

Social Interest—Another View

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Introduction

Rich Uncle George was visiting. Mother and Father laughed dutifully at his jokes and marveled at his wisdom. Little, four-year-old Billy played on the floor. In a moment of quiet Billy looked at Uncle George and said, oh so clearly, “That man sure has a big, funny nose.”

Mother looked at the ceiling and pretended that Billy hadn’t said it at all. That was her way. Father tried to make the comment more palatable by saying, “I know how it sounded, Uncle George, but what he really meant was. . . .”

I have observed many contemporary Adlerians react in those same ways to some of the comments of Adler that are embarrassing to the family. By carefully ignoring some of his words or saying he really didn’t mean what he so clearly said, Adlerians often introduce confusion to already complex and difficult concepts.

The Struggle to Define Social Interest

Social interest has become a central theme in mature Adlerian thought. In discussing this subtle concept, Adler (1954:35), for example, clearly wrote:

No human being ever appeared except in a community of human beings. This is very easily explained. The whole animal kingdom demonstrates the fundamental law that species whose members are incapable of facing the battle for self preservation, gather new strength through herd life.

The herd instinct has served humanity to this end; the most notable instrument which it has developed against the rigors of the environment is the soul, whose very essence is permeated with the necessity of communal life.

The Ansbachers, writing in *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler* (1967), use all the meat of that discussion by Adler which says, in essence, that man needs cultural instruments and cooperation to survive, except the portion regarding herd instinct. They appear to be looking at the ceiling and pretending that Adler had not said it at all. Talk of instinctive behavior is typical of that other theory and is as embarrassing to modern Adlerians as Uncle George’s big, funny nose.

Dreikurs (1953:4) emphasizes the social nature of the concept. After explaining the flying of birds and the sexual behavior of bees, he then says of mankind:

Man's urge to adapt himself to the arbitrary conditions of his environment is expressed by the social interest innate in every human being. But this innate social characteristic, which is common to all, must be developed if the individual is to fulfill the complicated demands of the community in which the civilized adult lives.

Now in saying what Adler really meant, Dreikurs has introduced an innate, instinctive characteristic that needs to be drawn out through training. It is a potential, a capacity. The same kind of reasoning could apply to every possible arena of human functioning including bridge playing, sexual behavior, aggressiveness and developing a periodic table of the elements. Many contemporaries of Dreikurs speak of social interest as an innate capacity much like man's upright stance and gait. While this is difficult to argue against, it doesn't seem very helpful either. All that we as human beings can become through training must somehow once have been an "innate potential." But to claim that humans can learn to live in infinitely varied ways is a long way from promoting instinctive behavior. Still, many modern Adlerians connect their ideas regarding social interest to Adler by using the term "innate capacity which must be developed."

Perhaps it would be more productive to say that Adler may have been wrong in promoting the instinctive nature of social interest. Such reasoning is not necessary to the rest of the theoretical position and may even be at odds with a system that emphasizes choice and personal responsibility.

Purpose

The main purpose of the balance of the paper is to show that social interest probably does depend upon certain uniquely human abilities and characteristics. I will try to build a reasonable argument for considering social feeling or social interest as a universally useful fiction (in the Adlerian sense) that is a cultural product which we inherit. The secondary purpose of the paper is to give some additional meaning to this powerful construct by relating this Adlerian idea to other human efforts to deal with the same issue in religion and in ethics.

Self Transcendence, Empathy and Social Interest

The ability to transcend the limits of the self is a definitive characteristic of the human. This unique power leads us to behave sometimes foolishly, often creatively, and occasionally with great empathy. We can, and do, move outside

our own space to identify with other people and even with material objects around us. What other creature on this earth would attempt to influence the course of a bowling ball by moving shoulders, head, or hips!

This self transcendence makes it possible to understand and partially anticipate how our actions will affect those about us. We can, with varying degrees of success, even put ourselves in the psychological place of the other guy. This uniquely human capability is called social feeling or social interest. Adler (1967:135-136) noted:

This evaluative attitude (social interest) must not be understood as an external form only as if it were the expression of an acquired way of life. It is much more than that. We are not in a position to define it unequivocally, but we have found in an English author a phrase which clearly expresses what we could contribute to an explanation: "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another." For the time being this seems to me an admissible definition of social feeling. . . .

We see immediately that this ability coincides in part with what we call identification or empathy. . . . The ability to identify must be trained and it can be trained only if one grows up in relation to others and feels a part of the whole. . . . The capacity for identification which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation and love is the basis of social interest and can be practiced and exercised only in conjunction with others.

There, he said it again. Social interest is innate, instinctive. There is more to it than that, however, because it does not appear spontaneously. Social feeling, though, does correspond "in part with what we call identification or empathy."

