

# The Unity of the Self-Image

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“Each new generation struggles afresh with old and new tasks and, pitted against the environment, is forced as a whole to maintain its equilibrium physically and psychologically, with growing senses and growing understanding. This equilibrium can be gained only if the sum of the energies of the individual, supported through the growth of a rational picture of the world, is successful in bringing the problem of the environment closer to a solution.”

Alfred Adler \*

Personality implies unified action of an individual within the framework of the environment. Basic to this unified action of the individual is the concept of the self—the picture which each person carries within of his true nature. Whatever he does in life will be in accord with the particular, private view of the self. This view is built upon each reinforcing, previous social step which is selectively made to maintain a certain image.

The fulfillment of the self is a work which each person carries through life. Its concept is expressed through efforts within the community which ultimately enrich or deprive the social structure. Since these consistent acts which reinforce the individual's assumptions about himself are expressed through his personality, the same structure of values permeates behavior, no matter how or what the behavior appears to be. In other words, even behavior which is destructive and labeled neurotic makes good sense when viewed from the eyes of the person using that particular action to maintain his self-identity. It appears that when the self-image is detected and understood by the observer, a consistency will be found which explains what, on the surface, may appear out of character.

Therefore, it is not the acts themselves which need to be understood so much as the personality which stands behind each bit of behavior, good or bad. Understanding the self-image is the task of each person who wishes to help himself, or another, find successful ways of coping with life problems. Until the self-concept is known, the true goals of the person cannot be understood; his acts will be evident, but not intelligible. Although they make perfect sense to the person performing them, the private rationale may or may not accord with common sense.

Personality is defined by Webster as “the organization of the individual's distinguishing traits, attitudes or habits.” This organization has as its building block the foundation of the self-image. From this inner structure develops the individual behavior patterns which are recognizable to others. A recognizable

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personality implies consistency of behavior. Just as a person cannot master a skill independent from what has gone on before to prepare him, in similar fashion it appears that a person cannot act independent of his self-concept which he has previously structured and which is in the process of being structured all the time.

Behavior is necessarily, therefore, consistent with the concept of the self and the person's need to enhance the self as he perceives it. Perception in this instance is defined in terms of the way it exists for an individual, and not in actual objective terms; subjective opinion has more value than the actual situation. A child will believe that an inanimate object (e.g. a toy) can think and feel consciously. To the child, the toy is apt to think and feel as he does. Likewise, an adult projects certain feelings onto persons and situations he meets, endowing them with preconceived attributes which emphasize his self-image.

A person is ill-at-ease in situations which do not confirm his expectations. He may literally not understand or not "see" situations or behavior to which he is opposed. Such reactions appear to be predicated upon assumptions which are made to reinforce a particular sense of identity. We attach significance to that which makes sense to us, eliminating those factors which we consider trifles. Confirmation of expectations may be conceived to be reassuring because it reinforces the personality structure. Stereotyped reactions to the "wicked" stepmother, the "unfair" mother-in-law, the "dumb" blonde, testify to the recognized tendencies to simplify situations regardless of actuality. The person who anticipates certain results will act as if they are, in fact, in existence.

A child who is sure nobody wants him will ultimately act as though nobody does, and his feeling of unworthiness is apt to bring such dislike into reality, in spite of potentially favorable circumstances. He will test and test again in order to harmonize his interior feelings of being unworthy to correlate with the outward situation. An overly sensitive adult who meets a group of outsiders whom he judges to be his superiors or inferiors will find justification because he expects it. Because he generalizes on the subject ("I am inferior" or "I am superior"), he will interpret specific circumstances to suit himself; his ability to empathize has been short-circuited.

It is therefore a premise that the private interpretation of the individual will give both credibility and predictability to his overt performance. He will cling to behavior which to him is understandable and connected with the unity and consistency of the self as he sees it. In solving his problems, he will incorporate the principles of balance and inner order to maintain himself in a unified manner.

The "organization" of outward behavior is only another form of balance, and it is expressive of the consistency of personality. Just as the inner self is witnessed through the expressive movements and physical attitudes in standing, walking, talking, writing, etc., so the self-image privately exists and builds through generalities which are adapted into specific behavior patterns. The individual thinks, selects and remembers what is important to maintain his

integrity. A well-adjusted person may be said to be that individual who can maintain a sense of balance within himself and still be in harmony with society around him. Yet a criminal will be well-adjusted in certain criminal society; he may, in fact, be an acknowledged leader. The place he chooses for his leadership qualities to be displayed will be the environment where he feels he has the most chance of succeeding. What is considered his neurosis is consequently not a disorder so much as an attempt to maintain order within the personality. Its expression will be found to be appropriate to the surroundings as the person subjectively interprets them.

The appearance of outward balance is a reflection of inner balance and harmony. This need for balance, based upon the capacity of the human to "organize" units into a whole, is integral to the personality. Just as expressions such as "shook-up" are used negatively and emphasize fragmentation, such expressions as "upright" imply stability. (The word "up-tight" carries this concept to extreme, expressing a balance maintained with rigidity which connotes a certain anxiety on the part of the up-tight one; he fears loss of balance.)

Bodily balance and integration together are part of excellent or skilled performance. A bodily skill which is being learned for the first time involves the entire individual; only later is its performance refined and specific. It appears that this specificity indicates the efficiency and organization of the process. An example is a child just learning to write. His entire body takes part in the performance; he bobs his head, cranes his neck and twists his tongue. His entire torso appears involved with effort. He may twine his legs around the chair and jiggle his feet. In his beginning efforts he emphasizes total bodily effort and movement in what he is learning to master. The entire body participating in what will ultimately become an apparent manual performance is expressive of the individual's manner of assimilation. There is first, general effort and finally a synergized, specific movement which results in smooth mastery.

