

## Adler's Contribution to Medicine, Psychology, and Education

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In a short presentation, one can only point out a very few of the many important contributions which Alfred Adler has made, both to the understanding of human behavior and to a methodology in dealing with human problems and maladjustments. While Adler was primarily a physician who tried to treat mental and emotional disturbances, his theoretical perspectives and therapeutic procedures have far-reaching significance for the field of medicine in general, for psychology, and education. The impact of his work was hardly felt during his lifetime, but has become increasingly obvious at the present time, when his findings appear to be in line with the general orientation and trend of research in all these fields, and as his formulations and methods become increasingly accepted by the professional workers, partly through their discovery of Adler and his work, partly by independent rediscoveries of what he had found forty years ago.

Perhaps the greatest contribution which Adler made to medicine was his emphasis on the unity of the human being, which he demonstrated in practical terms. This emphasis has been recognized by Adler as the fundament of his theory and practice, since he referred to the indivisibility of the person in the name he gave to his school of thought: Individual Psychology. Today, it is axiomatic in medicine and particularly in psychiatry to assume—at least theoretically—a totality of the individual, not only in his psychological make-up, but as a psychosomatic entity. However, present references to the unity of mind and body remain only too often empty phrases, as long as Adler's perception of this unity is either not recognized or not accepted. It was Adler who discovered that the unity of the individual can only be recognized through the *goals* which the individual sets himself. In his goals each person brings into play his total assets, his hereditary endowment and environmental stimulations, his psychological con-

stitution and pathological inflictions, his physical, mental, and emotional attributes. The goal of human activity integrates the past and the present into one focal point of direction toward the future; and the goal is always a social goal since the human being is a social being, a *zoon politicon*.

Understanding the goal of a person means understanding the person himself. Without the recognition of a person's goal one cannot see him in his totality, in his strivings, in his movement. The physician who is dealing with a sick person must "understand" him to assess properly any disturbance of function, be it primarily organic or not. Adler provided a technique for uncovering a person's life style, the over-all goal for social integration and participation which each individual has set for himself in his formative years of early childhood. This technique is so concise and easy to learn that every physician could acquire this skill and thereby become able to understand each one of his patients in his total physio-psychological make-up. Such grasp of the total personality, the avowed goal of psychosomatic medicine, would permit every physician to treat his patient not merely somatically, but psychologically as well. In this way Adler paved the way for a technique of "minor psychotherapy" which would enable the general practitioner to deal effectively with the emotional needs of all his patients without the necessity of sending everyone with emotional disturbances—and about sixty percent of his patients fall into this category—to a specialist, a psychiatrist who can perform what we may call "major psychotherapy."

Adler's psychological approach offers so far the only practical possibility for making a quick and reliable differential diagnosis between organ-pathology and psychologically induced physical disturbances. It is possible to evaluate fairly accurately the purpose of a patient's behavior; the purpose indicates reliably the total function of a given disease syndrome. The patient himself is in no position to distinguish between pains and disturbed functions due to organ-pathology and those without any organic foundation. The diagnosis of psychogenic disturbance cannot be made accurately merely by elimination, through the absence of any recognized organ-pathology. Unfortunately, such procedure is the norm today. A patient with organic complaints, who happens to be obviously emotionally disturbed, will be diagnosed as psychogenic if no physical findings are obtainable to explain his ailments on an organic basis. To make such a diagnosis on positive grounds, it is necessary to establish what *use* the patient makes of

his symptoms. If he uses them as a means to get special privileges, as an excuse or alibi, or for whatever other social gain, then we can make the diagnosis of a psychogenic process, regardless of the existence or absence of any organic pathology. Such differential diagnosis on the basis of the social function of symptoms has proven extremely reliable. One can insist that some physical pathology must be found if a psychological examination indicates that the patient is *not* using his symptoms in any way, even if the referring general practitioner has definitely declared the patient as "psychogenic." On the other hand, overlooking the psychological significance of any actually pathological condition prevents therapeutic efficiency if the therapy is merely organically oriented. Without the technique of an analysis described by Adler, the diagnosis of psychogenic factors is either haphazard or extremely time-consuming, as it may be made only after exhaustive psychotherapeutic endeavors.

In the field of psychology, Adler freed the "understanding" of an individual from a mere intuitive comprehension of the non-scientist or from the involved and dissecting, but not all-inclusive analysis of the so-called expert. His socio-teleological approach is in contrast to the mechanistic-physiological approach, characteristic for Behaviorism with its emphasis on stimulus-response mechanisms, and to the instinct-biological orientation of Psychoanalysis. Only the socio-teleological approach can reveal the individual in the totality of his personality in a given social setting. It combines the holistic approach with a social orientation; it excludes the over-emphasis on certain psychological mechanisms or isolated intra-personal psychodynamics. If there were any need for proof of the correctness of Adler's observations and conclusions, it would be found in the fact that all those who depart from other psychological schools move in the direction of Adler's position, by discovering piecemeal one or another of Adler's findings.

Adler made common sense psychology a part of the science of psychology. He integrated medicine, psychology, and social science into one approach toward the understanding of a person in his total organo-psycho-sociological entity.

Adler's approach toward a thorough and reliable understanding of children is so far unsurpassed. His methods of analyzing the family constellation (through what may be called today a sociogram of the family) permits an easy grasp of the total situation in which the child developed his personality. A realization of the interaction between

all members of the family provides also a guide for necessary corrective measures. The realization of discouragement as a fundamental source of misbehavior and maladjustment puts the vaguely recognized need for encouragement on a scientific basis. Demonstrating the child's goals, Adler enabled parents and teachers to deal effectively with any kind of problems they may have with the child. In this way Adler provided a sound scientific psychological orientation for all educators, who previously had to rely on general psychological information which was not applicable to an understanding of a particular child and his problems. Whatever teachers understood about children was hardly learned in teacher's training schools, but reflected the individual teacher's sympathy, his intuitive feeling for the child.

The field of education is wide open today to the application of Adler's theories and practical methods. However, the theory of learning has not yet caught up with Adler's recognition of the innate creative ability of each child. Mechanistic approaches are still prevalent and are responsible for many frustrating and wasteful educational practices. Adler pointed to the importance of courage and social interest as the basis of proper functioning, in the child just as well as in the adult. He designed ways and means of fostering the development of social interest and pointed out what should be avoided in order not to restrict this all-important development. He formulated educational procedures applicable to a democratic atmosphere, where punishment becomes unnecessary and order can still be maintained through the "natural consequences" of a disturbed order. He was primarily concerned with practical methods and concrete results; his theories provide merely the framework for these methods. But without such a theoretical framework, any single measure, regardless of how successful it may be, remains haphazard and unco-ordinated. His theories make his practice catholic, all-inclusive. It is to Adler's credit that so far nothing has been discovered to invalidate any of his premises. His approach has been called "superficial" by those who hardly were familiar with it, but never—by anyone—incorrect. And many who have prided themselves on their "deeper" penetration are slowly finding their way back to Adler's original assumptions.