

Note on the Psychology of Proper Names

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In a paper "On the Psychology of Proper Names" in a recent issue of this journal, Paul Plottke³ shows how a person's attitude toward his name may be used in understanding his personality. This paper shows striking similarities to one by a German military psychologist, Professor Dr. Günther,¹ Berlin, published in 1939 in the *Wehrpsychologische Mitteilungen*, a restricted publication for military psychologists. The opening paragraphs in the two papers are almost identical. Plottke starts with: "Certain people have the magic belief that one's name determines his or her character. . . . The very opposite . . . seems to be expressed by Goethe when his Faust says to Gretchen: 'Name ist *Schall und Rauch*'. ('Name is sound and smoke.')" Günther introduces his discussion of proper names as follows: "The question as to whether and to what extent the first and the last name of the individual have an outer or inner significance for him, is of psychological importance. The truth lies between two extreme poles: the name is neither *Schall und Rauch* (sound and smoke), nor is it in itself descriptive of the bearer of the name."

Günther continues from here to show how a person's attitude toward his name may be used for diagnostic purposes, although he does not develop these thoughts as clearly and fully as does Plottke. To quote Günther: "One does not select one's name, but is named by one's parents. The name is, so to speak, given to us by fate; we cannot change it. Psychologically, there are only three possible relationships of a man to his name. (1) The name has no inner, personal significance for the bearer, i.e., not only has he a very common name without personal color, but he never becomes aware of the peculiar quality of his name. Such a person might agree to the proposal to assign everyone a number for purposes of identification. (2) He has a positive relationship to his name; for example, he finds his name fitting, or pretty, or he is proud of it. In families with traditions the name appears as an important symbol of the family heritage or it may represent a moral obligation. . . . (3) Finally, one may reject one's name for various reasons. One may, e.g., have a name which does not sound well or immediately leads to unpleasant associations which, in turn, may at times irritate or even endanger the self-esteem of the bearer. Such names may cause the formation of a psychological tension, and the person so called may take any joke or insinuation regarding his name as a personal insult—which indeed it is. Also consider the comical situations which arise when upon meeting someone for the first time, you learn that his name signifies

quite the opposite from his appearance. The attitude of an individual toward his name can be psychologically very significant."

It is exceedingly unlikely that Plotke knew of Günther's paper, since the *Wehrpsychologische Mitteilungen*, as mentioned at the outset, was a publication restricted for circulation among German military psychologists. It would therefore be interesting to trace what background factors these authors had in common to determine observations along such similar lines. Here we find that while Plotke is influenced in his thoughts by Adler, Günther expresses views strikingly similar to those of Adler, although he traces them to Nietzsche rather than Adler. This is quite understandable since, working as he did under the Nazi regime, Günther could hardly have afforded to expound Adler. In a paper on "The Relationship of Man to Himself" Günther² discusses self-esteem as the essential basic attitude. He sees evaluation of the environment as based on self-evaluation, although the two attitudes are not identical and do not necessarily run in the same direction. High or low self-esteem may be found with either social or asocial orientations. Love with low self-esteem is a flight from the self to the other person for the purpose of using him. Genuine love is possible only through love of the self; only he who values his self can give love to another person. Günther quotes from Nietzsche as follows: "We must fear him who hates himself because we shall be the victims of his revenge. Thus we must see to it that we seduce him toward loving himself." Aside from such considerations, Günther placed, however, considerable importance on heredity, keeping in tune with his time and place. For one reason or another, Günther disappeared from the scene rather suddenly. His article on self-esteem ended with the promise of a continuation under the title "The Man of Resentment"; but this sequel never appeared.

Even though Günther did share basic views of personality with Plotke, which would account for the fact that the two authors developed similar approaches to the psychology of proper names, the question still remains: Did the psychology of proper names actually originate with these two authors, albeit independently from one another, or had such views been expressed before and, if so, by whom and where?

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