

The Basic Discrepancy of the Human Mind

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Man moves between experiences of difficulties and compensations, i.e., he strives to overcome these difficulties in trying for success. These are, generally speaking, the phylogenetically acquired and ontogenetically developed ways and means of adaptation to the conditions of life, which, for human beings, means social life. As the psychic life involves those factors enabling man to deal with the conditions of social life, it is obvious that psychic health is identical with successful adjustment to social life.

Usually people perceive difficulties and the particular conditions of their social life in a biased way, and, consequently, their compensational movements do not correspond to objective necessities. Alfred Adler demonstrated how this biased way of experiencing and acting occurs according to a pattern which he called "Style of Life." This style of life has been developed by the individual in his early childhood. It originates from the individually shaded feeling of inferiority and is the *individual's guiding line to all his conduct*; it aims at a fictitious goal of perfection which corresponds to his feeling of inferiority. Thus we can state that the relationship between the objective conditions of an individual's social life and his subjective way of perceiving and experiencing these objective conditions, and his corresponding behavior, is a chief feature of the individual style of life. In most cases, however, this relationship is characterized by a more or less large gap, by a discrepancy. The importance of this discrepancy can scarcely be over-emphasized. That is why the writer calls it the *Basic Discrepancy of the Human Mind*. It certainly deserves a thorough study as to its origin, its development, and its consequences for human psychic life.

This Basic Discrepancy is, as mentioned above, the discrepancy between objective facts of real life and the individual's subjective way of perceiving these objective facts. How does that come about? It starts, as will be seen, in the earliest childhood. It has as its background and source, and thus reflects, another important objective fact which we may correctly term a biological discrepancy. It consists in the following: the human baby is born, i.e., somatically separated from its mother, and exposed to a physically (though not socially!) isolated life, at a stage when it is somatically not at all ready for it. As a consequence, it depends, entirely and vitally, on the care of its environment. The human infant has not acquired the necessary patterns phylogenetically which would make it fit for independent life immediately after birth, as compared with certain animals. It is compelled to acquire these patterns individually, using and developing only the phylogenetically acquired, i.e., inherited "abilities and possibilities" (Adler) in approaching the outer world which, to the baby, is some-

thing altogether chaotic. It, moreover, cannot even distinguish between its own organism and the outer world. But this approach is identical with perceiving and answering objective facts with the inadequate means at the baby's disposal. The baby's central nervous system has not, and could not have developed as yet the abilities of discernment, discrimination, abstraction, in short, what we call consciousness. As a consequence, the baby perceives both its own organism and the outer world, so to speak, in the sphere of feelings and sensations, in "terms" of comfort and discomfort. It is bound to perceive any kind of situation first as a difficulty; but according to the baby's stage of psychic development, difficulty does not mean to *him* anything in connection with an objective fact which causes the difficulty, but simply the feeling of discomfort, the suffering, in other words, the subjective perception of an objective fact but not the objective fact itself. Thus, the first movements of compensation, taking place in a groping, trying way, can never tend to remove an objective fact causing the perception of a difficulty, but serve only to get rid of the feeling of discomfort, irrespective of the objective fact. This is the aforementioned Basic Discrepancy at its very origin. It has decisive consequences for the further psychic development of the child; for, already at this stage, the important question arises whether the influence of the environment, chiefly of the mother, will help the child to close or widen this gap. An example will illustrate this:

A baby wets its diapers. This fact, together with the impossibility of moving away despite fidgeting, causes a deep feeling of discomfort, or as we may term it, the baby perceives subjectively a difficulty. Of course, nobody can expect the baby to "think" according to the objective facts: "I should not wet my diapers, I should learn how to control my bladder." It cannot even discern whether the feeling of discomfort comes from wetting or hunger or anything else. But it strives to get rid of this suffering, and expresses that through crying. Now let us imagine that mother changes the diaper not regularly but only upon the baby's crying. This situation repeating itself time and again, the child has after some time, by "training" this act of compensation (crying), acquired a new association-pattern. This pattern does not run along the lines of the objective facts such as: wetting - discomfort, dry - comfort, but it simply runs along the lines that present themselves to the baby: *discomfort - crying - comfort*. Even the mother does not play any part yet, but simply the disappearance of the feeling of discomfort after crying. If the baby expresses, at some other time, again through crying, a feeling of discomfort, this time caused by hunger, and mother feeds the baby when it cries, and not in regular intervals, we find again the association-pattern: *discomfort - crying - comfort*, although the difficulty originates this time from an entirely different source. Thus, the discrepancy between the subjective perception of objective facts on the one hand and the facts themselves on the other,

the Basic Discrepancy, has been deepened instead of having been overcome; the child has acquired the "erroneous impression" that it can get rid of discomfort and difficulties through crying; the way along the lines of a "pampered style of life" has started.

