

A Comparison of the Educational Philosophy of John Dewey and Alfred Adler

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In dealing with this subject, it does not seem necessary to dwell on the importance nor the influence that John Dewey has had on modern educational philosophy. To those of us who are in the educational field this is well known. However, since most people think of Alfred Adler merely as an associate of Sigmund Freud and a member of the so-called psychoanalytical movement, it is not likely that they are aware of his contribution to Western philosophy and to education in particular. Probably some of this is due to the fact that in the medical field Freud still dominates psychiatric thinking, and in those psychological schools outside the medical profession Adler is categorized merely as "an associate of Freud." Some mention is made of Adler's work in child psychology, but very little is known of his philosophical thinking or of his emphasis on education as a means toward the social development of the child. In this concept as well as many of his other basic philosophical ideas, the thinking of Adler is remarkably similar to that of John Dewey. When one considers the widely varying backgrounds of the two men: Dewey as the philosopher and educator, growing out of the thoroughly American culture of New England and the Middle West, and Adler the practicing physician, educated in the highly cultured yet authoritarian environment of monarchist Austria-Hungary, the agreement in their basic views seems all the more striking.

In terms of general principles, both Adler and Dewey were concerned with knowledge gained through human experience; each developed his theories through scientific method. Both maintained that the source of knowledge is through sense-experience plus thought and felt that truth could not be considered truth until the results verified it. Both considered the mind as a biological instrument with which man effected his adjustment to his environment, and both were deeply con-

cerned with the modification of human behavior through education in order that man might live more harmoniously with his fellow beings. The theories and methods by which they proposed these changes are in wide use today throughout the Western world, yet are so controversial as to be considered revolutionary in their implications for the future of the human race.

Obviously there is neither time nor space here to make a detailed analysis of the work of the two men. This attempt will only be to cover some of the more fundamental concepts which have had bearing on the changes in recent educational thought.

Man as a Social Being

Essentially both Adler and Dewey were concerned with man as a social being and his relationships with his fellow human beings. They were interested in improving the lot of man here and now on this earth and not in some transcendental after-world. They also felt that probably the most important aspect of man's development was this interdependence on one another. Dewey expressed it thus:

. . . it may be questioned whether there is a single human activity or experience which is not profoundly affected by the social and cultural environment (8, p. 825).

Adler, in a sense, could have added the *why* to this sentence in saying that: "The community is the best guarantee of the continued existence of human beings" (3, p. 29).

For this reason, man has a definite responsibility to the community. Although Dewey considered moral good something which is historical in context, he also says:

The something for which a man must be good is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes (6, p. 417).

This idea is virtually the core of Adler's philosophy. His books are full of statements such as:

The criteria by which we can measure an individual are determined by his value to mankind in general (3, p. 10).

and

What we call justice and righteousness and consider most valuable in all human character, is essentially nothing more than the fulfillment

of the conditions which arise in the social needs of mankind. (6, p. 344).

How does the child, commencing as he does as "a bundle of potentialities," achieve this desired state, the "capacity to co-operate," as Adler has put it. According to both men this is the prime function of education. But it cannot be imposed on the child from without; he must become aware of the personal values of such behavior in his own way. The educational methods by which he is brought to this conclusion are fundamental to his achieving this awareness.

Individual Differences and Education

In their recognition of how to handle individual differences, both Dewey and Adler took sharp issue with the old authoritarian ideas of formality and discipline. Dewey felt that any attempts at suppressing individual points of view in the interest of conformity created mental confusion and artificiality. Adler concluded that it was impossible to suppress individual points of view in that: "We will find that there are no two people who will draw the same conclusion from a similar experience" (3, p. 10). To most of us this is a relatively commonplace remark, but it has great bearing on the problem of motivating learning. It means, to take an extreme case, that in order to achieve the highest possible amount of learning from a psychological point of view, a teacher with forty students in her class would have to have forty different methods of teaching. We can see that even if a teacher *had* forty different ways of teaching one subject, the possibilities of matching them with the life-styles of the students would be somewhat remote. The better way, as Adler suggests, might be to know more about the individual viewpoint of the student and try to approach the subject with this in mind. He says:

Even in a crowded class we can observe the differences between children and we can handle them better if we understand their characters than if they remain an indistinguished mass (4, p. 169).

As both men saw it, instruction must of necessity be related to the aims and interests of the pupil in his present status: Adler maintains that:

The greatest factor in the development of mental faculties is *interest* (4, p. 162).

Also:

The best way to teach subjects is in coherence with the rest of life, so that the children can see the purpose of the instruction and the practical value of what they are learning (4, p. 162).

To Dewey:

The problem of instruction is thus that of finding material which will engage a person in specific activities having an aim or purpose of moment or interest to him, and dealing with things not as gymnastic appliances but as conditions for the attainment of ends (6, p. 155).

It is also, perhaps, important to note that Dewey and Adler shared similar views on the importance of mental traits. A reference is made in Henderson's *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* to the effect that Dewey believed that mind emerges in social interaction; it is not something with which man is born (7, p. 208). This almost exactly confirms Adler's view that:

So far as psychic phenomena and character traits are concerned, heredity plays a relatively unimportant role. There are no points of contact with reality which might support a theory of inherited acquired traits (3, p. 163).

