

INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY AND EXISTENTIALISM*

by Alfred Farau, Ph.D. (New York)

Existentialism is no philosophy at all. It refers to experience and not results of experience. The problem of human existence was the core of Adler's work. There was greater affinity between the forerunners of existentialism and Individual Psychology than the present existentialists. While existentialists are related to metaphysics, it is the realistic Adlerian who is much more related to it by the concept of Social Feeling. Individual Psychology does not demand a theoretical brotherhood but rather a sense of relatedness within the context of mankind as a unit.

When I am thinking of mankind today, the following picture comes to my mind: I see a naked infant, sitting on a ball of fire, and with wide-open baby-eyes it is staring — into space, and playing with the stars. This is not a pretty picture, I know. — The situation of our species on this planet is increasingly getting out of hand. This holds true for all areas of living as well as for all nations and countries. The very same century, which has made savages long for democracy, has also made the most educated people of Europe long for a "Fuehrer" out of the jungles. The very same century, which has produced Depth Psychology is gradually transforming the relationship between physician and patient into a mathematical equation out of a computer. For every meal we eat, two other people eat nothing, or hardly anything. "And one of those two people is a child. On World Children's Day, June 14, 1961, there were approximately 1,000,000,000 children in the world — most of them inadequately fed, stunted and disease-ridden. Less than one third of them will ever see the inside of a school." These are facts, taken from an official report of the United Nations, and quoted by Marian Maury in "Birth Rate and Birth Right"; a compendium, just published by world authorities on the immensely important topic. No longer is our birthrate mounting steadily; it rather has become a birth-flood. In addition, there looms automation. One of our professors was recently asked by a journalist: "What are the people going to do in this world of automation?" Answered the professor: "A group of highly qualified men and women will always be needed, even then..." "And how about the others", the reporter asked, "the billions of common people?" "We scientists", said the professor, "must work on automation; what it will mean — socially — is not our business." The professor was very proud of his answer.

It is interesting, that after countless discussions in various circles, last year, about the complete uselessness of fallout-shelters, almost over night, thousand of buildings in New York City now are displaying black and yellow signs, which read "Fallout-Shelter". (And this when for the first

*Speech delivered at the 12th Annual Conference of the American Society of Adlerian Psychology, May 31 — June 2, 1963, New York City.

time there is real hope for the realization of a test-ban-agreement between Russia and the USA).^{*} Again I quote a few authentic facts from a study undertaken by the Rockefeller Institute, New York: at the present time the U.S. possess a destruction-potential of almost 30.000 megatons of Trinitrotoluol (the so-called TNT). Probably nobody can visualize what that means. However, if we consider, that during the entire Second World War, from 1939 to 1945, including the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, five megatons of TNT energy were used, while at the present time America alone possesses six-thousand times more than the entire world possessed twenty-five years ago, this might tell you a story. The study of the Rockefeller Institute states further, that in the event of an attack, at the present stage of development, assuming one 10.000 megaton bomb of an enemy were directed against the military objects and largest cities of the U.S.A., not more than 11% of the population would survive.

The question may arise: what has all this to do with Existentialism? A great deal. Both, the atomic age and existentialism were born simultaneously: namely during the darkest days of World War II. Existentialism is *the* philosophy of the atomic age.

What actually is existentialism? Since there are so many definitions in existence, why not permit myself my own? I should say (and I know, it sounds somewhat malicious): existentialism is the non-philosophy of the masses of isolated and unhappy individuals, who are marching together in no direction. Psychologically speaking I would define it this way: existentialism is the striving for a personal meaning of an individual's life in a completely meaningless world. There will be objections raised to everything I shall say from here on. If I should say, that existentialism isolates the individual... this or that person will ask: "How about Martin Buber 'I and Thou'?" — Should I claim that existentialism is negativistic... many will contradict me: "How about Paul Tillich's 'Courage to Be'?" — And when I am going to state that existentialism is materialistic... "How about Martin Heidegger?" — And all these contradictions will be valid, because it depends who, just then, has been chosen as personal idol. Always assuming, that this very idol has not also just changed direction. Heidegger of 1920, Heidegger of 1927, Heidegger of 1945... these are three entirely different Heideggers.