This example proves what a decisive factor this Basic Discrepancy is for the shaping of the style of life. If it is not overcome in time, it will be taken along and further deepened by more experiences, such as being picked up and lulled to sleep when crying. The baby will perceive difficulties along this or a similar association-pattern, and will try to compensate through movements which have proved successful before in getting rid of the suffering. In our example it may, being a pampered child, try to "solve" difficulties through crying; the more so when it has come to learn later on that crying as such does not remove the feeling of discomfort, but is received as an "order" by another person on whom one depends.

From all this we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The Basic Discrepancy manifests itself in the earliest babyhood in every psychic movement whatsoever, i.e., in every subjective perception of a difficulty, and in every compensational movement made in order to overcome this difficulty subjectively, i.e., the suffering resulting from it. It manifests itself in the feeling of inferiority of early childhood; for, first, the feeling of inferiority corresponds to the subjective perception of the entire situation of early childhood, or as we may term it, the entity of all subjective difficulties in early childhood, and, second, if there were no Basic Discrepancy, a feeling of inferiority would not come into existence but only an objective evaluation of difficulties and of the respective possibilities to overcome these difficulties. Since objective evaluation is impossible at that stage, and since the feeling of inferiority in its individual character is the starting point of the individual style of life, we can rightly state that, paradoxically as it may seem, the development of personality necessarily starts with a contradiction, with a striking discrepancy, with an "error." But such paradoxes happen often enough in nature (e.g., beasts of prey living by killing other animals which on their part are equipped with natural means of protection against the former, both of them being subject to the law of preservation of the individual and the species, etc.). The laws of nature do not care for our laws of logic; rather do we have to adapt our way of thinking to the laws of nature. The same applies to psychology. And we must not forget that the evolution of living beings is going on in a struggle with the conditions of nature by "trying out" ways of adaptation, with formidable casualties on the part of those who "committed errors," i.e., who were not properly adapted. Individual evolution is going on in struggle as well; and thus, in consequence of this general law, we develop our personality by seeking and finding ways to cope with the conditions of our life, i.e., of social life. Contradictions and "errors" are an integral part of this struggle.

We grow up psychically by both committing errors and overcoming them. Therefore, to be afraid of committing errors means to be afraid of life itself. It is never essential not to commit errors, but the question is to recognize errors and to overcome them as soon as possible. In psychology that means, above all, to overcome the Basic Discrepancy.

2. The Basic Discrepancy is inevitably bound to appear in earliest childhood. When the individual style of life is being shaped out of the first compensational movements, the prerequisites of perceiving an objective fact correctly, such as a certain level of consciousness, intelligence, a certain stock of experiences, are not yet available; for, at that time, the child is just starting to collect experiences and by doing so develops consciousness. On the other hand, the individual style of life is being built up by just such individual experiences, i.e., subjective perceptions of difficulties and possibilities of success. When, at around the fifth year of life, the individual style of life is about fully shaped, the child is already in a position to evaluate objective facts much more correctly; but by this time it has already learned to perceive tendentiously, the direction of its style of life. The fact that human consciousness is being developed out of the very conditions which ought to presuppose its existence is a direct consequence of the aforementioned biological contradiction and leads inevitably to the formation of the Basic Discrepancy of psychic life..

3. Points 1 and 2 clearly prove how important it is for the further development of the child and for its adjustment to the immutable fact of human interconnection and interrelation with both nature and society, to overcome this Basic Discrepancy as early as possible. All kinds of subsequent failures and tensions involve this Basic Discrepancy, embody it in its individual shape and shade. The first and primary result of the Basic Discrepancy is the most decisive tension and discrepancy, the source and origin of all further psychic tensions: It is the tension existing between the individual and society. The actual distance between an individual and society expresses clearly the discrepancy between the objective fact of man's social life on the one hand, and the subjective perception of this fact by this individual on the other. Hence follows:

a) If an individual does not overcome the Basic Discrepancy, the feeling of inferiority acquired in the earliest childhood in its individual shape and shade has given and it is still giving him the erroneous impression that he is personally incapable of coping with the tasks emanating from social life; i.e., the individual still confuses his subjective feeling of inferiority with objective, unchangeable inferiority.

