

Causality and Indeterminism According to Alfred Adler, and Some Current American Personality Theories

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INTRODUCTION

It is the purpose of this paper to show that Alfred Adler's views on causality and indeterminism are much in line with certain recent trends in American personality theory.

Before we start with the discussion proper a brief statement of the issues involved in the problem of causality seems to be called for. Since ancient times philosophy has realized that there are essentially two possible answers to the question of psychological causation. We may say a house is being built because the necessary labor is being expended and the necessary material has been made available. This is the *causa efficiens* or the efficient or moving cause, which goes with the mechanistic view. But we may also say that the house is being built because a man wanted a house according to a certain plan, to live in or to sell. This is the *causa finalis* or the final cause, which goes with teleology or purposivism. Here the goal becomes the cause.

The obvious difference between these two causes is in respect to the time dimension, the first leaning on the past, the second on the future. Much confusion regarding the two causalities exists, however, because of a lack of appreciation of a second dimension according to which they also differ. The *causa efficiens* belongs to the objective, behavioristic frame of reference; the *causa finalis* to the subjective, phenomenological frame. "Subjective" refers to the subjective world of the individual under study.

What has happened to a subject in the past, or is happening to him now, in the present, is open to observation by an outsider and is objective. But the future does not exist in objective, physical, reality, and can therefore not be observed. The *causa finalis* thus cannot exist for objective psychology, which must therefore be necessarily concerned

with the *causa efficiens* and must become a genetic historical psychology. Subjective psychology, on the other hand, does, through introspection, obtain data on the future, and is thus technically in a position to include the *causa finalis* in its scheme of things and to become an ahistorical psychology. Since introspection reveals that the subject is very concerned with his future, usually much more so than with his past, subjective, phenomenological psychology generally assigns to the *causa finalis* the greater psychological significance.

The above considerations may be presented schematically in the following table.

POSSIBLE STANDS TOWARD THE PROBLEM OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSATION BY OBJECTIVE AND SUBJECTIVE PSYCHOLOGY

FRAME OF REFERENCE	CAUSAL POTENCY OF		
	past <i>causa efficiens</i>	present	future <i>causa finalis</i>
objective, behavioristic	emphasized	possible	impossible
subjective, phenomenological	possible	possible	emphasized

The classifications of the table are to be understood not as a dichotomy and a trichotomy but as points in continua.

A. CAUSALITY

1. *Adler's Position*

Adler was from the start a subjective, phenomenological psychologist. "We must be able to see with his eyes and listen with his ears" (7, p. 72). Adler found the *causa finalis* the most fruitful explanatory principle, since it afforded greater exactness in predicting a person's future actions than did the person's objective history. "Objective determiners are probabilities only, not direct causes" (8, p. 74). It is important to keep in mind that Adler, however, fully recognized the *causa efficiens* for providing probabilities. But Adler was not satisfied with probabilities; he wanted a psychological theory which would be

adequate for each individual case, the exceptions as well as the rule. What he aimed at was a truly idiographic psychology, although he himself never used this term. Granted that early childhood environment is an important factor—and nobody appreciated this factor more than Adler—the following still holds. “One child, living without warmth retains enough courage and confidence to seek the love which had been kept from him. A second child in a similar situation tries to become master of the situation through cunning, thus betraying his lowered self-confidence. A third makes a weapon out of his feeling of weakness and helplessness . . . creates for himself a system of counter-arguments against any activity, and by doing so forces his smaller and larger environment to take over the care of him” (2). This thought has been expressed repeatedly by Adler (e.g., 7, pp. 13-14).