However, both Dewey and Adler rejected the behavioristic views of John B. Watson and his school on somewhat different grounds. Dewey felt that the mechanistic view connoted an inclusive end at the beginning of life, from which there was no development, change, or purpose in life. Adler, on the other hand, disagreed with Watson on more psychological grounds, in that he felt Behaviorism with its materialistic cause-and-effect philosophy completely violated the principles of individual choice and purposiveness. The Behavioristic view that mind and body operated as a response to the environment rather than the interpreter of the sense stimuli received, Adler called "Reflexology."

The Human Goals

The element of the human goal or purpose in life would seem to be one of the most fundamental educational questions as far as learning is concerned. Before we can teach a student anything of value, we must have an idea where he is going in terms of purposes and aims in life.

Here we find an apparent disagreement in ideas between Dewey and Adler. I say "apparent" because some of the evidence on Dewey's viewpoint is contradictory. The fundamental keystone of Adler's philosophy and psychology as well was his concept of the relatively fixed human goal or "style of life" as Adler called it. This goal Adler terms teleological because it is purposive, although not in the Hegelian sense of the term. In reality, it is nothing more or less than what the individual hopes to achieve in life, that is from a psychic, not necessarily a rational sense. It is formed out of the sense-impressions the child receives from birth onwards through the first few years of his life. Even at the age of a few months, the child is aware that he is totally helpless and unable to satisfy any of his physical wants and must be served by others. Thus, early in life, the child develops what Adler called "inferiority feelings"; the desire to grow, to become strong, or even stronger than others around him develops in him. As the child's sensory apparatus develops he begins to get an idea of what it would be like to be an adult, or even superior to an adult, largely because the grown-ups around him are capable of satisfying their wants as well as his own. In the beginning this idea is vague and formless, but gradually takes the shape of an objective, his style of life. Approximately at the end of his fifth year, as Adler asserts:

. . . a child has reached a unified and crystallized pattern of behavior, its own style of approach to problems and tasks. . . . From now on the world is seen through a stable scheme of apperceptions, experiences are interpreted before they are accepted and the interpretation always accords with the original meaning given to life. Even if this meaning is very gravely mistaken, it is never easily relinquished (3, p. 12).

In the barest terms the motivating force behind this goal is superiority over the environment. When he reaches the adult stage, the external manifestations of this goal are different, but the driving force is still there. In this case, as Adler puts it:

All our strivings are directed towards a position in which a feeling of security has been achieved, a feeling that the difficulties of life have been overcome and that we have emerged finally, in relation to the whole situation around us, safe and victorious (4, p. 27).

As we know, Dewey criticized the Hegelian idea of teleology because he felt that the aims set up must be an outgrowth of existing

conditions, and that: "Theories about the proper end of our activities—educational and moral theories—often violate this principle. They assume ends lying outside our activities" (6, p. 120). In this case Dewey was referring to *transcendental* ends. However, Adler's view is that although these teleological ends are in a sense abstract because they arise out of the imperfect interpretation of life made by the immature child, in no way do they lie *outside of life*. The day-dreams and fantasies of the child, and even the dreams of the adult may not jibe with reality, but in every case they are based on knowledge gained *through sense experiences*. A child who dreams about flying cannot do so unless he has some idea what it means to fly; either he has seen a bird or an airplane, or has been told something about it by his mother or someone else. The goal of superiority is always superiority over *something*, and in most cases the human translates it into superiority over others.

Here again, we may recognize the significance of the role of education in the formation and perpetuation of aims in life. Both Dewey and Adler were much aware of the importance of the environment on the development of the child. Adler felt that "the goal toward which every being's actions are directed is determined by those influences which the environment gives to the child" (4, p. 57).

Although Dewey conceives of purposes and aims changing with each experience, we also find him making this statement:

More than we imagine the ways in which the tendencies of early childhood are treated fix fundamental dispositions and condition the turn taken by powers which show themselves later (6, p. 136).

We might wonder whether or not Dewey suspected the presence of a relatively stable goal in the "fundamental dispositions" to which he refers.

Aims in Education

How can education help the child form the behavior patterns which will provide him with the success in life we feel is needed? We have seen that both Dewey and Adler consider that the growth of the child is one of the functions in which education plays a major role.

Adler is most unequivocal in his feeling that the purpose of education is the social adjustment of the child. In his opinion, the amount of social adjustment the child achieves depends directly upon the type of goal the child has set for himself. If the goal involves sharing of

purposes and co-operation with others, the child will have a reasonably happy, successful life; if the goal is one of achieving superiority over others, the child will obviously encounter the hostility of others as he attempts to implement this goal by his activities. The result becomes a frustration which, if allowed to continue, leads to neurosis and even psychosis in extreme case.