b) As he has learned to take the subjective perception of a difficulty for the real, objective difficulty and to overcome, by his compensational activities, this subjective perception and feeling of inferiority only, he must also

have learned to take a subjective perception of success, i.e., overcoming this feeling of inferiority, for objective success, which could mean only coping with a given task in social way. In other words: an individual lacking self-confidence tries hard to conceal his supposed "inferiority" from both himself and others in order to save his self-esteem. This happens whenever he is challenged by a situation with which he does not feel able or ready to cope. This attitude is, of course, bound to create and to widen constantly the gap between the individual and society.

c) Being in strict contradiction to the fact of man's social interconnection, the distance between an individual and society necessarily leads, like any other infringement upon laws of nature, to growing conflicts. These conflicts widen this distance, and render the overcoming of the Basic Discrepancy more difficult. Here it may be mentioned in short that all kinds of psychic failures (maladjustments of problem children, nervousness, neurosis, criminality, even functional psychoses) are expressions of this objectively futile fighting attitude against the laws of social life. Neuroses, for instance, serve, without being understood by the patient himself, to escape situations emanating from the three life problems—the neurotic escapes by creating counter-reasons, corresponding to his style of life, in order to save his self-esteem. "What could I not achieve if I were not suffering from headache, insomnia, etc." He is suffering indeed, and he is fighting against the symptom, but just by doing so he emphasizes the "if."

It is obvious that all psychic failures mentioned above involve the Basic Discrepancy at its highest level. Being a problem child, becoming criminal, or showing a nervous or neurotic symptom clearly indicates that the Basic Discrepancy has developed into an open clash. It means that the individual, hard pressed by a particular objective fact of social life, which he has not learned to face, tries his hardest, but without success, to apply his subjective way of perception and compensational activities to this fact. This results in the individual's failure to cope with an objective situation as he uses only those means thus far applied by him along his individual style of life. Thus he does not try to overcome this gap, but to evade it somehow with the help of the symptom: the "if"—as in the case of the neurotic—or, through ruse and force, to make objective facts fit into his subjective conceptions and attitudes, as is done by the criminal and the psychopath. A functional psychosis clearly means that the gap cannot be bridged at all. The psychotic has decided the clash definitely in favor of his subjective conceptions by entirely eliminating objective facts and creating his own subjective world, as is clearly shown in delusions and hallucinations, which indicate that the tension has led to complete rupture, and is leading further, from this new level, to ever-growing conflicts with the community.

Thus we can formulate the important law of the Basic Discrepancy of the Human Mind as follows:

The individual style of life is characterized 1) by the individual features of the Basic Discrepancy, i.e., the discrepancy between objective facts of social life and the way they are subjectively perceived. It is inevitably bound to appear at the origin of personality, 2) by the way and intensity of its growing or by the extent of its being overcome. The maintenance of the Basic Discrepancy is clearly expressed by the distance between an individual and his community, as seen in the individual's actual way of conduct in all situations arising from the three problem-groups of social participation, work and love and sex.

In this way we can distinguish in the individual's psychic development the following stages:

I. The Pre-Personality-Stage consisting of:

1. The Approaching-Stage: the newly-born baby is approaching his own organism and the outer world—both of them being perceived as a chaotic entity—only in the sphere of feelings and sensations (initial feelings of discomfort, initial primitive compensational activities). This stage usually does not last longer than the first half year of life.

2. The Experiencing-Stage: perceptions and compensational activities are increasing in number and developed into experiences. They are based on those of the Approaching-Stage. They are initiating and furthering, and simultaneously furthered by, the growing ability of discernment. Out of all these perceptions and compensational movements the child gradually forms a unified line which we call the style of life. This entire stage consists of two phases:

a) The Orienting-Phase: the child learns to recognize things and persons, and thus to orient itself; it learns to differentiate perceptions of difficulties and of possibilities of success. This phase lasts up to the finding of the own Ego ("subjective birth of the individual," i.e., "subjective separation" of the own organism from the outside world). This takes place between the first and the second year of life.

b) The Comparing-Phase: approach is made to the first problem of life, the problem of society, made possible by the finding of the own Ego. Comparing itself with other individuals, other children, it can build up its own way of social relations. The feeling of inferiority is getting its individual shape and shade, the compensational movements are growing more and more unified. This stage lasts up to the third to fifth year of life. At that time the individual style of life is clearly developed.

II. The Personality-Stage starts with the clearly developed style of life; the child begins to perceive and to act distinctly according to an individual pattern. This stage lasts, of course, until the end of life. It does not contradict in any way the possibilities to change the individual pattern

itself at any time later on, it merely means that from now on the child's psychic life is characterized by, and running along, a clear cut pattern.