Understanding and prediction are greatly facilitated when you know the interests, purposes, goals, i.e., final causes of an individual, whether he himself is aware of these or not. “The most important question of the healthy and the diseased mind is not: whence? but: whither? Only when we know the active, directive goal of a person may we undertake to understand his movements. . . . In this whither? the cause is implanted” (3, p. 244). “The psychic life of man is determined by his goal” (4, p. 17). And “let me observe that if I know the goal of a person I know in a general way what will happen” (3, p. 3). “The aim of the mental life of man becomes its governing principle, its *causa finalis*, and sweeps every motion of the mind into the stream of mental happenings. Here we have the root of the unity of the personality, the individuality. It matters not what may have been the source of its energies: not their origin but their end, their ultimate goal constitutes their individual character” (1, p. 23).

Unfortunately this passage is the only one in which Adler explicitly differentiates between the two causalities, as far as we know. Usually he seems to attack causality in general, as in the following, although the context makes it clear that he only intends to attack the *causa efficiens*. “Every semblance of causality in the psychic life is due to the tendency of many psychologists to present their dogmas disguised in mechanistic or physical similes” (5, p.13).

When objectivism and behaviorism were at their prime in American psychology (1920-1930), historical, genetic, efficient causality was stressed, and interest was directed toward formulating general, nomothetic laws. Since then an ever-growing counter-movement oriented

toward subjectivism and the *causa finalis* has set in, necessitated by the ambition to arrive at laws which would fit each individual case, which in turn may run quite contrary to the general law. From the individual's separate life-manifestations and forms of expression Adler attempted to gain a picture of the unified, homogeneous personality. From such understanding he tried to arrive at laws which would fit each individual variant. This is how his Individual Psychology is to be understood. We shall give two important examples below to show that others seriously struggling with the same problem, namely that of a truly individual psychology, an idiographic psychology, arrived at much the same theoretical formulations.

2. *Lewin's Position*

One of the first, and possibly most influential protests against historical causality was sounded by Lewin, the systematic proponent of field theory. His criticism is: "According to the old saw that 'the exception proves the rule,' psychology does not regard exceptions as counter-arguments, so long as their frequency is not too great" (16, p. 19). But, he points out, "it is no longer possible to take exceptions lightly. They do not in any way 'prove the rule,' but on the contrary are completely valid disproofs, even though they are rare, indeed, so long as one single exception is demonstrable" (16, p. 24).

Lewin sought the solution of the problem of causality in "the principle of 'contemporaneity'" according to which "neither past nor future psychological facts, but only the present situation can influence present events" (17, p. 34). Unfortunately this formulation of his thesis, in its lack of differentiation between tense and content, is not clear. In clarification, it should be said, firstly, that the statement belongs to the subjective frame of reference, Lewin being subjectively and phenomenologically oriented. He means, then, that only the present subjectively psychological situation can influence the present. But, and this is the main point, he includes in the psychological present the past and the future according to content. Actually, the past, as subjectively represented at the moment was very much taken into account by Lewin. One need only consider that he is the originator of the incompleting task experiments. This was also pointed out in an important article by Chein, where the significance of the subjective past in the subjective present is stressed as "the principle of 'unfinished business'" (13, p.

165). Lewin also takes the future, the goal, into account—as it is subjectively represented at the moment; again, one need only consider that he is the originator of the level-of-aspiration experiments. In the subjective present situation he includes the goals, the subjective future. “The goal as a psychological fact undoubtedly lies in the present” (17, p. 37). Since all dynamic forces have goal tendencies, Lewin’s topological dynamics are thus in the end also teleological, in the sense that the subject’s present goal tendencies are considered prominently as causal factors, *causae finales*.

Just as it can be shown that Lewin did take the *subjective* future into account, so it can also be shown that Adler was, like Lewin, concerned primarily with the present. He was not so much concerned with the objective past as with the present subjective representation of the past. “It is comparatively indifferent whether the memories are accurate or inaccurate” (7, p. 75). Adler rather used memories as a projective technique, so to speak, to gain information regarding the person’s present personality structure. And as this changes, the memories too will change. “In so far as his style of life alters, his memories also will alter; he will remember different incidents, or he will put a different interpretation on the incidents he remembers” (7, p. 74). For “we pronounce something out of the past the cause and make the effects follow it” (2). The goal with its content of the future was also seen by Adler to be of the present tense. He speaks repeatedly of “the ever-present goal” (4, pp. 17 and 18).

