner life. Or, its capacity for maintaining self-intactness will be so severely handicapped that no adequate protection will exist for warding-off unwelcome demands and threats. Thus, whether in the form of exaggerated boundaries or no boundaries, the potential of self will be thwarted.

A far healthier structure is present when the
internal and external boundaries are permeable and pliable. Flexibility implies the capacity for nuanced response to environmental and internal stimuli. As with other structural dyads, optimum selfhood is obtained when self reveals both openness and closedness. What might this imply?

A self in relationship with both boundary requirements knows where it begins and the other ends, and vice versa. It does not impose itself upon the other nor does it fear being engaged. It maintains itself without devouring or negating otherness or itself, and hence lives without fear of such violation of its selfhood. Since its center is within and not external to it, it makes no demands for self-maintenance upon another.

Conversely, a boundary-sensitive self does not hide behind artificial self-protective barriers. It honors its indebtedness to all selfhood and strains to enhance all self-potential. It is not diminished by the fullness achieved by other selves but knows that its own subjective potential is inextricably connected to the fuller development of self wherever it is to be found. Above all, one could say that such a self maintains an empathetic link toward all self-states of which it is aware.

The Self as Intimate and Separate

The boundary dyad just described identifies the dual dangers of atrophied selfhood as: (1) a self driven into itself as a retreat from object-relatedness, or (2) a self drowning in object-demands because it has not found itself. All structural arrangements named thus far: (1) singular and multiple (2) validated and validating and (3) open and closed, are linked to this final organizing center for self. Every self will find itself somewhere on this continuum of intimacy-separation.

It should be noted how far removed we are from models which suggest mature selfhood attains some arbitrary standards of separation-individuation. The journey toward so-called autonomy or separateness is only half of the developmental task. If Nancy Chodorow’s thesis is correct, then men have already attained this sublime state of separation only to find that self has somehow slipped through their fingers. Conversely, women’s selfhood is never reached if absolute separateness is the sought-after norm.

In the final analysis, every self seems drawn toward its inherent fullness, a fullness which contains both the subject and object parameters of its life. Again, no optimum ratio of intimacy to aloneness exists. Every self needs to come to terms with its legacy of engagement and sort out the degree of entanglement versus freedom it lives out. A self tied to its determining objects whether parents, teachers, or religious authorities, will find certain forms of such attachments appropriate for particular phases of its life, but not adequate for others. What fits at one moment may not fit the next.

Similarly, a self might find a high degree of aloneness/distance from defining objects (cultural, relational, ideological etc.) as absolutely necessary for itself. It may need to clear out the clutter of suffocating intimacies in order to be able to move toward other self-potentials. Again, the historical legacy will impinge upon the next developmental demand, even as the self’s skills and capacities will help define the new possibilities which present themselves.

The intimacy required of selfhood is first of all, then, an intimacy with one’s very own self. The relationship with one’s own emotional life is a primary barometer of the degree of comfort attained toward the self’s life-process. Emotions are the breathing of the self and intimacy toward them does not mean being swallowed up by them but maintaining a full and tender dialog with them. States of external isolation are often in direct proportion to the distance one has put between oneself and the subjective (affective) aspects of one’s life.

Conversely, I must be able to let go of my feelings as absolute determiners of my life. To separate from them is not to deny them but to honor them as here and now indicators of my subjective life. To identify fully with them would be to be possessed by them thereby dosing the self in upon itself. The same could be said of other self-defining elements such as belief or meaning-systems. To the extent that beliefs negate the openness self needs to move into its future they deny self its freedom, hence suffocating the self.

The self’s need for autonomy then, ought never to be equated with isolation. Rather, self seeks to become itself, to become differentiated, linking with all its determining elements without having to control them or be swallowed up by them. Such a self is a “layered” self, having gathered up its history, and maintaining a relationship with its manifold constituting elements. It is intimate with itself and with otherness even as it honors its singularity.
The Process of Self

If self finds its shape through the four dyadic patterns just named, it remains to be demonstrated how this movement is actualized. Not only is it imperative that the energies which drive the life of self be revealed, it must be demonstrated how these energies are linked with self's structural integrity. The following questions will need to be answered for this link to be viable.