What then, really is existentialism? — It really is: no philosophy at all. And this for two reasons: in the first place it constantly refers to "experience", whereas any true "philosophy" — at least in the Western meaning of the word — must be the result of an experience. Secondly it is not a philosophy, because it has not been originated by a philosopher. It is, at best, a philosophical syndrome. It contains everything in symptoms: the devoted Christian Kierkegaard and the fanatical Christian of Byzantine character, Dostojewsky; Nietzsche, the anti-German superman; Heidegger, the typical German thinker, including even the incomprehensible style; delicate poets like Rilke and Kafka; theologians like Tillich and Buber; metaphysicians like Jaspers and Marcell; atheists like Jean Paul Sartre; they

^{*}Some given facts may seem not so urgent anymore at the present time; as the underlying psychological and spiritual facts, however, do not seem "outdated" in the least, the author decided not to change these parts of the article. —

all are considered to be existentialists or its forerunners. And in addition, some of the contemporary existentialists fight against each other. Jaspers rejects Heidegger's belief, that knowledge can be transmitted through philosophy; Heidegger considers Jaspers' discussion of the transcendent betrayal on the possibility of concrete explorability of all phenomena, and both refuse to be called existentialists, because this is indeed what Jean Paul Sartre considers himself to be. Co-existence of the existentialists is truly in very bad shape!

I might say: the largest common denominator of all existentialism seems to be man's distress; his fear, his despair, his loneliness, and his being lost completely on this planet. I am wondering why Arthur Schnitzler, the great Viennese writer at the turn of our century, has never been included; for his Theme of Life — one could say paradoxically — has been Death; and it is quite inconceivable to me, why no one as yet has noticed, that the most important forerunner of existentialism was a musician, namely Gustav Mahler, whose work — in my opinion — is the most important artistic exploration of modern man's despair, of his fear of Life and his fear of Death.

Let us now turn to Alfred Adler. It can be easily assumed, that any reader of this article is familiar with the work of this pioneer of Depth Psychology, who broke away from Sigmund Freud in 1911, and founded Individual Psychology, the first stepping stone, which led modern psychology into social science. Adler's concepts are known today not only to the experts in the field; some of the most important ones, as e. g. Inferiority feeling, Inferiority complex, Family constellation, Style of life, and Social interest especially, have become part of our everyday language. Surely, the problem of human existence was the core of Adler's work. At any rate, I see far more connection between Individual Psychology and the so-called "forerunners" of existentialism than with the contemporary ones, and particularly do I have in mind Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Individual Psychology and Kierkegaard are connected through the latter's concept of the "Human Situation": man must make decisions. It matters less, says Kierkegaard, whether the decision is moral or not! The essential thing remains the decision per se. Much as Adler accepts the necessity for making decisions, he would never have deemed it irrelevant whether that decision is useful or harmful for the community as a whole; and similarly, the attitude of Adler's courage is — in contrast to Nietzsche — not super-human and anti-social, but it is human and democratic.

What connects *today's* existentialists with Adler is the fact, that man can exist only as social being, and the awareness of the individual's fear of life. Existentialists and Adlerians share also the holistic viewpoint. This holistic viewpoint has been so widely accepted today, however, that it appears almost everywhere: in Gestalt-Psychology, the physiological and neurological circle of Kurt Goldstein, in psychosomatic medicine, with the Neo-Freudians, with Karl Jung and the Eranos movement, with the experimentalists and even with the academic psychologists.