Self transcendence and the reaching out to identify with another inhabitant of this earth is largely a function, I believe, of the articulate use of language as a tool. Through the use of the symbols of language we can burst through the temporal, spatial, and psychological limits of the self to imagine circumstances of life that have not yet come into existence, and we can make the past alive today. We can even set to work to bring imagined conditions into existence. Language, in short, makes purposeful and purposive behavior possible. We can create long range goals, and we can construct major fictions to live by. Articulate speech and the self transcendence which rest upon it underly the human creativity which gives us choices for our lives within certain externally imposed limits. We can view the world, in addition, from the stance of another person.

Neither language nor self transcendence exist at birth as realities. Both lie there in the newborn as human possibilities which depend upon social contact and cooperation for their development. The very young can reach for the moon with every apparent expectation of touching it. Very likely the human infant is as close to omnipotence as he will ever be. For a brief, brief time all the world is a part of him, and he is a part of all things. The very process of coming to a concept of self is, in large measure, the process of separating the "me" from the "not me." We never completely finish the task (many feel personal anger when some unusually hairy person spits on the flag or a colleague or friend ridicules Adlerian psychology). But the possibility is there, and the process is an endless educational one. Most of us, no matter how unfortunate life has been to us, never completely separate ourselves from our fellows:

Through training we do come to a conception of selfhood, even if the boundaries are not always fixed and clear. We learn our conception of self in a thoroughly social, cooperative setting. The ability to cooperate does seem to exist from birth. From the moment of separate life, the mother's breasts must fill with milk, and the child must suck if he and all of us are to survive.

We achieve our conceptualization of self through language which according to Adler requires a kind of social, universal validity. In a slightly different context Adler (1954:37) says:

All its faculties are developed upon an identical basis: the logic of communal life. . . . In the origin of logic with its innate necessity for universal applicability we should doubtless find the next step in the development of man's soul. Only that which is universally useful is logical. Another instrument of the communal life is to be found in articulate speech, that miracle which distinguishes man from all other animals. The phenomenon of speech, whose forms clearly indicate its social origin, cannot be divorced from this same concept of universal usefulness. . . .

Speech has an enormously important value in the development of the human soul. Logical thinking is possible only with the premise of speech which gives us the possibility of building up concepts and understanding differences in values. The fashioning of concepts is not a private matter, but concerns all society.

Social Interest Alone is Not Enough

Now, more than ever before, the necessity of not allowing our own interests to become isolated and at variance with the interests of others has the kind of universal applicability Adler describes. Human survival has always demanded cooperation and that the interests of others be considered seriously.

At the level of survival it is easy to see that cooperation is required if the child is to live. At the more complex level of socially learned adult behavior it is easy to miss. It is necessary that the human be able to understand how his actions will affect others as a minimal condition for cooperative efforts for mutual benefit. Developed language, shared meanings, empathy, and identification are required as a condition for building sky scrapers or for living successfully as fellow human beings.

Adler (1954:136), in a passage that sounds somewhat pessimistic from the standpoint of modern Adlerian thought, writes of the need for empathy and identification:

We must reaffirm, however, that it (personal superiority) would not grow with such tropic luxuriance if we humans understood one another better. If we could go so far that each of us developed better eyes and could more transparently view the character of his neighbor, then we should not only be able to protect ourselves better, but simultaneously make it so difficult for another to express his striving for power, that it would not pay him to do so. Under such circumstances, the veiled striving for power would disappear.

If social feeling is, in large measure, the ability to “see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another,” then it is certainly an underlying condition for human cooperation. But taken alone, it also makes chicanery and confidence games possible. Extreme cooperation was required, incidentally, for the efficient extermination of approximately 6,000,000 Jews three decades ago.

We find the gift of empathy in the absence of caring can be used to anticipate the behavior of others and to take advantage of them: that cooperation without concern can be used for evil purposes. Only when the ability to identify with others, to feel empathy, and to cooperate is combined with some universally useful, ethical system does the full meaning of social interest become clear. For thousands of years, the ability to understand how our acts will affect others and to care, have been the basis for countless attempts to develop workable ethical systems.

For example, the ability and the willingness to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes is the underlying base of the Golden Rule. That ancient principle for living harmoniously with others has been variously stated in diverse religions both before and after Christ. Yet as an actual guide to our day-to-day decisions when there is a real conflict of interests among people, it probably just doesn’t work—unless one of the parties does not intend to apply the Rule! Consider an example of doing unto others as we would have them do unto us in a specific situation.

Suppose a Black man wants to buy my house in a totally white, suburban neighborhood. My unenlightened neighbors have informed me that they will hate me for life and possibly retaliate if I go through with the sale.

Now, the Black, applying the Rule, should say, "I wouldn't want to be forced into such a terrible position if I owned that house. Therefore, I'll not offer to buy the house; I'll withdraw."

The homeowner should think, "If I were the Black, I'd want the right to buy any house I can afford. Foolish neighbors should not prevent me from having my rights. I should, therefore, sell the house to him."

The result? Stalemate, and no action at all, no resolution.

Perhaps the real purpose of the Golden Rule is to point to a universally logical and ideal principle of communal life. The Golden Rule seems to specify that we ought to have an interest in the interests of others and to consider those interests seriously before we act.