To begin with, it must be clarified whether self is a mediation between its polar elements as Kierkegaard would have us believe, or whether self is a synthesis of its constituting factors as Hegel has declared? Or, is some other mechanism better suited to carry the reciprocal quality of dyadic relatedness? Furthermore, is self active or passive? Is its life best understood as an evolutionary unfolding, or as an intentional choosing? And what does it mean for desire to be the engine of its life?

A Triadic Formula

All dyadic links claimed for self have in common an object-relatedness. They are attempts at mapping patterns of object-seeking or object-avoidance. But self is not simply the accumulation of object-residue, but the living interaction of subject-object content. All models which avoid static unity need to find a bridge which might unify the manifold subject-object parameters of self.

The first such bridge is provided by Aristotle who uses the capacity for thinking as a primary means of both dividing subject from object, as well as synthesizing the same. This option is borrowed by Aquinas who raises rationality into the supreme vehicle of selfhood, the means by which it achieves its integration. This unfortunate dependence upon rationality as the glue which holds self together locks self into exile from its full inwardsness, condemning its adherents to live from the neck up.

Another attempt at connecting the dispersive self comes in the form of the instincts or drives. These body-based impulses are presented by Freud as the pathways by which an organism seeks its needed objects. Whether in the service of seeking pleasure (satisfaction), or inevitable decay (homeostasis), self completes its functional purpose. It unifies (organizes itself in keeping with its instinctual requirements).

Other bridging possibilities holding perhaps more promise emerge as early as Augustine in the form of the internal images by which self relates to itself. Even contributors as recent as the Ego Psychologists Heinz Hartmann and Edith Jacobson see the self as the accumulation of self and object representations. The fact that these images do not allow self much more than an imitative existence again diminishes their usefulness. An image where one mimics the other hardly approximates the complexity of operations of self. Nevertheless, images serve as reminders that self does present itself to itself.

After all is said and done, however, I must declare that no subject-object link can be claimed for self if it is not accomplished through experience. Subject-object engagement is only realizable within the crucible of raw experience. This does not mean the unconscious or hidden factors are eliminated. Rather, it insists that every layer of self is born within an experiential grid.

I therefore reaffirm that the most useful device for discussing the subject-object linkages is the selfobject construct. Selfobjects, I have noted, refer to the internal function of self-harmonization and self-sustenance. This does not make them an automatic bridging-agent, however. Constructed out of both subject and object material, selfobjects draw from both, emerging as a distinct entity within the self system. As a unifying third element, they gather affect-laden spect of experience and for better or for worse become integrated into the self-system. How, then, is this process triadic?

Mediation or Synthesis

We have arrived at the dilemma crystallized by Kierkegaard. Given his abhorring of Hegelian unity, Kierkegaard accuses Hegel of eliminating the polarities of selfhood through an artificial synthesis which destroys the prior elements. This Kierkegaard calls a self as negative unity. In its place he proposes a "third" element which maintains the polar components of self in a creative tension. Kierkegaard wishes to lay claim to the word synthesis to describe this triadic process but I must deny him this privilege.

It is more accurate to describe the operations of the Kierkegaardian self with the term mediation. In Kierkegaard the opposites are unresolvable, a permanent and fixed polarization, with the so-called third factor (reconciling agent) suspended between them. Mediation describes the process of
holding these polarized factors in their abiding state of tension while attempting to navigate between them. Given my rejection of polar models as incompatible with selfobject frameworks, I believe I can safely discard the Kierkegaardian reliance upon mediation as the means of self-construction and self-maintenance. But what of synthesis? Is it any more compatible than mediation for naming self-process?

The possibility that synthesis might capture the movement of self is less easily dismissed than is true for mediation. While Hegel’s ontological dialectic with its absolute synthesizing operations can perhaps be dismissed as armchair abstraction, it becomes another matter when as reputable a figure as D.W. Winnicott uses dialectic synthesis to describe a historically-grounded process of self-maintenance.14

Winnicott’s framework, as is true for Object Relational models generally, begins with self in undifferentiated unity. These states of absolute dependency are invariable negated by frustration which drives a wedge between the nascent self and its protective cocoon.15 There is, however, an “intermediate” realm which ties together both interior and exterior components to experience even as it gathers up the rewarding and frustrating elements contained therein. These “transitional objects”, the forerunners to the selfobject construct, reveal a distinct synthesizing capacity. Here the matter becomes problematic, however.

