

MISQUOTATIONS: AN ADLERIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ERRORS

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We have come a long way since errors were dismissed as mere mechanical accidents having little psychological interest. In order to explain misquotations from our present holistic (7) viewpoint, we must, first, of course, include a chemical, mechanical, or physiological explanation. Was the error due to the influence of alcohol, for instance? Did fatigue or illness bring about circulatory disturbances of the brain? We must, secondly, ask, are the associationists' laws of memory at work? Such causes can certainly facilitate slips, and are thus not entirely without interest. But naming causes does not satisfy us since we want to find the meaning of an error in relation to the individual as a whole who is in a particular situation and is attracted by a goal which finally guides all his behavior. Thus we must, thirdly, take the step from causal explanation to interpretation—indeed a step into meanings, into “metaphysics.”

We formulate a hypothesis as to a near goal which is consistent with the individual's constant personality ideal, because the final guiding fiction which is responsible for the creation and conservation of his life style gives meaning also to a particular error. Our hypothesis is confirmed when we find that other ways of behavior—overt and mental, fantasies, dreams, earliest recollections—imply the same personality ideal, the same kind of movement, the same life style.

When Freud published in 1904 his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (4), Adler belonged to his weekly discussion group. Both men were convinced that every mental activity is determined, in one way or another. Adler accepted Freud's technique of free association for exploring the background, the latent content, not only of dreams but also of early recollections and errors (1). Although Freud's numerous analyses and discussions of the “mental mechanisms” leading to various errors still prove instructive, Adlerians do not accept his general concept that such acts result from “unwelcome, repressed, psychic material which, though pushed away from consciousness, is nevertheless not robbed of all capacity to express itself” (4, p. 178).

Adler's concept of biased or tendentious apperception seems to be more adequate and useful than Freud's of repression. In fact, we have

nothing to repress since we do not even perceive what does not fit in with our life style. (Freud's "self reference" complex [4, p. 52] seems to contain a similar insight, but he did not pursue it.)

We disapprove with Adler of the very word "depth" psychology. Adler insisted that "Individual Psychology is far removed from any theory of shallow 'depth psychology' " (2). An error is not understood the better, the "deeper" we dig into the unconscious, but the more we realize the complexity of the situation in which it occurs.

Every error has, it would seem, the general significance that the subject is in a state of uncommon tension. By this we mean a discrepancy between the individual's hidden guiding fiction and the objective situation. But the particular significance of the error must in each case be discovered from the complexity of the situation and may appear more or less "deep" according to the subject's unreadiness to admit it. Such an approach is neither deep nor shallow, but "concrete" (6, p. 8).

This concrete, holistic approach involves then: (a) A tension exists in the subject which is the fertile soil for the occurrence of error, and the particular nature of which must be understood. (b) In this state certain probabilities are given through such objective "alluring" factors as recency, similarity, familiarity, reversal, etc. (c) From these, the subject selects the error which best fits into his total schema, as a fallacious but compensatory or goal-directed device. Where needed, free association will usually furnish clues to these three determiners.

SLIPS OF THE TONGUE

The following are two examples of this approach to slips of the tongue. A subject refers to Mr. Flower as Mr. Foulter. This reversal of the medial sounds suggests that the subject may be left-sided by constitution and given to reversals in the psychological superstructure, an alluring factor because the subject does not always reverse his sounds. In the present case the reversal produces two homonyms or homophones, namely fowler and foulter. Questioning the subject showed that he did not think of Henry the "Fowler" about whom he had heard in German medieval history, but of a man whose acting is "foul." The hidden purpose of this error is revealed by the situation in which it occurred: Mr. Flower, his superior, had kept our subject waiting, and this roused his inferiority feeling. In referring afterwards to this person as Mr. "Foulter" to an astonished colleague, he clearly

depreciated his superior, which gave him the feeling of a relative superiority. In doing this he neurotically balanced his inner budget of values.

Another subject, being interviewed by a Mr. Church for a job, and suffering from the tension often inherent in such a situation, addressed his interviewer as Mr. Christ. If the interview were to culminate in his appointment, the subject would move from the manifest minus of unemployment to a desired plus, and he would work for an organization comparable to that of a church. So he may have meant to flatter this head of a department when he transformed him into Christ himself. The alluring objective factor here was the great number of Christchurch avenues, roads, lanes, closes, crescents and gardens in his own city of London.