In a real conflict situation we may not be able to act in such a way that everyone gets just what he wants. Teachers and therapists, in fact, often are required to act in such a way that persons who come to them do not get just what they want.

How Human Character Can Be Judged

But there must be some principles for judging human behavior that go beyond the specific situation and provide some general guidelines we can use as ways of making judgments. Adler (1967:142) clearly makes the same point as he struggles to give additional meaning to his key fiction, social interest:

Social interest means much more [than a social circle of ours.] It means particularly the interest in or the feeling with the community . . . in the essential or universal form. It means the striving for a community which must be thought of as everlasting as we could think of it if mankind had reached the goal of perfection. It is never [only] a present day community or society, a specific political or religious formation.

Adler clearly feels that there must be some principles for judging human behavior that go beyond the specific situation and are based on some kind of general welfare in an ideal sense.

Peters, in his book, *Ethics and Education* (1966), presents many parallel ideas as he attempts to apply Hegelian reasoning to issues in education. Many of his conclusions apply equally well to problems outside the walls of the classroom. In many ways he lends additional meaning to Adler's views.

Peters asserts, correctly, I think, that when a person in good faith asks the question, "What ought I to do?" in a public discourse there are certain assumptions that underly that act. One is that there will be freedom of choice. Why ask the question and seriously seek an answer if one is to be prevented from acting as he has decided? Another assumption is that those involved will give serious consideration to the opinions of the others. Why ask the question in a public discourse if one does not intend to seriously consider the answers and to believe they are offered in good faith?

So the act of asking the essential ethical question in a public discourse does rest upon certain underlying assumptions regarding one's relationship to others. Also assumed is that the interests of others (what is in their best interest) will be seriously considered. Peters (1966:95-96) writes:

Why should he not ask, "What ought I to do considering only myself?". . . The answer is surely that consideration of the interests of others is a presupposition of asking the question, "Why do this rather than that?" seriously. It (the asking of the question in public discourse) presupposes a situation in which men are concerned with finding answers. . . in which they need the help of other men. In entering into such a discussion any rational man must assume not only that there are worthwhile things to do, but also that he might want to engage in such worthwhile things. If he thought that having discussed such matters with his fellows, his stake in such a worthwhile life was going to be completely ignored, it is difficult to conceive how he would ever take the step in such a public discussion. As a rational man he must see, too, that what applies to him applies to any other man engaging in such a discussion, for how could he think that he alone has any claims?

It seems clear that Peters believes that in order for humans to live ethically and harmoniously together there must be general conceptions of what would be good for *anyone* and which goes beyond specific situations. These are the general conceptions which make communal living possible. There must be certain "ideal" principles, constructs, or fictions which people have the capacity to know and which may be taught and learned.

Peters (1966:97-98) further notes:

Anyone who considers seriously questions to do with the public interest must come to the conclusion that not only commodities such as food and raw materials are necessary to it, but also the observance of a minimal code of basic rules which are in any man's interest to observe and have observed. For without such a framework of order and security no one would be able to pursue for long either what he wants or what is good. . .

The most basic fact is the one to which Hobbes has given such prominence--man's indisputable mortality and his universal desire (other things being equal) to remain alive and his universal aversion to pain. . . . Another universal is man's vulnerability to attack from others and approximate equality in this respect to other men. . . .

Another such fact is man's need for other men if he is to survive and his limited social feeling with regard to them, which may extend only to his family or tribe. This . . . makes a limited number of basic rules imperative, the acceptance of which is necessary for any form of social life.

Adler (1954) made very much the same point as he talked of the consideration of inherent rules of the game of a group as they emerge within the limited organization of the human body and its achievements as if they were an absolute truth. There are clear demands upon people that come according to Adler from living communal lives. He writes:

. . . Thus we arrive at the conclusion that the concepts of reason, logic, ethics and aesthetics can have taken their origin only in the communal life of man and that they are at the same time the cement which protects culture from disintegration. . . .

What we call good or bad character can be judged only from the viewpoint of the community. Character, like any scientific, political, or artistic achievement, will prove its greatness and value by being valuable to men in general.

An ideal image by which we appraise the individual is created only by considering its value and usefulness for men in general. We compare the individual with the ideal image of a fellow man who meets his problems in a fashion with general validity. (Adler, 1967:130-131)

Summary

Healthy people are those who are able to cooperate with others, to consider the interests of others and who behave in ways that have usefulness to men in general, in ways that have general validity.

It is certainly within the power of people to live in this way. It is also clearly within the power of people to behave quite in the reverse way. For the good of us all, it is best if people are taught to live harmonious lives and who have a sense of the effects of their behavior on other people, and who, furthermore, care.

Social interest has demonstrated validity for human happiness and even human survival. Defining it as innate serves no useful purpose, and seems to be quite unnecessary. Developing social interest is a useful goal of education at home and at school and of therapy in the event these other educational systems have failed.

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