The very notion of synthesis implies on the one hand a joining of opposites, and secondly, the elimination of prior elements. These aspects of synthesis are incompatible with my evolving model. Selfhood, I would conclude, is not constructed by the mediation of oppositional elements (Kierkegaard), nor by their synthesis (Hegel), but by a hunger for selfobject content which confirms the self as itself.

There is no automatic cycle to self in which there is movement from unity, through negation, toward differentiation, but an abiding hunger which reflects the level of selfhood being sought. I affirm with Kohut that selfobject supply is needed throughout life, this being the life-blood of the self. What, then, is the self’s process and how is it triadic?

I would propose that self reveals the following flow:

(1) movement out of itself
(2) returning to itself
(3) transforming integration

Movement out of itself. Virtually every contributor to the quest for self from Plato through Hegel, to Freud, insists that desire is the doorway to self. Rationality alone can never awaken self to itself. A self is activated by desire and driven by desire.16 Desire mobilizes the self toward the objects through which a subject can define itself. Such desire is ever-present since only the encounter with otherness brings self to itself. By its very nature this appetite is a movement out of itself toward its constituting objects. Indeed, every act of seeking is a form of object-hunger, a movement of self attempting to find itself. Not all seeking is the same, however.

Hedonistic devouring of objects is a first form of such seeking. By its very nature it is insatiable because the self can only maintain itself by consuming the object. Narcissistic neediness is another form of awakening desire which propels a subject out of itself toward its determining objects. While it may undergo maturation, the impulse to seek confirmation of oneself through validating objects never ceases.

Returning to Itself. The movement toward defining objects is a yearning for selfobject supply. Selfobjects are the building blocks of self. Selfobject content includes those nurturing and persecuting patterns of otherness which we have taken-in to our very own self turning them into the fabric of our being. Again, this task is never accomplished once-for-all. Archaic selfobject residues are deeply layered within us, there to nourish or destroy, even as we seek new confirming or compensating selfobject experiences.

Transforming Integration. The movement outward and its return is completed as the defining elements become incorporated into the self system. While my indebtedness to Kohut (transmuting internalization) and Jung (transcendent function) is clear, I also wish to identify the differences.17 Kohut’s use of transmutation, a term borrowed from alchemy, implies a change in nature that borders on the miraculous. If nothing else, it leans toward a discontinuity between one’s defining selfobjects and the emerging self-system. This I find unacceptable.
All selfobject content is absorbed into the self system for better or for worse. Its presence within the self does not unhook the self from its prior nature. The slate is now wiped clean as new selfobject content presents itself. It is, rather, taken into the self there to challenge or confirm what already resides within.

This is not to say that transformation does not happen. A self does change as it releases attachments and ingests the new. The critical factor, however, is the relationship taken toward the determining elements. A self may or may not come to terms with the hunger or desire which drives its life, even as it may or may not gather up (claim ownership of) its constituting factors. But to become its self it is compelled to embrace its desires, relational legacy, and full experiential matrix. As these are claimed a transformation is accomplished because the past is brought into the present with greater fullness, even as the future is anticipated through the vehicle of desire.

**Self as Source of Initiative**

The above formula has provided a model of the self's activity without offering particular insight as to the forces which energize this process. Virtually every explorer of self has noted some energizing factor within self ranging form simple appetite (Aristotle), to libidinal pleasure-seeking (Freud), to an inherent drive toward the object (Fairbairn).

While differing greatly around the nature and meaning of this object-hunger, most perspectives which grant self any movement at all, place this movement within the rubric of desire. Desire is the impulse which drives the birth of the self. The self, to borrow Kohut’s phrase, is a “center of initiative”, the thrust of which is to seek its determining objects. But why seek external objects if the primary impulse is to know itself?