There is then no essential difference between Adler’s views and Lewin’s principle of contemporaneity. The important common factor is the development of a subjective psychology which is ahistorical from the objective standpoint only. Such a psychology does not place the main emphasis on the objective history of the individual under study, but rather on the immediate psychological field which includes the subjective past and the subjective future. In this, as in many other respects, Adler can thus be considered a forerunner and anticipator of current field theory, even defining his psychology by a similar term as “contextual psychology” (4, p. 163).

3. Allport's Position

Another important protest against the *causa efficiens* was raised by Allport and is perhaps best formulated in a paper on “Geneticism vs.

Ego-Structure in Theories of Personality." One of his conclusions is "that goal-striving is the essence of personality" (10, p. 169). "Indeed, if we pause to think about it, any personal problem has an *effective* relation only to one's future, since it is in the future that all problems must be solved. The ego in taking command projects itself forward into the future, and recasts its motives largely in terms of intentions and plans" (10, p. 161). In his much-quoted paper on "The Ego in Contemporary Psychology" Allport also writes regarding the ego's "customary preoccupation with the future. Israeli, it will be remembered, reports that among his subjects over ninety per cent expressed themselves more interested in their futures than in their pasts . . . This finding is worth stressing, for as a rule, psychologists are more interested in a person's past than in his future. In other words, the psychologist and his subject customarily face in different directions, and that is unfortunate" (10, p. 137). In addition, Allport, like Adler and Lewin, also accepts the proposition that "motivation is *always* contemporary" (10, p. 79). The principle of the contemporaneity of motives is not at all in contradiction to an emphasis on the individual's concern with the future, as shown above.

Consistent with these views Allport too lines up on the side of the *causa finalis*. "Were I *forced* to choose between mechanism and purposivism as an ultimate principle of motivation, I should unhesitatingly choose—as I think my book amply indicates—purposivism" (10, p. 94). Purposivism is, of course, but another name for teleology, the dictionary definition of which includes: determination by final causes. Allport arrived at this viewpoint for the same reason that Adler and Lewin did. Allport too was not satisfied with a psychology of general laws, a nomothetic psychology, but aimed to construct a psychology by which each individual case can be understood, an idiographic psychology. Actually it was Allport, as will be remembered, who introduced these terms of Windelband into American psychology.

Unfortunately Allport was not sufficiently acquainted with Adler, and thus it was possible that he misunderstood him so as to classify him with Freud, McDougall, Kretschmer, Thurstone, and Guilford as a nomothetic psychologist (10, p. 97f.). Allport did not know that in one of the earliest theoretical discussions from the Adlerian circle, in 1913, Neuer had stated that Adler's "Individual Psychology would be the idiographic science par excellence" (19, p. 3). But the Allport-Adler misunderstanding was not mutual. The Adlerian journal in Vienna

published an enthusiastic review of Allport's book on personality and came to the conclusion that "Adler's concept of the 'style-of-life' runs all through this wonderful book" (14).

4. Freud's Position

While Adler's original formulations on causality are in accord with some of the most advanced trends in current American theory of personality, Freud is antithetical to these trends, just as he was to Adler.

J. F. Brown (11) has shown in how many respects Freud violated the principles of field theory in general. Regarding causality in specific, Neuer stated that "it was the basic mistake of Freud that he diluted his truly psychological creation, the demasking . . . of the neuroses, through causal hypotheses of a physiological and mechanistic physical kind" (20, pp. 409-411). Freud confuses the objective and subjective frames of reference. Although he says "psychological reality is the determining factor" (15, p. 322) he does not truly adopt the subjective frame of reference. Rather he is a reductionist, trying to reduce the "psychological reality" to some objective historical or genetic fact. He looks for an objective *causa efficiens*. To cite a specific example, "The precautionary measure of *coitus interruptus*, when practised as a customary sexual regime, is so regularly the cause of anxiety-neurosis in men, and even more so in women, that medical practitioners would be wise to enquire first of all into the possibility of such an etiology in all such cases. Innumerable examples show that the anxiety-neurosis vanishes when the sexual malpractice is given up" (15, p. 348).