And this leads us to the existential analysts, whose therapy is based on existentialism. Among the originators we find Binswanger, Medard Boss, Minkowski, Gebattel, a.o.; Wilson van Dusen, an existential analyst him-

self, undertook to examine both, Adlerian and Existential analysis. He writes: "Our theory is based on an attempt to discover the phenomenology of the other person, his unique way of being-in-the-world. This parallels Adler's attempt to discover the style of life of the individual" . . . (By "Style of Life" Adler means the direction in which an individual moves, in order to reach his goals). "Here", van Dusen continues with his examination, "is the real difference between the two schools. . . with his own understanding of a case, Adler undertakes to explain this knowledge to the patient. . . It is unlikely that an existential analyst would ever conceive the process as one of explaining the patient to himself". — This remark implies that the existential analysts are convinced — as are so many psychologists — that they are digging deeper than the Adlerians, whose therapy is essentially nearer to ego-psychology and conscious approach, and that their therapy, in contrast to Adler's is a real exploration of the ontological ground of man. However, they are mistaken. Van Dusen, surprisingly undogmatic, must admit that "they are merely laboriously rediscovering what Adler has set forth to discover thirty and forty years ago already". For the "Style of Life", and the innate capacity for social interest, are also ontologically grounded.

I do believe, however, that in one respect the existential analysts do have an advantage over the Adlerians. Adler says that one basic dynamic force is behind all human activity, namely the "Striving for Superiority and Perfection." This is an axiom in Adlerianism. It has been accepted by the existentialists (regardless of whether they are familiar with Adler's theories, or not). But they also say, that it covers not everything — possibly there is another purpose behind this recognizable one, which we cannot — at the present stage of development of psychology — as yet recognize. Perhaps they are right; perhaps they are wrong. In any event, I believe that this speculation is worth to be explored. The thought in itself might stimulate neglected Adlerian research, and it might widen and enlighten the horizon of Individual Psychology in a fruitful way. Adlerians should move on a little; perhaps they should strive towards earning some laurels of their own, instead of resting securely on those of Alfred Adler.

We still have not penetrated to the most essential part of Existentialism. For this we learn only partially from philosophy and analysis. It is contemporary literature we must turn to, in order to find complete expression of what existentialism has achieved, or I should rather say, distorted; and I refer to its endless preoccupation with dread, fear and despair; to its horrifying mixture of Nihilism, which far overshadows all Materialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with a Mysticism, which exceeds all theological eccentricities of the Middle Ages. We all know, of course, that there are excellent writers and thinkers among the existentialists; the fact remains, that through it a door was opened to those innumerable mediocre and less than mediocre "poets" and playwrights, who speak forever in symbols, because there is no human language left to them any longer, with the possible exception of vulgarity. Unfortunately they confuse *vulgarity* with *reality*. Did many of you not also notice, that fewer and fewer films and plays, not to speak of novels, which have come out lately, have a "Happy End"? Does that truly mean that art has become adult? I doubt

it. Rather do I believe that for modern man the unhappy end has become the only acceptable one. Actually it is not even an "Unhappy End"; it is an "Existential" one. The formerly negativistic attitude of many individuals has deteriorated into a collective one. People derive a certain feeling of comfort, a faint glimmer of satisfaction from finding confirmation of their misery and hopelessness through facts. And the reason for this is that they no longer can imagine any kind of existence without unsolvable confusion and complete senselessness. This reminds me of a well-known anecdote: Johannes Brahms was a notorious pessimist and a very witty musician of his time, Hellmesberger, once said: when Brahms is in a particularly good mood, he composes a song which is titled "The Grave is my Delight." Yet — what a difference! The composer Brahms, the philosopher Schopenhauer, the poet Ibsen, the psychologist Freud — true, they all were essentially pessimistic. But how productive were these nineteenth century pessimists, how creative, how full of strength! Surely, they did not simply whine in company with their own audience!!