The self as a source of initiative attempts to accomplish a particular purpose, the most central of which is to become known. Becoming known is not instantaneously given, but involves the repetitive and persistent confirmation(s) of defining objects. This necessary validation occurs through the life cycle, a seeking of object-encounters which match the degree or level of selfhood being sought.

The desire which governs the emergence of selfhood is not to be confused with petty neediness, although it may emerge in this form. It is rather the yearning of self for itself, the completion of its nature, the discovery of itself. This nature is not simply given, lowered from heaven, but constructed out of the mixture of self's current potentialities as carried within its historical realities.

The seeking which drives the self’s efforts at finding itself will match the level of organization attained. A child will find delight in itself as it sways to music it finds pleasing, even if it has no knowledge of the structural meanings contained in the medium. A trained musician will find herself mirrored only as vastly more sophisticated levels of musical capability are reached. The common truth is that neither event would have appeal if self were not being reflected back to itself. The eternal seeking of self is for an otherness which will match, confirm, and validate the “level” or “form” of selfhood currently being lived out.

The development of self in more sophisticated ways does not necessarily eliminate the earliest forms of desire. The highest levels of artistic, intellectual, or athletic achievements can often rest upon thinly—veiled impulses of an infantile quality, whether sexual, aggressive, or narcissistic. Particularly if the earliest forms of self-hunger were not incorporated or integrated into later development, such a self risks regressing back to its unclaimed elements. In living them out self is seeking to find itself.

I must return to an earlier question. In granting desire a central role, is self now understood as an evolutionary unfolding, its nature and destiny fully contained within? What place then remains for freedom, for choice, never mind the question of who should assume responsibility for this self?

Desire is not an ephemeral construct. As the primary form of engagement of subject with object it links them to one another. Therefore, tracing my desires becomes a window into my object-history even as it alerts me to new possibilities of encounter. This is not to deny that my desires can reveal forms of utter darkness and enslavement. If my object-history has generated a preponderance of suffocation and annihilating selfobjects, then my desires will reveal themselves accordingly. Our desires never lie. They both lead us to ourselves and beyond ourselves. We may choose to hide or distort these desires from ourselves or others for the sake of maintaining artificial self-states, which only enslave the self all the more.
A self's path, then, involves a choosing of itself within the object-parameters of its existence. There is no grand design for any self other than the requirement to find itself. A self can only find itself where it is, in its here and now. But its current place and current time is not an isolated monad. A self stands in continuity with its past and its anticipated future. This is the source of its joy and its terror, its freedom and its bondage. But I must push the notion of desire one step further.

From Heinz Kohut we have received the valuable contribution that active selfhood not only hunger for object confirmations, but that self seeks to ingest selfobject material for itself. Selfobject yearning, while limited by Kohut's archaeological perspectives, nevertheless names the necessity for internal harmonization. The selfobject function as internal regulator balances (or upsets) the operations of self, keeping in mind the triadic nature thereof. Whether in the form of attraction or repulsion, self-soothing or self-agitation, a self will attempt to regulate itself according to its current capacities and developmental demands.

But before I leave behind the process factors of self, a final question requires response. The attention given to desire leaves the impression that self is only defined by its activity, by the energy expended in shaping itself. How then, is the self's passivity to be understood in light of its ever-present capacity to actualize itself?

I wish to reframe the requirement that self be capable of suspending its activity by reintroducing the concept of rest one finds in Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard insists upon a state of restfulness for self even though there is nothing within the Kierkegaardian self allowing it to do so. Rest becomes meaningless when self is constantly plummeted by its polarities.

Rather, I would propose that rest refers to a self in a state of attunement, ready to receive what comes its way. Such a state of receptivity is in fact essential for any nurture or fulfillment a self might experience. Winnicott's beautiful phrase "the nursing couple" reveals a first form of such attunement in which a child and its mother are fully receptive to the stimulus emerging from the other. All levels of selfhood have this capacity within them; furthermore, without this capacity no claim can be made for a fullness to self. The radical receptivity to all Being which we find in Meister Eckhart comes much closer to the requirement that self attain a state of rest. This state of non-clinging attachment fills the self with its absolutely essential requirement: the fullness of another self.