EXAMPLES OF MISQUOTATIONS

1. "The Private Secretary," for T. S. Elliot's play *The Confidential Clerk*. At first it does not seem to mean much when, years after having seen the play, the subject quotes it as "The Private Secrestry." The substituted title may be a more common expression, but it appears to be neither more or less emotional or concrete, nor more or less appreciative or depreciative than the correct title. Here free association allows us to see a meaning. After a few initial statements of having been overworked and tired and of liking neither the play nor its author, it occurs in the subject's mind: "Several of my friends have private secretaries; I haven't yet got that far in life." Now we understand that with this slip the subject, feeling rightly or wrongly inferior and tense, finds a compensation in anticipating the time when he too may have a private secretary, thus concretizing his personality ideal of being outstanding in the field of learning.

2. The loneliness of the "long-distance driver," for Alan Silitoe's novel about a long-distance runner. The present writer had heard that the novel was a remarkable new publication but knew nothing else about it. Being a stranger in the world of sports where there are long and short distance runners, he had, however, recently had to deal with the son of a long-distance driver. The memory law of recency played on the subject's desire to make a new book title meaningful for himself, revealing only that educational problems were nearer to his mind than sport. But the tension, as fertile soil for this error, was created by the desire to show he knew the book (superior-

ity) when indeed he had not yet read it (inferiority). It is in the nature of errors that they mainly occur on the "useless side of life."

3. "Bitter Honey," for Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*. The patient who made this slip in reporting that she had seen the play, expressed by it what was presently being discussed in the therapy session: Life, which can "taste" sweet, appeared in her state of renewed depression as "bitter."

4. "Das Ich und das Wir," for Alice Ruehle-Gerstel's book *Der Weg zum Wir*. The lecturer who made this mistake had always struck one as being extremely self-centered and vain. He felt an opposition between himself and the community and was not marching on "the way to the we." (A lecturer, speaking about "industrial psychology" and saying in error "Individual Psychology" was, of course, an over-enthusiastic Adlerian.)

A MISQUOTATION BY ADLER

On recently rereading a book by Adler (3), the writer was struck by a misquotation from Heinrich von Kleist, a German patriot who in the decade before Napoleon's defeat in Russia, fought with fierce poetry and powerful plays against the French occupation of his Prussia.

The misquotation occurs in an account showing Adler's technique of interpreting a life history written down by a girl whom he did not know. The girl tells that one day the friend of an officer who was keen on her came to her house to make her acquaintance. Although she would have liked to meet him, she asked her sister to say that she was not at home. Her reason was that she did not feel well and was afraid she would therefore make a bad impression on the caller. Adler's interpretation was:

She runs away from the problem of love and marriage. We must not be surprised or in doubt when we see that a person pursues a goal with "good" reasons. They often look like an alibi. Also things may happen which are considered as important reasons for not acting. Being certain of seeing the dynamism correctly, we are not much interested in such reasons or events. What we see missing here are the movements which would lead to a solution of the love problem, or as Kleist says: "Schlaget zu, das Weltgericht fraegt nach euren Gruenden nicht" (3, p. 121).

Kleist's actual words are: "Schlagt ihn tot, das Weltgericht fragt euch nach den Gruenden nicht!" (5, Vol. 1, p. 26). Hardly ever has an appeal to action been expressed more vehemently. The words remain in the memory of the German-speaking reader without any effort to learn them by heart.

In quoting Kleist, Adler identified himself with Kleist's desire to make hesitant people active. But Adler's life style was basically different from that of the exalted poet who committed suicide in 1811. Adler's guiding line was helpfulness: helping as a physician to avoid illness and death; and helping as an educator to banish barren inter-human relationships and conflicts. Thus he transformed "kill him" into "strike out," a version which is less forcible in rhythm as well as content. Whether this change was due to tendentious memory or perhaps even intention, we do not know. The fact remains that in misquoting Kleist, Adler, the lover and servant of life, excluded the word "kill."

Adler's transformation of the second part of the quotation is not accidental either. Kleist's "Weltgericht" is for Adler mankind's common sense. Whereas Kleist says, "You will not be asked for *reasons*" to justify action, Adler's version means "*your* reasons" do not interest us. This indeed fits better the case under discussion, where, as Adler suggests, the neurotic's reasons are but alibis for her hesitating, and where we must observe her movements rather than listen to her words, if we wish to understand her goal.

In discussing this misquotation we regret it, of course, as literary critics; but we are grateful to have been given by Adler himself the means to understand it, and similar errors by others, in the context of a particular situation and life style.

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