ADLER AND THE FUTURE OF EGO PSYCHOLOGY[1]

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At the point we have reached in the history of Western civilization it has become a truism to say that man is puzzled by his own nature and deeply concerned to understand it. Curiosity about human nature is today no idle luxury; it springs from the urgent need to assess our chances for happiness, even our chances for survival. This seems so obvious that it is easy to forget how recently the study of man's nature has emerged as a serious and pertinent branch of scientific inquiry.

Science made its first conquests far away from human behavior. It achieved its early victories in such realms as the movements of heavenly bodies and the movements of earthly bodies dropped from towers. The motives of the scientist, the reason for his peering at the heavens or caring about the fall of objects, did not present themselves as forming any part of legitimate inquiry. Understanding of the physical world was well advanced before even the first steps were taken to investigate human behavior. As Wilhelm Stern said at the beginning of his great book on child psychology, "It has been reserved for our own times to look upon the child himself as a problem; now we suddenly discover beside what deep mysteries and riddles we have wandered, blind and deaf, for thousands of years" (23, p. 21).

Science and Human Pride

The direction taken by scientific inquiry, starting far away and only gradually approaching human problems, is not entirely a consequence of changes in need. Presumably it would have been most useful three and four hundred years ago if man had had a better understanding of himself and of society. Science moved as it did because of man's extraordinary difficulty in taking his own behavior as the subject of dispassionate investigation. To stand apart from oneself, to take oneself as an object of scrutiny, requires a sophistication and a humility that are by no means easily developed. Science began not where it was most needed, but where it was most possible without offending human pride.

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The advance of scientific knowledge has in fact entailed three frontal assaults on the treasured citadel of pride. Each has been resisted with stubborn fury and angry counterattack. The first blow was delivered by Copernicus when he demoted the earth to a modest and secondary place in the universe. It seemed intolerable that man's place of habitation, the scene of his worldly endeavors and spiritual enterprises, should be anything less than the center of the universe, around which sun, moon and stars revolved in their useful courses. The second blow came from Darwin, who made a case for man's animal ancestry and thus tumbled him from his cherished high caste status among living creatures. It was an affront that man should be identified with blindly struggling animals driven only by instinct, and that doubts should be thrown upon his peculiar rational and spiritual endowments. The third blow fell from the hand of Freud, who uncovered deep irrationalities in human behavior and questioned the precious power of conscious self-determination. Freud was chided by his friend, Karl Abraham, for nominating himself to this third position of honor (16, p. 226). He did not withdraw his name, and I think that subsequent history will probably support him in this judgment. He belongs with those who have greatly shaken our accustomed ways of thinking and thus prepared the way for new and better understanding.

RECOVERY FROM DISILLUSIONMENT

If human pride has thus been thrice shattered, we must ask how mankind has managed to salvage the necessary minimum of self-respect. When the basis of an individual's pride is shot away, we recognize that his condition is perilous. Some measure of self-esteem is necessary if people are to continue with the tasks of life. The shocks produced by Copernicus and Darwin have today been well absorbed, and are no longer seen as threatening our foundations. Ruth Benedict described this in the following words.

> We are quite willing to admit now that the revolution of the earth about the sun, or the animal ancestry of man, has next to nothing to do with the uniqueness of our human achievement. If we inhabit one chance planet out of a myriad solar systems, so much the greater glory, and if all the ill-assorted human races are linked by evolution with the animal, the provable differences between ourselves and them are the more extreme and the uniqueness of our institutions more remarkable. (2, p. 4).

These blows no longer offend our pride or give us a feeling of diminishment. Indeed, they have been the occasions for a reappraisal of man's constructive capacities on a new and sounder basis, an ultimate boon to self-respect and to man's ability to deal with his fate.