The Phases of the Life of Self

Any talk of the "stations" which mark the life of self cannot be divorced from the truth that the unity (or fragmentation) of self along this path is dependent upon its object-experience. A self eternally seeks an otherness capable of bringing self to itself. This seeking for selfobjects supply matches the level or "type" of selfhood being lived out.

Elaborate schemes have been proposed throughout history for classifying the developmental stations of self. Some models such as the Aristotelian look to functional capability as the primary means of naming developmental competencies. Here, rational and cognitive capacities are given the highest value as the optimum destination for self. Mystic perspectives look to the dissolution of boundaries as the means of marking developmental accomplishment. Psychological paradigms generally look to the consolidation of personal identity as the developmental norm. The process of individuation is the name given to this developmental path, with the psychoanalytic scheme considering personal autonomy and creative self-directness the optimum destination, while the Jungian or Transpersonal path considers unity with Being (Self) the sought-after goal.

But perhaps the most encompassing frameworks remain the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian. Although their differences are well-known, their developmental stations for comprehensive selfhood reveal surprising confluence. While both recognize that personal consolidation of self is important, they also share the vision that a communal substrate grounds all self-construction. Selfhood becomes meaningless when divorced from its corporate matrix. Only its connective social and relational "tissue" gives self its "substance".

Beyond the interpersonal web, however, there is a larger embeddedness for self, only visible form a particular vista. Religious paradigms have developed the necessary symbolizing frameworks to allow this reality to become known. Full selfhood cannot be approached only through the historical elements of its life but also through the encompassing, trans-historical themes which infuse its existence. Nevertheless, these too must be experientially grounded.
The grand sweep of living selfhood then, reveals three phases. The first phase concerns the birth of the self as personal, the second as it finds its shape in its particular world, and the third as it fulfills itself.

The Personal Self

Most every explorer of selfhood has envisioned a state of pre-emergent embeddedness for self. The awakening of self is never magically given, but brought about through the simultaneous arrival of the world. A subject is born hand in hand with its object(s). Physical birth is perhaps the most visible transition from embeddedness to exposure to the world, but as dramatic as it is, it is only one small occasion in a process that covers the full range of potentials for self.

Every moment of living selfhood is in some ways an emergence, a birth. The encounter with otherness begins even in those pre-birth “experiences” which first bring the fetus to the world. The sensations of sound, movement, distress, and rest, while mediated by the maternal host, nevertheless prepare the way for full awakening.

Being born to one’s self, then, is a never-ending process. This on-going impulse to find one’s self is desire-driven at all levels of self. The key factor which shapes such desires, however, is the developmental stage which has been attained. A self emerging out of embryonic oneness experiences its first forms of object-hunger as a desire for object constancy. The persistent and faithful availability of a need-satisfying other offers a safe cocoon for a newly-emerging self. As the psychoanalytic paradigm has declared, this availability need only be “good enough”; as a matter of fact, it must contain sufficient frustration to allow some measure of internal structure-building within self.

The first developmental task to be accomplished by self, then, is for sufficient coalescing to occur to allow subsequent experience to find some ordered and safe place within the self. Conditions of chronic chaos only fragment the foundation of self, leaving it with marginal ability to claim any stability for itself.

A self wounded in this first developmental task will find its ability at boundary and structure maintenance so compromised that the threat of annihilation and collapse of self always looms. Psychotic conditions arising out of such collapsed self-structures are the most common form of a self diseased through its first object-encounter.

A second phase to the life of self is the requirement that it experience attachment with its defining object(s). To be attached is very different than being fused with one’s objects. A certain measure of separation is a prerequisite for genuine attachment to occur. A self desires attachment because of the structural requirement of intimacy and engagement discussed earlier. There is no self without some form of attachment even if this attachment takes the so-called negative form of the renunciation of objects.

To be attached in self-enhancing ways, nourishes the self in a manner far deeper than the equally necessary mirroring need. A self which is attached, which belongs, is warmed by this interaction because it is accepted in ways not dependent upon its particular accomplishments. A self’s intrinsic acceptability is declared within attachment regardless of its capabilities and in spite of its abilities. A self which “belongs” only because of its accomplishments is a self living outside itself, hanging by the thread of productivity maintenance.