It appears that this same concentration of effort may be applied to personality expression. The system of specific values which a person brings to life will conform to the general inner sense of balance which is part of the self-image. Any resistance to outward change will be symptomatic of a resistance to anything which threatens to destroy this unified self-concept. If a thief believes himself to be clever only in stealing, he will resist efforts to curtail his stealing. If a girl believes she can be attractive only by promiscuous behavior, she will continue her activities and resist curtailment of them. If a child believes himself to be valuable only so long as he is noticed, he will make a nuisance of himself in public.

A person becomes anxious if he is prevented from giving expression to what he considers his own personality to be. Although he may give obedience to a situation and pretend all is well, it appears that the individual can fake it only so long; his tolerance for disunity or imbalance is limited, and the truth will out. It may be said, then, that the present is based upon that which has gone before.

Like history, we repeat the patterns which have proved workable to us in the past. We remain with our feet planted squarely in the self. To try to change behavior patterns without understanding the self-concept of the individual is a little like putting a hat on a donkey and expecting it to act like a man.

Integrating the personality implies inner equilibrium and an attempt to lessen contradictory attitudes. The person is in focus, so to speak, who neither exaggerate nor minimizes possibilities of action. He recognizes potentialities for what they are. Human life appears to have a dual purpose; first, to maintain the integrity of the self inwardly and outwardly; second, to develop and grow in the ability to cooperate. Both depend upon the individual's ability to recognize and respect not only his true potential but the potential of others.

The "I" cannot be separated from social action; each person needs fellowship. Under certain conditions, stereotyped behavior may appear advantageous; for instance, a complex dictatorship as well as a simple society structured with definite taboos may offer security to those who are motivated by power. Whether such social power is ultimately destructive or creative will depend upon the courses of action which the individual perceives as being open to him. His purpose will be to maintain that society which best preserves his identity.

Both collective and individual successful social action implies freedom from anxiety which cripples the creativity of each person. It evolves when the inner self is courageous and free enough to have a wide selection of choice of action. Since genuine membership in a group depends in large part on the view we hold of our special capacities, any limited view constricts our potential to cooperate fully. To be involved and committed positively with another implies inner balance which permits such freedom. An inadequate, stereotyped vision of the self will ultimately thwart the social goal of harmony and creative achievement.

The person cannot solve his problems or recognize his optimum goal of humanization in the fullest sense without recourse to the fundamental fact of being what he is to himself. He can see and understand only from his own viewpoint; he stands in the center of himself, and what he looks at and how he interprets what he sees make his world. Man is selective in his vision; he will choose and be able to see what he can assimilate because of previous encounters. Hence the limited viewing scope of the person called neurotic prevents him from assimilating a broader landscape and thus a broader possibility of action. He is hung-up on the "has to." His ability to be creative to the limits of his native gifts will therefore be curtailed. The chances are that his life-style outward pattern of behavior will be as rigid and unproductive as his inner self dictates; the good he may give the world he cannot.

The best of human life appears to consist in the effort to expand oneself and one's field of action with benefit to all. The courage to be imperfect and yet try again implies a self-consistency which is not violated by inappropriate action. We struggle to maintain our integrity in an environment which may be favorable or unfavorable, and how well we succeed in solving this problem is demonstrated ultimately through our social, or community, interest.

To be alive is to act and have goals. A striving for unity and balance within the self is a part of the inner goals of the personality; a liking for problem-solving appears to be part of the healthy human need to expand and develop outer goals. Social interest will be commensurate with, and dependent upon, a person's private logic pertaining to himself—the focal point of the personality appears from this point of view to be the person's inner evaluation of himself which triggers outer goal manifestations. Each human being marches to the refrain of "I seek myself." Answers to this problem torment or delight, but they cannot be ignored. Crawling out of a playpen or escaping from a highchair keep company with the best of mankind's impulses—we can predict that mankind wishes to enlarge his horizons and his goals, just as a toddler who has once escaped limiting boundaries will try it again and again.

To sum up, a particular social goal is based upon the generalized notion of the inner self. While changing situations bring new goals, the organization of the unified self consistently selects that direction of the goal which it will pursue. The striving for unified inner and outer achievement is constant. Self-evaluation will give the person certain standards which he will use to judge himself and his role in life. The person is reliable in his efforts—the possibilities he sees for himself appear harmonious to him. To say that an individual is inconsistent is a contradiction, for while the environment may change, under normal conditions the person is consistently himself.

Difficulties in learning and difficulties in social interest may be said to arise in part because of a faulty or inferior vision of the self. The victims of society and those who victimize society are alike. They have assimilated a limited vision, or a stereotyped vision of their potential. Such personalities are blocked because they have been built upon a definition of the self which is biased. There is, therefore, a fragile limit to a personal encounter with another.

The person who feels he cannot succeed in any society will compensate for his inner distress and loss of balance. He may very well over-compensate for his exaggerated inferiority feelings by exaggerated superiority drives into aggression, or perhaps by withdrawing into depression, which again is symptomatic of exaggerated desire for superiority or control. Or suicide may be the end result. To limit one's productivity and the onward-and-upward goals appears to be against the natural inclination of mankind as a whole. Life in general echoes this; seething miniature life under a microscope, the teeming life within the sea, the herd which maintains itself, speak to us of adaptable action.

A flower strives in every way it can to be the best it can be through favorable or hostile soil—an organ within the body will attempt to compensate for its weakness. A boy strives to become a man in every way he knows. If his presumptions are incorrect, he as well as society is the loser. Who can say that his motives do not, nevertheless, spring from the best which is inherent in life itself?