It is interesting to ask ourselves where we now stand in the process of recovery from the third blow to human pride, Freud's demonstration of our profound irrationality and our subjection to unconscious urges and emotions. If we take these findings just as they stood in Freud's early writings they constitute a ruinous blow to the feeling of self-direction. They could throw us into despair or into a frantic search for pleasure. For a short while, especially in the decade of the twenties, Freud was often quoted to justify a life of hectic hedonism and a literature which prided itself chiefly on debunking. We have recovered from this first reaction and it is notable that Freud is now widely admired for his courage in seeking new truth, for his integrity, and for the personal dignity with which he met his final political persecution. These are admirable traits. I wish they were easier to understand in the terms of Freud's theory of personality.

MODERN EGO PSYCHOLOGY

In this meeting we are less concerned with philosophies of life and more concerned with the technical problem of a theory of personality. In this realm, the recovery from Freud's first undermining insights can be measured by the success of what is nowadays called ego psychology. This refers to the integrating aspect of personality, the guiding, planning, checking, umpiring, interpretative activities which give our lives their overall direction and make us responsive to the environment. We must first recognize that the Freudian school has attempted, rather belatedly, to construct an ego psychology, and I shall in a moment examine this effort.

Let me state at once, however, that in my view of history the first pioneering steps toward an ego psychology within psychoanalysis were taken by Alfred Adler. He was the first person to see that something had to be added to Freud's analytic penetrations if one were to account for recovery from neurosis and for the healthy functioning of personality. I believe that today the work which is going on in the realm of ego psychology is struggling to give us, and tomorrow may succeed in giving us, the true post-Freudian conception of human nature. I hope we may look forward to the vision of an achievement like the post-Copernican and post-Darwinian, when in the face of new, startling and unflattering discoveries mankind, after a period of rather blind contention, was able to reconstruct its self-understanding at a new level of insight and in a new approximation to the real facts. When the history of this recovery comes to be written, it seems to me that the first name to be considered will be that of Alfred Adler.

Freud and his followers. We must first ask how far Freud himself and his loyal followers have been able to go in developing an ego psychology. The principal contribution seems to me to lie in the mechanisms of defense. Heinz and Rowena Ansbacher present evidence that several of Freud's best ideas about defense mechanisms were anticipated by Adler (1), but we must agree that Freud, and later Anna Freud, pursued this topic with great attention so that it has become deeply rooted in psychological thought. Freudian ego psychology includes the concept of sublimation, which, however, has been very poorly clarified (17). It also includes a statement of the function of the ego as that of mediating among the claims of id, superego and outside reality, in which role the ego is represented as rather feeble and helpless. Altogether this constitutes a valuable but rather small yield, and it is noteworthy that the emphasis falls largely on the irrational characteristics of the ego. This was no accident. Freud himself gave us the clue that it was quite in line with his intentions and interests. On an early page of *The Ego and the Id* he said: "Pathological research has centered our interest too exclusively on the repressed. We wish to know more about the ego now that we know that it, too, can be unconscious in the proper sense of the word" (7, p. 19). There we have a classic statement of what Freud found worth studying and a classic implication as to what was not worth studying. He saw the ego as a poor deluded thing, beset by illusions, full of vanity, a tempting subject for deflation. It was hard for him to be an ego theorist when at heart he was an ego iconoclast.

The difficulties created by this attitude seem to me to have persisted and to have prevented Freudian ego psychology from making further advances. The problem can be illustrated by the fate of some ideas advanced by Ives Hendrick in 1942 and 1943 (13, 14, 15). Hendrick attached importance to "the development of ability to master a segment of the environment," and to "pleasure in exercising a function successfully, regardless of its sensual value." As illustrations he mentioned learning to manipulate, to walk, to speak, to comprehend and to reason, these being some of the functions which eventually become integrated as the ego. He took a further step by suggesting that functions of such great importance could not borrow their energy from libidinal sources, and he proposed the concept of a "need to master" or "instinct to master," characterized further as "an inborn drive to do and to learn how to do." Apparently his psychoanalytic listeners thought that most of these ideas were excellent, but they

jumped upon his use of the term "instinct" on the ground that Freud's definition of an instinct always implied an energy source outside the central nervous system. One member of the group which discussed these papers pointed out that Hendrick's idea was similar to Adler's concept of will to power and striving for superiority. This unfortunate reference doubtless gave Hendrick's proposal its *coup de grace*. It has subsequently appeared in the psychoanalytic literature only to be criticized and dismissed.