And here the most significant difference can be found between the existentialists and Adler — in spite of many similarities — namely the difference, which in my opinion must bring about the final separation: Adler is full of courage, even in his despair; the existentialists are full of despair even in their courage. There is such a thing as courage in existentialism, undoubtedly, but what kind of courage is that? I always have the feeling they are brave with clinched teeth. Man is doomed to live, and he might just as well make the best of it! It really is a puritanical courage, and it might be well worth the while to explore, to what extent it has but replaced puritanical sex-morale. We shall get an entirely different picture, when we visualize the "courage" of Individual Psychology, expressed in Adler's writings and in case histories of Adlerians. Adler says Yes to life. With open arms . . . To life, which is beautiful; precious; important; and well worth living — in spite of everything!! Adler knew only too well that man is capable of living only in community with others, and that he is full of fear in an unknown world. But strange — these very facts — with Adler they often turn into comfort.

It is inconceivable that Adler could ever have written a sentence like the following by Sarte, one of the most highly gifted existentialists: "Man is the being who wants to be God. But the idea of God is contradictory, and man therefore is a useless passion."

To give credit to existentialism, which it does nevertheless deserve, one must repeat here once more when and how it originated. One can well neglect it as an intellectual orientation before the year 1940. But then, during the occupation of France by the Nazis, at the time of the "Resistance", it became an important historic phenomenon. Albert Camus has formulated this most clearly. At the time the situation was that of Sisyphus, the damned one in the Underworld. There was really nothing one could do, but accept the damnation: nothing but to bear it, and — at best — not to lose one's dignity. It was truly the heroic time of existentialism. And it really is the tragedy of existentialism that it continued with this feeling of life (this heroic Nihilism of a desperate and exceptional time, which we must respect, if not admire), and believed it to be still valid, when

immeasurable oceans of new discoveries and experiences already opened up before us. Between 1940 and 1963 not twenty-three years have gone by, but twenty-three thousand years! Yes, it is a world of misery and madness at the present time, but it is also a time of grandeur, which cannot even be grasped yet. Existentialism, which still has remained so fashionable in many parts of the world, does not even know yet that — seen from a historic perspective — it has become obsolete. Heroic nihilism has become a saturated one; its courage is drowning in the self-pity of lonely individuals; and the Space-Age still clings to this outlived and inappropriate philosophy whose themes are despair and resignation.

Before returning again to Individual Psychology, I should like to discuss something, which to me seems to be extraordinarily important. Again and again we hear of the great inner relatedness of existentialism and Zen Buddhism; and I believe this to be a complete misunderstanding and a lack of knowledge of the Eastern attitude towards life; and the few similarities taken into account are quite superficial, indeed. True, Baso Matsu has called Zen “the daily consciousness” already more than thousand years ago. This daily consciousness is nothing other than “to sleep when one is tired, to eat when one is hungry.” But how far removed is this from modern existentialism! For the “consciousness” Zen is concerned with (incidentally an entirely different consciousness than that of European-American psychology!) only *becomes* consciousness when it *stops* being consciousness and still *remains* just that. “Man is a thinking being, but his works are created when he does *not* think”, says Daisetz J. Suzuki. “We eat no longer when we eat, we sleep no longer when we sleep. Man must think as rain is falling from the skies. . . as the stars are shining at night. . . as the grass in the gentle wind of spring. He indeed is himself rain, stars and grass.” — These are thoughts much too difficult for Western man to grasp in their simplicity; because he lacks all tradition, all training and all belief to do so.

When Zen Buddhism concentrates on one moment, it does not isolate it. For past, present and future, goal, way and interrelation are *one*. Nor does it exclude anything, for all is contained in it existentially, we could also say, it can exclude *all* because *all* is included in it.

Measured by such a deeply metaphysical form of “existentialism” today's existential philosophies are typical of modern Western nihilism, which derives from fear and not from meditation, from the struggle for existence and not from understanding existence, and they represent a narrowing rather than a cosmic widening of philosophical development.

