

THE PROGRESS OF MANKIND¹

ALFRED ADLER

The question of whether progress of mankind is possible, probable, impossible, or certain moves everyone today more than ever. But even regarding the meaning of progress there is disagreement. The explanation for this is probably that people in general tend to overlook the larger contexts, and to regard all problems, including scientific ones, from their own, usually too narrow, personal perspective. This is also true for the problem of progress.

Everyone subordinates all experiences and problems to his own conception. This conception is usually a tacit assumption and as such unknown to the person. Yet he lives and dies for the inferences he draws from such a conception. It is amusing, and sad at the same time, to see how even scientists—especially philosophers, sociologists and psychologists—are caught in this net. Individual Psychology is no exception, in that it also has its assumptions, its conception of life, its style of life. But it differs in that it is well aware of this fact.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY

Individual Psychology was the first school of psychology to break with the assumption of inner forces, such as instincts, drives, unconsciousness, etc., as irrational material. When it comes to the understanding and appraisal of an individual or a group, this break has proved most helpful. On the positive side, Individual Psychology makes the following assumptions.

Individual Psychology has established the presupposition, against which no argument can be found, of the *unity and self-consistency of the personality*.

Individual Psychology finds its firm, rational field of activity in the manner in which the always unique individual behaves towards the changing problems of life. Decisive for his behavior is the individual's *opinion of himself and of the environment* with which he has to cope.

Individual Psychology assumes further the individual's *striving for success* in the solution of his problems, this striving being anchored

¹This paper appeared originally in 1937, the year of Adler's death, in German, under the title "Ist Fortschritt der Menschheit möglich? wahrscheinlich? unmöglich? sicher?" (*Int. Z. Indiv. Psychol.*, 15, 1-4).—Ed. note.

in the very structure of life.² But the judgment of what constitutes success, is again left to the opinion of the individual.

Our criterion for appraising a specific variant, whether a given individual or a group, is always the direction towards the ascending development and welfare of mankind. In other words, it is the degree and kind of *social interest* necessary to arrive at this goal of general welfare and upward development. The weightiest reason for this assumption is our finding that the individual is faced exclusively with such problems as can be solved only with sufficient social interest. He may have had this from childhood, or may have acquired it later. All problems of life merge into the three social problems of neighbourly love, work, and sexual love. One finds a degree of social interest, although this is usually inadequate, in all men, with the exception of idiots, and even in animals. We therefore feel justified in assuming that this social interest which is demonstrated throughout life is rooted in the germ cell. But it is rooted as a potentiality, not as an actual ability.

Social interest, like all innate human potentialities, will develop in accordance with the individual's self-consistent *style of life*.

The style of life arises in the child out of his *creative power*, i.e., from the way he perceives the world and from what appears to him as success.

Such a foundation of a psychology greatly supports the certainty of the observer. Firstly, since the assumptions are made explicit, he gains certainty in that he knows and understands them well and can check them at any time. Secondly, he is especially protected from false conclusions and mistaken appraisals regarding an individual or a group, because he is forced to seek the existing degree of social interest in all the expressive movements, personality traits, and symptoms. This latter advantage he owes to the basic view of the unity and self-consistency of the personality in thinking, feeling, willing, and acting.

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

From our basic assumptions there follows an important conclusion bearing on the problem of the progress of mankind.

We may define human progress as a function of a higher development of social interest. Admittedly the level of social interest is pre-

²See the paper by Edmund W. Sinnott in this issue.—Ed. note.

sently still low, as indicated by such phrases as "Why should I love my neighbour?" and "After me the deluge." But social interest is continually pressing and growing. For this reason, no matter how dark the times may be, in the long-range view there is the assurance of the higher development of the individual and the group. Social interest is continually growing; human progress is a function of the higher development of social interest; therefore, human progress will be inevitable as long as mankind exists.