The dismissal is usually accomplished on purely theoretical grounds. The facts pointed out by Hendrick can scarcely be made to vanish. Children do spend a great deal of time learning to master their own manipulative and motor processes and discovering what they can do with the environment. But this, in the Freudian conceptual scheme, is not to be attributed to any independent source of motivation. There are no ego instincts; there are only two important sources of energy, the erotic urges and the aggressive urges. Of course, anxiety may come into play, and it is by this means that Fenichel, for example, solves the problem of mastery (6, p. 45). The environment is assumed to be a constant source of anxiety, and all the child's attempts to handle objects, to walk and run, to jump and shout, to learn language, to solve problems, bring a feeling of satisfaction because they reduce his anxious helplessness. This joyless theory is not, however, quite strictly in the loyal tradition, which is represented rather by a series of papers by Heinz Hartmann and collaborators (9, 10, 11, 12). In Hartmann's view, the energies of the libidinal and aggressive systems become available to the ego through a process of neutralization which frees them from their original aims and permits their direction into defensive and adaptive behavior. There is a certain clinical value to this theory of neutralization, but to me it has the ring not of science but of science fiction. It implies a sort of alchemy that is difficult to reconcile with present conceptions of energy. I must agree with Kenneth Mark Colby when he calls the theory of neutralized energy a "metapsychological snarl" (5, p. 35). Colby's own attempt, in his recent *Energy and Structure in Psychoanalysis*, to move toward an ego psychology takes a very different direction and in so doing rejects practically all of Freud's basic concepts. To my mind Colby's course is not dictated by a negative personal attitude. I do not believe that it is possible to develop an adequate ego psychology within the loyal limits of Freudian psychoanalysis.

General psychology. In the United States a curious alliance has occurred between Freudian theory and positivistic experimental psychology. In one sense the marriage could hardly be stranger: the objective man of the laboratory would seem to have nothing in common with the physician who listens with the third ear to the elusive voice of the unconscious. But in another sense, there is deep basic agreement. Both systems are essentially mechanistic, with an emphasis on drive as the source of activity and with a lack of interest in such complexities as make up an ego psychology.

Of course, the positivistic trend, like the Freudian, has plenty of critics. Just as Horney, Fromm, and Sullivan have departed widely from psychoanalytic orthodoxy, so Murray and Allport, Goldstein and Maslow have interpreted personality in what I would describe as a much more positive way than the positivists, and certainly in a way that shows more respect for observable facts. The contributions of these workers are essential to an adequate ego psychology, but for a moment I want to direct your attention to a curious thing that has been happening right in the heartland of the positivistic experimental tradition, that is in experiments with animals. In Harry F. Harlow's laboratory, for instance, it has been shown that monkeys display persistence and endure frustration in tasks which involve problem-solving and do not contain any other kind of reward (8). Other workers, such as Berlyne (3) and Montgomery (19), have found it necessary to assume curiosity and exploratory tendencies as intrinsic motives to explain the behavior of their animals in experimental situations. Montgomery has also shown that activity itself can have reward value (18). If such things are found in animals, we need not be surprised that Gardner Murphy, on the basis mainly of observations of young children, proposes drives for sensory pleasure and drives for activity (20, Ch. 6), or that Murray and Kluckhohn postulate intrinsic satisfaction in performing actions for the sake of mastering them (21). Karl Buhler, earlier, had spoken of function pleasure (4).