Adler's theory is of course also a Western one, which deals very concretely with concrete problems. Still it is a strange fact, that, while some of the existentialists are related to metaphysics (though less than they claim), it is the realistic Adlerians who are much more related to it, though most of them do not know it. (They have “repressed” it!) Here is the paradox namely that Adler, whose Individual Psychology was the first “realistic” reaction to “mystic” original psychoanalysis, has at the same time initiated — in the beginning surely quite unintentionally — a reaction against his own “down to earth” orientation.

Adler, who was the first one to introduce vocational guidance clinics,

consultation centers, advisory councils, etc., through his practical work with people became increasingly aware of "Gemeinschaftsgefuehl", that concept which more and more proves to be metaphysical, the clearer we see the process from a historic point of view. — The translations of the term, which are still in use, "social sensitivity", "social feeling", "social interest" (I myself have been using the latter in this article), are without exception inadequate, because they contain only a part of the concept. Therefore more and more psychologists and other scientists have recently stopped using these translations, and the original and quite untranslatable German term Gemeinschaftsgefuehl has been used instead. — And only now and only gradually do many of the Adlerians themselves begin to understand clearly that it is this very concept which has turned out to be Adler's most important contribution, not only to psychology and philosophy, but to the history of mankind in its entirety.

Gemeinschaftsgefuehl, as Adler sees it, is not a theoretical command and demand for human brotherhood, but a basic fact of nature, given by Life itself to our species, which lives on the crust of this planet. Here we can sense definitely the relatedness with the age old wisdom of religion, that mankind is a unit and that man can find himself only by loosing himself in a higher goal than himself. It is the task of Adler's Individual Psychology, for the first time to prove this fundamental truth through scientific psychological methods.

Assuming hopefully that our world will not come to an end, the world of the future most certainly will be more social-minded than any other before, and at the same time it will be transcendently orientated. The writer of this article has expressed these convictions for many years. I believe that the metaphysical trend must be clearly visible to all who do not close their eyes to it, in the newest mathematical formulae as well as in research in biology and physics, in the rise of parapsychology as well as in the dawning of space-sociology. And the alert observer will notice that even technical science — in spite of its horrifyingly maniacal character we spoke of — begins to show spiritual traits! — And still we are lacking for the Space Age a philosophy which points to the future. Yet, I do believe that with the mutual influence of astronautics and parapsychology (and here I include Jung's School) — in connection with a realization of truly experiencing the Eastern attitude towards life and its feeling — a new and positive-optimistic philosophy will develop. This is a goal to be reached only in generations, but it can be reached and it will be reached. Possibly Adler's concept of Gemeinschaftsgefuehl will climax only during this new historic process of change. And this, because of the very fact that Gemeinschaftsgefuehl is not only "social interest". It is the inevitable interrelationship between the social needs of earthborn man and the cosmic consciousness of his psyche. I would like to emphasize as strongly as possible that I have said: *earth-born*, and not *earth-bound*. Man is a socio-biological being *and* a transcendental phenomenon. He is the son of the Earth and the child of the Universe.

One more thought should be added here. Just as Plato's "Ideas" or Aristotle's "Entelechy" — to give but two examples — today are different from what they were 2500 years ago, the last word about Adler's "Gemein-

schaftsgefuehl" has not been spoken by Adler. No genius ever spoke the last word. Others must continue to build and enlarge on his concept. It was Goethe who said: "Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vaetern hast, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen." ("What you inherited from your fathers must first be earned before it's yours.") — Gemeinschaftsgefuehl as a concept is Adler's greatest heritage. At the same time it is an obligation. An obligation for all people, who — at the present time, which is still so depressingly influenced by a tortured outlook on the future — believe as did Alfred Adler: that Life is worth living, and that it has a meaning. A personal meaning for the individual, a social meaning for the community, and let us not stop here — : a spiritual meaning for mankind.

50 West 96th Street
New York, N. Y., 10025