As development continues, however, cognitive, motor, and emotional growth brings self to a new level of potential selfhood where its energy and capacities need to be validated. The well-documented narcissistic dimension of self is the name given to this ever-present need for mirroring of emerging competencies. Acknowledgement by another self is so vital that its chronic absence leaves the self vulnerable to massive self-devaluation and disorientation. Not only is the self’s internal requirement to know itself thwarted if this recognition is withheld, the self can be crushed in its attempt to find some worth for itself.

Infantile hunger for a joyful response to one’s self is of course transcended if such acknowledgement is forthcoming in phase-appropriate ways. However, the need to be “taken-delight-in” never departs. All stations of life contain forms of acknowledgement-hunger. Compensations and surrogate self-validations are possible, of course. Their effectiveness will nevertheless depend upon the accumulated history of recognition experienced by a self. If early validations were mixed or non-existent, then later infusions of worth often fail to soothe the ache unless, of course, the self enters into relationship with its very neediness.
Finally, personal selfhood requires consolidations of itself. Beyond all needs for cohesion, for attachment, and for recognition, lies the desire to “pull the self together.” A cohesive self knows itself with a fullness only attainable as a culmination to the phases noted thus far. All aspects of its life, whether historical, emotional, or sexual are claimed and integrated into the self-system. No self accomplishes this task fully given the reality that self-knowledge is never simply given but must be arduously sought. Nevertheless, even in its incompleteness a cohesive self feels itself to be its very own self.

The Relational Self

The path of the consolidation of personal selfhood is in no way separate from relational and interpersonal themes. Every phase noted thus far is by its very nature relational. In turning to the inter-subjective arena, however, I am shifting the focus away from the internal structures toward the more external social network within which selfhood moves.

Every self is embedded in a social/cultural matrix. This network of meanings, values, behaviors, and norms is the communal soil within which self either flourishes or dies. The question confronting us is not whether self will or will not have a social world, but how that world will sustain the impulses within self, or thwart them, thereby putting self at risk. We need only remind ourselves of the massive self-alienation imposed upon many Native North Americans through the cultural genocide of the prevailing culture if we have any doubts about the importance of this factor.

With Hegel I propose that imitation is the first form of relational selfhood. A self will adapt itself to the norms of its world largely because its own self has not yet been attained. Acquiescence is the only model of accountability known by such a self since its acceptability is dependent upon the compliance demanded of it.

A primary agenda which fuels these processes (in addition to narcissistic themes spoken of earlier) is the issue of power versus powerlessness. An emerging self is not only unaware of competing claims for allegiance, but is powerless to challenge the prevailing social order given its dependence upon it. Early forms of negation (such as a young child which hurl its “no” at the face of the parent) involve a claiming of a preliminary sense of boundary, a precursor to the establishment of internalized norms generally referred to as conscience.

A crossroads presents itself at this stage of self-development. A self will either gravitate toward conformity as its first effort at accommodating itself to the social order, or it will seek a path of more active negation called rebellion in order to consolidate its values for itself. Even conformity, however, is a stage beyond imitation, since an awareness of values has now emerged which one attempts to honor through the act of conformity. Rebellion is an equivalent attempt at finding a framework of behavior for the self only this time in more “negating” form.

The two themes of conformity and negation are the two styles by which a self will attempt to orient itself toward the sources of power in its world. Some selves therefore find their self confirmed as they acquiesce to the demands of the power-brokers of their world, while others will find their self primarily through challenging the status quo.

There is a vast arena within which these transactions occur. Sexual mores, gender identities and rules, and religious belief systems, are prime examples. In each case the social definition of acceptability will be attractive for certain emerging selves who will align themselves accordingly (conformist self). Or, conversely, a self will find itself more fully as it challenges the prevailing power and value structures of its world. Even so-called adult relationships such as wife-husband, teacher-student, employee-employer can be arranged along these power-determined lines.