Notice what is involved here: a searching critique of those theories which deny motivational properties to anything but the most clear-cut physiological drives like hunger, thirst and sex, and the suggestion of a variety of further motives, such as sensory drives, curiosity, activity, exploration, manipulation and mastery. It looks as if we had here some very important ingredients for an ego psychology which might prove of great significance in the direction and integration of behavior. How can this matter be properly conceptualized?

CLUES FROM CONTENTED INFANTS

I am going to suggest that these several tendencies have a more or less uniform biological root. They are useful for adaptation and therefore intelligible in an evolutionary sense. But first I want to describe some specimens or prototypes of the behavior which later flowers in these several directions. For this purpose I invite you to visit the nursery in the house of Jean Piaget in Geneva. My selections will be drawn from Piaget's studies of the growth of intelligence from its earliest manifestations in his own three children. The records show that Piaget hovered daily over the cribs and performed all kinds of ingenious little experiments to observe the unfolding of intelligent behavior in the infants. We shall be dealing with the first two years of life, with behavior that does not depend upon language and verbal concepts; in short, with a practical or "sensori-motor" intelligence which may be quite similar to what is developed by the higher animals.

Influencing the environment. At three months, behavior can be observed which transcends both reflex action and such circular responses as grasping for the sake of grasping or looking for the sake of looking. What is now characteristic is that "movements are centered on a result produced in the external environment, and the sole aim of the action is to maintain this result." Laurent, lying in his bassinet, learns to shake a suspended rattle by pulling a string that hangs from it. He discovers this result fortuitously before vision and prehension are fully coordinated. Let us now observe him a little later when he has reached the ripe age of no years, three months and ten days.

> I place the string, which is attached to the rattle, in his right hand, merely unrolling it a little so that he may grasp it better. For a moment nothing happens. But at the first shake due to chance movement of his hand, the reaction is immediate: Laurent starts when looking at the rattle and then violently strikes his right hand alone, as if he felt the resistence and the effect. The operation lasts fully a quarter of an hour, during which Laurent emits peals of laughter (22, p. 162).

Three days later the following behavior is observed.

> Laurent, by chance, strikes the chain while sucking his fingers. He grasps it and slowly displaces it while looking at the rattles. He then begins to swing it very gently, which produces a slight movement of the hanging rattles and an as yet faint sound inside them Laurent then definitely increases by degrees his own movements. He shakes the chain more and more vigorously and laughs uproariously at the result obtained (22, p. 185).

Very soon it can be observed that procedures are used "to make interesting spectacles last." For instance, Laurent is shown a rubber monkey which he has not seen before. After a moment of surprise, and

perhaps even fright, he calms down and makes movements of pulling the string, a procedure which has no effect in this case, but which previously has caused interesting things to happen. It is to be noticed that "interesting spectacles" consist of quite commonplace novelties such as new toys, a tin box upon which a drumming noise can be made, an unfolded newspaper, or sounds made by the observer such as snapping the fingers.

Close examination of this behavior, a small sample of the many observations reported by Piaget, yields us some interesting conclusions. Notice that the behavior is directed and persistent. It is also selective: the infant does not try to conserve all impressions, but only those which are experienced as produced by his own activity. It yields pleasure and gratification as evinced in the child's smiles and laughter. It exhibits learning in the form of improved coordination on successive occasions. It is, in short, a form of motivated behavior, but the gratification appears to be intrinsic and not derived from nutritive or erotic needs. Notice further that these simple examples of infant behavior involve the prolonging and enjoying of sensory experience, manipulation, exploration, activity and mastery, all at the same time. At this stage of development, these several needs or purposes are not distinguished; the actions partake of all of them. The behavior constitutes a complete transaction which includes stimulus, sensation, perception, central elaboration, motor expression, and effects upon the stimulus field; these effects lead to further stimulation and to perhaps a whole series of transactions, such as Laurent's graded testing of the results produced by pulling the string. This kind of transaction between organism and environment tells us, it seems to me, much more about the nature and function of the neuro-muscular system than we can ever learn by studying the reflex arc.