Freud admits that there is not always an objective traumatic event, that often the traumatic event is a product of phantasy, yet he then reduces the phantasy to a "phylogenetic possession," a "true prehistoric experience." "You know that from analysis of symptoms we arrive at a knowledge of the infantile experiences to which the libido is fixated and out of which the symptoms are made up . . . Among the occurrences which continually recur in the theory of a neurotic childhood . . . are some of particular significance . . . observation of parental intercourse, seduction by an adult, and the threat of castration . . . If they (these experiences) can be found in real events, well and good; but if reality has not supplied them they will be evolved out of hints and elaborated by phantasy. The effect is the same . . . Whence comes the necessity for these phantasies, and the material for them? There can be no doubt about the instinctual sources; but how is it to be explained

that the same phantasies are always formed with the same content? . . . I believe that these *primal phantasies* . . . are a phylogenetic possession. In them the individual, wherever his own experience has become insufficient, stretches out beyond it to the experience of past ages. It seems to me quite possible that all that to-day is narrated in analysis in the form of phantasy . . . was in the prehistoric period of the human family a reality; and that the child in its phantasy simply fills out the gaps in its true individual experiences with true prehistoric experiences" (15, pp. 320-324).

The reader may think that these might be early statements which Freud took back in later writings. But such a thought would be quite in error. The quotations are taken from the Garden City edition of *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* which carries an introductory note by Freud dated November, 1934, in which he says: "I feel called upon to express my gratitude to the American publishers for their acceptance of the Riviere translation for their new edition" (15, p. 13).

What Allport said in respect to Freud's concept of the Id certainly fits here in connection with Freud's reductionism. "Freud presented us with another archaic conception of motivation that is at once fatalistic, blind and inescapably infantile" (10, p. 159).

B. INDETERMINISM

Both Freud and Adler defended psychic determinism, meaning that there are no fortuitous psychological expressions but that character traits, pathological symptoms, dreams, etc., can be understood as the meaningful effect of some cause. Freud's brilliant contribution was to have pointed out that even errors and slips are not fortuitous. Freud, however, stood for historical, instinctual determinism out of the subjective past, while Adler stood for ahistorical determinism out of the subjective future, the over-all goal, the self-ideal, out of which develops the personality structure, the style of life—to which we would add—with all its sub-goals.

The question remains: where and how does this all-important final goal, which may be quite hazy and is usually not conscious, take its origin? If it originated from environmental influences, we would come back to historical psychology. Also the suggestion that it may have arisen from hereditary, indigenous sources, such as instincts, was force-

fully rejected by Adler. His was not a "predetermined autochthonous* teleology" (3, p. 41). Needless to say, his teleology was also not transcendental, i.e., "introduced from without into the purposive structure, just as an engineer introduces his own purpose into a machine designed for a certain function. According to the transcendental theory, God bears this relationship to the world he created" (21, p. 35). As Neuer explained most clearly, Adler's teleology is "an 'immanent' teleology which places the origin of the purpose within the purposive structure itself. This theory is oriented to the concept of *organism*. The 'immanence' means nothing more than the reciprocal relation between parts and whole, whether this whole be a structure simultaneous in space or extensive in time" (21, p. 35). A phenomenological, idiographic psychology like Adler's logically leads to this type of immanent teleology.

