

What Makes an Adlerian?

WILLARD and MARGUERITE BEECHER

Brooklyn, New York

An Adlerian psychologist is an individual who views human behavior in the frame of reference which was provided by Alfred Adler in his creation, which he called Individual Psychology. In short, an Adlerian "employs the spectacles" which Adler provided for him. He does not take a bit of glass from Freud, a bit from Watson, a bit from Jung, stick them together and try to see through all of them at the same time. An Adlerian may pick up the spectacles provided by Freud, Jung, and others and look at the same individual or the same manifestations of human behavior. But, when he operates, he uses "Adlerian spectacles."

The word "spectacles" is an analogy for the word "theory." *A theory is not a copy of reality.* It is a tool and an invention of the mind, made for the purpose of adapting to reality. Man, with his limited physical senses, can never perceive reality *directly*. He can never hope to do more than find a theory that will improve his ability to predict recurrence and succession of events. A theory is to man what a seeing-eye dog is to the blind. A blind man can never hope to know how things really appear to sighted individuals. But, with the aid of his dog, he may move in the outside world with *greater assurance of survival*.

Man can never know the reality of the world and the universe. As he improves his theories about it, he can move (though blind) with greater probability of survival. But, he must admit his dependence on his theory—his seeing-eye dog. He must improve his theories with *full awareness* that they are not true copies of reality—nor are they ever reality itself. In China, men used to believe that the eclipse of the sun was caused by a dragon eating the sun. This is a poetic explanation. However, it does not tell us exactly when the dragon is going to get hungry again! It has no predictive value at all and is not a good seeing-eye dog. Today, we have a theory by which we can calculate to an

exact moment when there will be an eclipse. As long as no new relationships take place in the universe, our present theory will remain a reliable seeing-eye dog.

The question, then, is not which theory is right and which is wrong. A theory is only a theory—something we have invented and carry in our heads as a way of looking at phenomena and circumstance. At a seminar, Adler cautioned his group to be most careful of this point. He said, “When I say a man has an inferiority complex, I know full well there is no such thing *inside the man*. I know that the inferiority complex is nothing but an idea inside my head of which he knows nothing; he has no such thing. But, I look at him *as if* he had such a thing. This helps me to know how to relate myself to him so that I can help him to behave in a new way. For to me, he behaves *as if* he felt inferior.” Adler, consciously, put on the spectacles that he had invented for use when he wanted to view and modify human behavior.

A theory is no better than its ability to *predict* succession and recurrence of events. The spectacles Newton provided us for viewing the physical world worked beautifully in most situations. But we had to wait for Einstein to provide another pair of spectacles for some kinds of events not adequately predicted by Newton’s theory.

An Adlerian, then, is a person who borrows Adler’s spectacles and bases his “predictions” according to what he sees through them. The main or central principle is indeterminism—in other words, that behavior is *as if* it were a means to an end—a way of survival. Inside the theory itself are the concepts of the style of life, the unity of the personality, and the principle of compensation. The Adlerian does not try to see a man as the “sum of his parts” and is not primarily interested in what a man *has* as his equipment. The Adlerian asks, “What is the man trying to achieve and what does he *use* to achieve this end?” Adlerian psychology is *use-psychology* as against *possession-psychology*. The difference may be explained as follows. The possession-psychologist would try to explain the behavior of an amoeba in terms of *what it has*. They will find that it *has* only one cell. Here their story largely ends. The Adlerian, viewing an amoeba, would see that an amoeba is a single celled animal *with a purpose to adapt and survive*.

No one knows whether the amoeba is aware that it is one cell or whether it is aware that it has a purpose to adapt and survive. No theory will ever be a copy of reality. We shall never know the thing we call Life. The Adlerian knows the limitations of any and all theory to explain either an amoeba or a man. But, he regards each as if it were

“striving for survival” and *using* what is at hand in whatever way it can to help itself.

An Adlerian, then, is an individual who consciously chooses to view human behavior in the means-end frame of reference provided by Adler. And, at the same time, he gives up the “spectacles” of cause-effect because he knows that these two ways of evaluation are mutually exclusive ways of looking at things. To try to use them concurrently would be to *see nothing clearly*. And, in addition, he keeps reminding himself that what he *sees* is the result of the refraction of his spectacles and *not* a true copy of reality itself. That will always remain an *unknown*.