Active experimentation. Before drawing further conclusions, I want to put before you some additional examples occuring later in life. From eight to twelve months behavior can be observed in which the child explores the properties of objects and tries out his repertory of actions upon them. This soon leads to active experimentation in which the child attempts to provoke new results. Again we look in upon Laurent, who has now reached the mature age of nine months. On different occasions he is shown a variety of new objects—for instance a notebook, a beaded purse, and a wooden parrot. His carefully observing father detects four stages of response: (1) visual exploration, passing the object from hand to hand, folding the purse, etc.; (2)

tactile exploration, passing the hand all over the object, scratching, etc.; (3) slow moving of the object in space; (4) use of the repertory of action: shaking the object, striking it, swinging it, rubbing it against the side of the bassinet, sucking it, etc., "each in turn with a sort of prudence as though studying the effect produced."

At the age of ten months the active experimentation becomes clearer.

> He grasps in succession a celluloid swan, a box, and several other small objects, in each case stretching out his arm and letting them fall. Sometimes he stretches out his arm vertically, sometimes he holds it obliquely in front of or behind his eyes. When the object falls in a new position (for example on his pillow) he lets it fall two or three times more on the same place, as though to study the spatial relation; then he modifies the situation. At a certain moment the swan falls near his mouth; now he does not suck it, (even though this object habitually serves this purpose) but drops it three times more while merely making the gesture of opening his mouth (22, p. 269).

If these examples emphasize explorations and curiosity, they involve mastery as well, and this is more sharply apparent in other examples involving getting objects with a stick, pulling objects between bars, putting things into boxes, and other acts requiring increasing dexterity and skill.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE

What is the child doing in these examples, and why is he doing it? His behavior illustrates all the motives proposed by different workers: sensory drives, activity drives, manipulation, exploration, curiosity, mastery. All of them are present in each single act. I think that we are justified in insisting upon this common core. I suggest that we are here dealing with a very fundamental form of motivated activity. If we look for the common aim of all these actions, it is clear that the infant is building up his practical knowledge of the environment, of his own potentialities for action, and of the effects his actions can have upon the environment. By behavior of this kind, the young organism enters into a circular interaction with the environment, enters into commerce with it, and discovers how different parts of it can be maintained and altered. It is obviously impossible to attribute this behavior to anxiety, which would produce avoidance rather than commerce with the stimulating field. It is difficult to relate the behavior to drives like hunger and sex, which at this stage of the game are not being in the least satisfied by the infant's explorations. It seems to me that we must admit an independent motive which prompts the infant to find out what can be done with the environment. Satisfaction comes

directly from assimilating impressions and producing actions so that the environment is influenced. Of course the child is merely playing, but this does not diminish the importance of his behavior. He is enjoying himself and he is learning; the behavior is not random, and it leads to practical efficiency in dealing with the world.

The word I have tentatively chosen to describe this realm of behavior is *competence*. To be competent means to be sufficient or adequate. As one dictionary puts it, "one is competent who has all the natural powers, physical or mental, to meet the demands of a situation or work." Laurent in his bassinet, like all other normal human infants, strives to become competent, to learn the properties of the environment and the effect he can have upon them. The evolutionary importance of such a tendency, particularly in an organism with a plastic nervous system capable of much learning, can hardly be exaggerated. If all learning about the environment had to be done under stressful conditions such as hunger or danger, it would be hard to be prepared for changing circumstances. If, on the other hand, knowledge of the environment can be built up between occasions of stress, when the organism is relatively calm and most capable of learning, there will soon be a backlog of useful familiarity which will be available when emergency strikes. Animals could rarely escape from roving predators if they did not have the advantage of familiarity with the environment.

But competence does not imply simply preparing the instruments for escape. Commerce with the environment involves pleasure and the growth of an intrinsic interest in the world. In learning to be competent, the child reaches out to the friendly and useful aspects of the world, and lays the foundations for what may become enduring interests. We do not need to torture logic by attempting to derive all interests from libidinal sublimations. These may exist and add to interest, but the core is already provided by the fundamental urge toward competence.