Allport has taken exactly the same step. In speaking of two kinds of dynamic psychology he refutes the prevailing dynamic doctrines including those of McDougall and Freud which "refer every mature motive of personality to underlying original instincts, wishes, or needs, shared by *all men*" (10, p. 77). That would be autochthonous teleology. Instead he accepts the principle of the functional autonomy of motives which "regards adult motives as infinitely varied, and self-sustaining, *contemporary* systems, growing out of antecedent systems but functionally independent of them" (10, p. 78). He talks of the "ontogenetic emergence" of motives (10, p. 100) which denotes virtually the same as the term "immanent teleology."

Immanent teleology implies ultimate indeterminism. Adler says: "The child works in a realm of freedom with his own creative power" (9, p. 191). He referred to this creative power again and again, modifying it at one time as "mysterious" (5, p. 32). In an artistically creative way the child has by about the fifth year of life reached an interpretation of himself and the world, as well as an over-all goal, all of which together represent the style-of-life. From here on there is finalistic causation, since "the world is seen through a stable scheme of apperception: experiences are interpreted before they are accepted, and the interpretation always accords with original meaning given to life. . . . Mistakes in the meaning given to life can be corrected only by re-considering the situation in which the faulty interpretation was made, recognizing the error and revising the scheme of apperception" (7,

* Innate. (Footnote ours)

pp. 12-13). In this creative power and the possibility that its creation can be revised we have Adler's ultimate indeterminism.

Allport also arrives ultimately at indeterminism. "Though motives may often be (and, I argue usually are) independent of their origins, they are obviously not independent of the contemporary ego-structure in which they are now embedded" (10, p. 163). But where does the ego-structure, or personality, or style-of-life, originate? Here Allport's answer is: "Its identity is its own, guaranteed not by unchanging purposes, but by *sui generis* motivational systems" (10, p. 108). *Sui generis*, meaning of its own kind, unique, peculiar, usually implies indeterminism. Again, ultimate indeterminism seems to be the logical conclusion for the subjective, idiographic psychologist.

For the purpose of the present discussion we may include Murphy here also, because he recognizes "the participation of the person as cause—one of the most valuable working concepts available" (18, p. 645). What we have called finalistic causation he calls the principle of "soft" determinism, which is "determinism from the inner nature of life, not from external pressures alone" (18, p. 645). The question as to the origin of the style-of-life or personality structure leads Murphy to an answer quite similar to Adler's and Allport's. Murphy says that in the complex interactions between the child and the environment "he will slowly develop a relative autonomy" (18, p. 645). Another similar view is expressed in a recent paper by Cameron, who also adopts the principle of ultimate autonomy, or as he states it, "the concept of the autonomous reaction," which applies to "a reaction which, once initiated, tends to become self-perpetuating" (12, p. 555).

There is one point, however, where Adler stands alone. This is when he apparently embraces indeterminism completely by proclaiming that "Everybody can accomplish everything" (5, p. 227). All we can say here is that Adler did not mean this statement literally. Rather he called it a "maxim," i.e., a rule of conduct or a battle cry. Often he himself qualified this statement, as in the following: "Except in cases of sub-normal children . . . it is proper to assume that everyone can do everything necessary . . . that everyone is equal to his life-task. This does not mean that the results are or can be equal, for, of course, inequalities of training, method, and above all the degree of courage shown must be taken into consideration." Furthermore, "this is not, of course, to deny the differences of inherited material, but what is important is always the use which is made of it" (6, pp. 4-5).

SUMMARY

In his theory of personality dynamics Adler embraced the principle of finalistic causality, which means that goals rather than objective historical factors are the ultimate determiners of individual behavior. This teleological view is shared today by other theoreticians who are concerned with developing a psychology of personality with laws which would fit each individual case rather than one with merely general laws which spell only probabilities. Specific similarities can be traced between the theories of Lewin and of Allport, and that of Adler. The genetic formulations of Freud are diametrically opposed to these views. Since Adler's teleology was an immanent one, he was ultimately an indeterminist. Ultimate indeterminism seems to be expressed now also in the psychologies of Allport and of Murphy, among others. Adler's extreme indeterministic statements must be discounted as simply pragmatic expedencies, as he has explained himself.

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