It would perhaps be helpful to give a brief example of how this works. For example, the child who is pampered at home, and has come to realize that he can satisfy most of his physical wants merely by demanding or by crying and temper tantrums, may begin to feel that all the problems of life can be solved this way. If nothing is put in the way of this interpretation, this concept may become his goal and his later activities will be directed towards demanding that others satisfy these wants, as was the custom at home. Of course, he will realize that his peers do not respond to his demands and even may exhibit open hostility to his desire to take all and give nothing; but because he knows no other way of gaining their approval and satisfying his desires at the same time, he will continue in the same direction. Here then, education, in the form of the parent or teacher must come forward to show him that by giving as well as taking he can gain the approval of his peers and still move towards satisfying his wants. Naturally the older the child is before the corrective measures are applied the more established his habit-patterns have become, and the longer and more difficult the readjustment process. With the adult, it becomes the enormously difficult task of the psychologist or psychiatrist to discover this goal underlying the complex of habits, impressions, and self-deceptions built up throughout the years.

When one considers that this is the case of any one individual and that each child makes a different interpretation of the conditions which surround him, the problem of the teacher or psychologist in helping him make his reinterpretation of his goal in life can be readily seen. It is the reason why Adler called his movement "Individual Psychology." However, it was his conviction that if the teacher could understand the principle of the goal of the child and how it bears on his relationship with other human beings around him, the task of helping him make his social adjustment would be much easier. The establishment of his system in the public schools of Vienna shortly before the advent of Hitler in Austria was one means by which Adler was able to substantiate this view.

Although we do not find as much in Dewey about the direct techniques of improving the social adjustment of the individual, we find a great deal of evidence that he supported this aim in education. In contrast to his statement that "since in reality there is nothing to which growth is related save further growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save further education" (6, p. 60), he says:

To learn to be human is to develop through the give and take of communication an effective sense of being an individually, distinctive member of the community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires, and methods and who contributes to a further conversion of organic resources into human resources and values (8, p. 389).

What Are Our Values?

What kind of society must we have in order to achieve the aims of the educative process? Dewey would say:

A society which makes provision for participation in the good of all its members on equal terms, and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is, in so far, democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationship and control (8, p. 225).

Adler's view can probably be summed up thus:

All the problems of human life demand, as I have said, capacity for co-operation and preparation for it, the visible sign of social feeling (2, p. 284).

To many of us this might seem to be an idealistic view, but again and again in his books Adler emphasizes that "the rules of the game of human society," or, as he also called them "the iron laws of human co-living," are not permissive platitudes but empirical directive facts. It is true that we have the individual *choice* to go one way or the other, but these laws make it impossible for us to derive happiness out of any attitude or action that is not in favor of others. Perhaps the clearest definition of what this means in philosophic terms comes from one of Adler's followers, Mark Anton Bruck. Bruck says:

1. Our happiness depends upon our significance.
2. Our significance depends on what we mean or signify to others. They will admit, approve, or admire only such significances as are

beneficial to them; they will not admit or will disapprove and despise significances that are indifferent or harmful to them.

3. Logical living signifies: living in accordance with the requirements of our own human nature and those of co-living. If we need significance and if we can get it only through attitudes and actions beneficial to others, then it is the way we must live (5).

Some of us may feel that these laws do not encompass all of what it means to be happy. Perhaps Dewey might regard happiness as present in the attainment of cultural or aesthetic values as long as they do no harm to others. But, I am sure that few will quarrel with the premise that one attains a feeling of happiness and self-satisfaction through "attitudes and actions beneficial to others" as Bruck suggests. Adler, himself makes no claims that his system is a panacea to cure all human ills, but perhaps a means of "turning big mistakes into little ones." However he does make two basic assertions regarding human behavior that, I think, are important to all of us as teachers and human beings alike. These are (1) All of us have within us the capacity to change our so-called basic natures if we choose to do so, and (2) the reason why we seldom do so without skilled help from outside is that we are unable to view ourselves objectively and consequently are apt to misinterpret our own motives. But essentially the limitations on our ability to change ourselves are not innate but self-imposed. Adler says:

From a psychological point of view, the problem of education reduces itself, in the case of adults, to the problem of self-knowledge and rational self-direction (1, p. 3).

When we realize that the conflicts and psychoses of nations and peoples are only elaborations of these individual misinterpretations of life, and that through education many of them can be corrected, if not eliminated entirely, we can begin to see the possible hope that lies ahead. Perhaps Dewey himself had an idea of this sort in mind when he said:

Why should it then be thought that one must take his choice between sacrificing himself to doing useful things for others, or sacrificing them to pursuit of his own exclusive ends? It is the particular task of education at the present time to struggle on behalf of an aim in which social efficiency and personal culture are synonymous instead of antagonists (8, p. 143).

We have seen that in these days of atomic warfare through the physical sciences we have posed the problem of our own self-destruction; it may

be possible that through philosophy and psychology, we may have found, at least, a partial answer.

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"Our response to the teachings of the 'hereditarians' and every other tendency to overstress the significance of constitutional dispositions is: the important thing is not what one is born with, but what use one makes of that equipment."

ALFRED ADLER, *Intern. Journ. Ind. Psych.*,
Vol. I, No. 2, p. 5 (1935).