THREE PROSPECTIVE CONSIDERATIONS

In the following we wish to support through three brief prospects the view that evolution leads to the success of social interest. Such a view gives Individual Psychology the imprint of a gay and optimistic science.³

(1) The first prospect is in the nature of an anecdote. I once read it in an American article, the author of which I have unfortunately forgotten, and it has moved me very strongly. A multimillionaire who had spent a hard youth in poverty and misery wanted to protect his descendants from similar deprivations. He consulted a lawyer and told him the size of his fortune, as well as that he wanted to protect his descendants to approximately the tenth generation. The lawyer took his pen and began to figure. When he was finished he turned to his client and said: "Your fortune is so great that it is completely sufficient to provide for your descendants adequately up to the tenth generation. But do you know that if you do this, you are protecting children, each of whom is related to over 1,000 persons of your generation as closely as he is related to you?"

It follows from this consideration, if we widen our view to include 100 and more generations, that everything that people have contributed, even if only in the apparent interest of their own family, is irrevocably for the benefit of the whole of mankind. This "equalization process" may be slowed down at times for lack of useful contributions, but it cannot be stopped.

(2) A consideration from my forthcoming book *Social Interest; a Challenge to Mankind*⁴ supplements the first. I raise the question,

³The expression of "gay science" is undoubtedly borrowed from Nietzsche's book of that title.—Ed. note.

⁴New York: Putnam, 1939.—Ed. note.

"What do we find when we are born into this world?" The answer is: We find all the previous useful contributions which have been supplied by our forebears. We find human beings in their bodily and mental development, social institutions, art, science, lasting traditions, social relations, values, schooling, etc. We receive all these and build upon them, advancing, improving, and changing, always in the sense of a further durability. This is the inheritance from our forebears which falls to us for administration. It is their contribution in which their spirit lives on immortally after the body has fallen.

What happened to the earthly life of those who contributed nothing, or who interfered with the developmental process? The answer is: It has disappeared. Nothing from their lives can be found. Does this not appear like an inviolable law aimed against all who supply no contributions for later generations? Their trace on earth is lost forever.

This train of thought, against which it would be difficult to find any counter-argument, is closely related to my findings that the life of the individual as well as of the group presents itself as a "compensation process." This process attempts to overcome felt or alleged "inferiorities," in a physical or psychological manner. One goal of this compensatory striving is the steadily growing culture of mankind which collects all useful and productive contributions of the various generations and passes them on.

The power of social interest which is inherent to the life of mankind, which as innate aptitude determines human nature in great part, and which is lacking only in the feeble-minded, comes to life and becomes productive through the creative power of the child, as pointed out above. Although not strong enough at present to solve human difficulties for the benefit of the entire human family, the existing social interest is nevertheless so powerful that individuals and groups must refer to it. Human judgment can do no more than consider whether the line of a proposed movement will ultimately merge into the well-being of man in general. Political movements, the utilization of the advances of science and technology, laws, and social norms are included in this evaluation. Claims of interest in the well-being of the community, however, have power in the long run only if their professed accord with the general well-being finds confirmation.

(3) A third prospect has a much more serious background but leads to the same result, namely, that progress is forced upon men.

This consideration is that the finality of the individual life merges into the progress of mankind. Even though we are tragically affected by withered and rapidly withering life, we realize that its rejuvenation in the next generation, enriched by the earlier generation, forces new contributions and progress. Rejuvenation raises new problems and meets them. No heredity has matured for these problems because they have never arisen before. Again and again the creative power of the child and of the adult come under new tensions until new solutions have been brought into being and useless ones have been removed.

Each new generation struggles afresh with old and new tasks and, pitted against the environment, is forced as a whole to maintain its equilibrium (Cannon) physically and psychologically with growing senses and growing understanding. This equilibrium can be gained only if the sum of the energies of the individual, supported through the growth of a rational picture of the world, is successful in bringing the problems of the environment closer to a solution.

In the holistic relationship between man and cosmos progress will rule until the decline of the human family. "The environment moulds man, but man moulds the environment" (Pestalozzi). With the limitation of our senses and our understanding of the ultimate things, rational science speaks the last word. At this point, a strong word is spoken by Individual Psychology with its emphasis on the whole and on social interest.