There can, of course, be no question of those stages being strictly separated from each other. Each preceding stage is the preparation for the following one, which sets in when this preparation has reached a certain level. The transition from one stage or phase to the next one is often a gradual one. The personality-stage, too, does not mean the end of evolution; on the contrary, evolution goes on at this stage at a high level, i.e., along the lines of the style of life. It is, however, of decisive importance that all stages and phases of psychic evolution after the Approaching-Stage express the deepening or gradual overcoming of the Basic Discrepancy in its individual shape and shade. By studying an individual's Basic Discrepancy at its very origin (the Approaching-Stage) and by tracing and reconstructing it through the other phases of pre-personality stages, we can apply Individual Psychology to a particular individual much more exactly. Adler taught that a faulty style of life has been brought about by decisive "erroneous impressions" in early childhood. That is correct. Furthermore, we believed that the child was "misled" to commit such errors, but was not compelled to do so. As a consequence of the realization of the Basic Discrepancy we must state that this does not become true until the end of the Orienting-Phase, and there to a very limited extent only. It becomes much more correct in the Comparing-Phase. It is by no means correct in the Approaching-Stage. There, as was shown above, the child has neither the choice nor the means to choose among various attitudes; but at this stage, the seed is sown for the future ways of conduct. As a matter of fact, at this stage, and in the Orienting-Phase, we cannot even speak about errors. As we have seen, the child at this stage cannot grasp a situation as a whole, but merely part of it, i.e., discomfort and comfort, and this part is perceived not erroneously but correctly! Only by being merely part of a whole does it become a contradiction to the whole. The same holds true for compensational activities at that stage. This contradiction is the Basic Discrepancy at its origin. As to later stages we can state: as long as the Basic Discrepancy has not been overcome, the child is prejudiced by it and thus develops it further, making it gradually the essential feature of his style of life. The possibilities of choosing among various ways of conduct are furthered by the natural development and the widening scope of experiences; but they are simultaneously more and more hindered by the developing style of life under the conditions of a Basic Discrepancy which has not been overcome. This marks the beginning of the biased apperception. And that is just why man is "controlled" by his style of life and can, as long as this "control" lasts, move along this pattern only. But as Adler has taught, man is capable of controlling and, if necessary, of

changing his style of life. This, however, presupposes the individual's realization of his style of life, which becomes only possible by revealing the Basic Discrepancy. To help people in this way whenever they need such help is the task of child-guidance, clinical pedagogy and psychotherapy. They all require 1) in the early Pre-Personality-Stage: the creation of such situations and conditions, and the application of such pedagogical methods as help the child to face objective facts correctly as nearly as possible—above all the necessity of adjusting to social life; 2) in the Personality-Stage: at whatever age, to uncover the style of life from the beginning, through individual-psychological technique, and thus to help the individual to overcome his contradictory conceptions, his Basic Discrepancy. We examine the style of life, as we know, by investigating as many objective facts as possible, both of the present and the past, and by comparing them with as many corresponding, subjective attitudes of the individual as possible. In our case-histories we have to do the same, as far as possible, regarding the entire Pre-Personality-Stage from the Approaching-Stage on. This is, of course, much easier with children than with adults, partly because, in the case of children, the mother can give us some valuable help. In this way we uncover the Basic Discrepancy at its very root. And thus, by tracing its development through the stages of evolution, we help the individual, child or adult, to overcome his "errors" and thus to change those psychic activities tending in a wrong direction. This method is both scientifically exact and optimistic in its outlook. Scientifically exact, because it does not rely on consolation, persuasion, etc., but is based on psychological laws deduced from, applied to, and substantiated by the experience of human life. Optimistic, because it proves to us by these very laws that man is not a defenceless victim and object of circumstances caused by environment and constitution, but a victim of errors which are bound to appear at an early age, but which can be overcome at any time later on. By overcoming these errors, man on his part can, as a social being, influence, and often change, the very circumstances of which he thought himself to be the victim before. Thus we give on a methodic basis to our patients, children or adults, what Adler called the decisive act in child-guidance and psychotherapy: encouragement.

With modesty characteristic of a genuine scientist, a modesty based on self-confidence and deep conviction of the correctness of his teachings, Alfred Adler was fully aware that Individual Psychology is not the end of an evolution, but a new step in the direction of progress of humanity. Thus a fine sentence of Adler may form the conclusion of this survey:

"We fully realize that with Individual Psychology no 'absolute truth' has been found. I only consider it our task to keep striving steadily for progress from big errors to smaller ones."