While there may be some comfort found in the predictability of such arrangements it is not the final word. A fullness to relational selfhood is only attained as a self gains the capacity for increasingly nuanced response to its world. The extremes of meek conformity or strident over-againstness are unable to grant legitimacy either to the self or the social world. In negating one or the other the necessary reciprocal relation is not attained. No self can live in permanent isolation from wider meaning and value systems, just as no self can live if its own voice is to mimic the social or religious “party line”.

The prevailing social order must be filtered through a self’s critical capacities and affective discernments, which allows the self to sift out the
incongruent and suffocating aspects of the social world. A further dialog with these elements may well need to be maintained but this does not mean that the self’s life must be driven by them. To be able to challenge the values of one’s world enlivens the self in that it now takes full responsibility for itself without negating or denying its world. No longer driven by the world or swallowed up by it, the self is able to live in an intentional mutuality with its social world.

The Fulfilled Self

In my definition of self I declared that self is a center of initiative which accomplishes certain purposes, the most central of which is to become known. Becoming known involves an on-going process of validation in which a self seeks confirmation from an otherness which matches the level of selfhood being sought. This eternal seeking of objects which “bring” self to itself I have mapped across a wide range of self-seeking from the earliest forms of infantile emergence out of fusion, to the highly sophisticated competencies of creative process.

Thus far, I have paid primary attention to the personal and social objects which direct self toward varying degrees of unity or fragmentation for itself. The task which remains is to demonstrate how the encounter with absolute otherness impacts self for better or for worse. Rather than using the overburdened word “God” to name this otherness, I am relying upon a concept I call a sheer defining absolute. A sheer defining absolute covers the full range of experienceable realities from utter constriction (death) to radical openness (limitlessness), from oceanic oneness, to supremely refined and nuanced differentiation. Speaking analogously, a sheer defining absolute serves the self construct much as infinity serves mathematics and science. This is not to suggest that such an absolute only resides at the limitless “outer edges” of the self. Rather, it also names the depth dimension of the smallest bits of self experience. The absolute is not only present as the factor of radical expansiveness for self but the factor of supreme connectedness and fullest inwardsness. The sheer defining absolute is the object of fulfillment for self.

Hegel’s approach to this question, was to posit a universal self which “gathers itself together” through the manifold forms of religiosity reflected in human experience. All religious experience, for Hegel, serves the self-discovery and self-consolidation of absolute selfhood. This proposition may or may not be persuasive, and in any case is not the approach I am advocating.

Rather than speculate upon the so-called “career” of God, I prefer to find an encompassing grounding and validation for human selfhood, which honors its deepest yearnings. My resistance to the Hegelian model centers around a subtle arrogance which creeps into all attempts at judging the adequacy of religious systems for “carrying” the self. Generally, one’s own perspective or ideational framework is taken to be the norm, the supreme reflection of what is meant to be.

I, on the other hand, wish to affirm the legitimacy of all encompassing (absolute) objects which attempt to unify and validate the self. All selves seek a viable otherness through which the worth of the self will be affirmed. All selfhood is unified for better or for worse by its operative religious object(s). Absolute Object-choice and the use that is made thereof will of course depend upon the particular history of every self and the nature of selfobject supply received. A self with limited sources of security will likely yearn for Absolute selfobject material which will correct the deficiency. Conversely, a self with a constricting selfobject legacy will likely seek an Absolute otherness which opens the horizons for the self. At the same time, if the structural dyads of self have been torn asunder through destructive experience, then the internal requirement to gather up these pieces of self will often propel such a self toward contradictory visions of itself. Yet even here, the yearning for integrity, for a sustaining center of initiative, will nudge a self toward potentially unifying absolute objects.

Does this commitment to a multiplicity of absolute objects mean they are one and the same, interchangeable even? By no means. A self steeped in an Islamic milieu, for instance, will find itself unified and validated primarily through patterns of obedience and alignment of self with a sovereign absolute object. Many a self will find great contentment therein. Yet even such a self is not static but also moving beyond itself toward a not-yet. New possibilities and new challenges present themselves with new forms of validation required. In the great melting pot of history the religious ideation(s) which feed the self are changing, even as they maintain a link to their prior inheritance.