Competence and self-esteem. The concept of competence makes it possible to form a workable idea of self-esteem. In the course of growth a child's competence becomes increasingly differentiated as a result of experience. One boy, let us say, proves particularly competent in walking and running, not as good in building with blocks or handling small objects, decidedly poor in writing and other fine coordinations. When he enters a new school, we shall find him running happily to the playground, certain that he can deal with whatever he

may encounter, but he will take up handicrafts in a somewhat dubious spirit and will turn to penmanship with something like despair. Confidence and self-esteem follow the patterns of one's established and attested competence. No doubt this can be seen most sharply when the child is pitting his strength and skill against inanimate obstacles, as when he tries to climb a tree or scale a difficult cliff, or as when later he undertakes to drive a car or repair electrical equipment.

The concept of competence, however, applies equally well in the social sphere, even though it is not always so easy to be aware either of one's intentions as regards others or the effect one has upon them. There are tremendous individual differences in social competence, ranging from the person who feels unable to influence others at all to the person in whom a habit of command has become second nature. Feelings of social competence are constructed out of experiences in which one has produced intended effects in other people: making them respond, procuring help from them, obtaining expressions of affection, having your own expressions of affection accepted, giving advice which is followed. Self-esteem is partly a question of what others think of us, but it has a very strong root in our own experiences of competence.

If I were to continue this description of the development of competence and its part in the organization of personality, you would find me talking about feelings of inferiority and compensatory strivings, and you would probably tell me to stop bringing coals to Newcastle.

ADLER'S ENDURING CONTRIBUTION

I have tried here to formulate a concept which seems to me fundamental in the development of an ego psychology. I have argued that there is a fundamental urge toward competence, that it has biological and evolutionary significance, that it underlies many of the motives such as exploration, manipulation and mastery which seem to be required by recent studies of personality and of animal learning, that it plays a vital role in the growth of confidence and self-esteem, that it produces a variety of interests not associated with visceral need gratification, and that it provides a conceptual basis for the active, playful, eager, expansive, creative side of man's behavior which is so often lost in mechanistic theories. In this direction, I believe, or at least in some such direction, lies the future of ego psychology.

I do not need to point out to you the similarity between these ideas and some of the major concepts proposed by Adler. It is true

that I have spoken of an urge toward competence rather than a striving for superiority or perfection. I have done this because I think it brings us a little closer to biological roots and to recent detailed observations of child behavior. It is also true that I have not specifically mentioned the concepts of activity level and style of life; here, too, I would favor certain modifications and perhaps a change of names. But it would be of no use, even if I were so disposed, to deny the ancestry of the whole train of thought about which I have been speaking. Someone would surely step up and say, "Oh yes, I knew your grandfather, Alfred Adler."

And perhaps this metaphor of lineal descent will help many of us today who are not associated with any particular psychological school to realize and express our indebtedness to Adler. We like to emphasize our individuality and to believe that we have arrived at a new theory or a fresh combination of ideas. It will be well for us to remember, therefore, that our interest in personality theory has come not only from books but also from training and experience in clinical work. In this realm, we have learned to observe the subtle operation of strivings for power, the purposive and aggressive elements in neurotic symptoms, the jealousies, inferiorities, and compensations that result from competition and sibling rivalry, the poisoning of social feeling by needs for self-enhancement, and the gradual release of social interest as the patient moves in the direction of health. Fifty years ago these things were never reported and may not even have been perceived in the behavior of patients, yet today we accept them as nothing more than clinical common sense. We can congratulate ourselves that we are wiser than our forebears and can observe the things out of which a better ego psychology will ultimately be fashioned. But let us not forget that the man who first pointed out these things, who first saw their significance for both sickness and health, and who thus started us on our way toward tomorrow's ego psychology, was Alfred Adler.

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