The primary requirement, then, is to own the framework within which the self is defined. For
me, as a Christian, the Christ event is normative for selfhood, the epitome of what self is and was called to be. Christ is for the Christian the supreme mirror of the self, for the self. In agreement with W. Paul Jones I can declare that Christ is a double mirror, representing my self to God, and God to my self. \(^{21}\)

Christ, as normative for selfhood, mirrors me to myself infusing my self with the radiance of the fullness of self. Furthermore, Christ “carries” my self for the Absolute, presenting my self as it were, to that supreme otherness as a self in the making. Not only is the self absolutely affirmed in this transaction, its sanctity is guaranteed. If Christ were only a one way mirror for the self then this Absolute selfobject would only beckon as a remote ideal. Rather, Christ also declares the self to be fully and eternally valid, even in its incompleteness. This becomes the source of its absolute security in the midst of its manifold changeableness.

The Christian tradition has been most insistent that selfhood is in fact a house divided, perhaps even at war with itself and its truest inclinations. At first glance this division to self seems contradicted by my earlier claim that self lives in dyadic unity, organized around the four structural dyads named earlier. Granted, a self may have split off part of its structure. For instance, a self may have negated its need for intimacy by attempting to live in an exaggerated separateness. But this lopsidedness to self is not what is meant by divided selfhood.

Divided selfhood concerns the degree of bondage versus freedom actualized by every self. Selfhood is in an ongoing birthing process, of being taken beyond itself into ever new possibilities. A self may become divided from itself in two ways as it anticipates this requirement. On the one hand it can shrink from its possibilities either by being smothered by what has been, or by avoiding any option that might loosen the self from its entrenched existence. Thus is constructed an outer self detached from its authentic inclinations and deepest desires.

On the other hand, a self can be quiet bold in moving toward new possibilities, seeking to find itself in their actualization. Great athletic, artistic and intellectual feats have been accomplished out of such impulses. Nevertheless, such a self can be chasing after counterfeit validations for itself. It may be seeking confirmation of some aspect of itself to the neglect of its larger requirement, namely, to find and embrace its very own self. Such a self is a false self seeking its validating in its functional capacities meanwhile missing the necessary validation of its deeper capacities.

If the model of Christ as a prototype for selfhood carries legitimacy, then the fullest validation for self is found as it releases itself for another and in so doing finds itself. This is a far cry from any holier-than-thou altruism. It is a model of selfhood which does not attempt to grasp its worth, hoarding it for safe-keeping. Rather, it lets be and in releasing all claims for permanence for itself it finds its freedom and its true self.

Footnotes
1. I find welcome confirmation for my insistence that the primary energy of self is the desire to be known in contemporary feminist scholarship such as Rita Brock, Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988), p. 9.

2. Catherine Keller, From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self (Boston: Beacon Press. 1986. While Keller occasionally overstates her case as in her assessment of Hegel, for example, she correctly observes that the Western model of self has generally posited the other as oppositional object through which one defines oneself.


4. Catherine Keller (1986) offers four dyads as determinant for selfhood: (1) being one and being many; (2) being private or being public; (3) being body and being soul; (4) being here and being now. I wish to acknowledge the close affinity between my own first dyad and that of Keller’s. Her other dyads I find somewhat wanting for the following reasons: Keller’s second dyad is strangely presented as an either/or. (Note also the use of the word “poles” on p. 232). Furthermore, it mixes themes of introversion/extroversion (as styles of engaging otherness) with agendas of community vs. autonomy. the third dyad uses the unfortunate linguistic duality of “body” and “soul”. These terms are too archaic and final dyad mixes spatial and temporal metaphors to affirm the experiential groundedness of self.

6. Freud held that narcissistically bound persons were quite untreatable given their seeming impossibility at forming transference relationships.


12. Not only Freud, but all organically-driven efforts are unable to offer self a unity beyond the immediacy of biological/neurological satisfaction.


15. The four structural dyads of self become crystallized through this cycle of satisfaction and negation.


20. Psychoanalytic scholarship has provided a varied usefulness for exploring this aspect of self-experience. Resources include Ana-Maria