

RUDOLF HILDEBRAND:
A FORERUNNER OF ALFRED ADLER

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“Throughout the great *being* which surrounds and deeply penetrates us, there extends a great *becoming* which strives toward the perfect *being*.” (“Durch das grosse Sein, das uns umgibt und weit in uns hineinreicht, zieht sich ein grosses Werden, das dem vollendeten Sein zustrebt.”)

This is a quotation introduced by Alfred Adler on the final page of his *Ueber den nervoesen Charakter* (1, p. 195; 2, p. 445), first published in 1912. Adler's theory underwent considerable refinement and extension during the 25 years between then and his death in 1937. Yet this quotation testifies to a basically unchanged position. In fact, it epitomizes the development which Adler took toward a completely dynamic, holistic theory of personality which sees man embedded in society, this earth, the cosmos, striving toward a subjectively conceived goal of perfection.

The quotation, so pregnant of meaning and strikingly Adlerian, given by Adler the prominence of the final page in his first major book, arouses curiosity about the author and what else he may have written. Adler, unsystematic as he was, did not originally give the source. When in a later edition he added the name of Hildebrandt in parentheses (3, p. 219), this was still neither quite adequate nor quite correct.

The quotation is from Rudolf Hildebrand (1824-1894), Germanist and professor at Leipzig, known mainly for his work on the German dictionary founded by the Grimm brothers and for his treatise on teaching German. The latter went into 21 printings and was still reprinted at least as recently as 1948 (6), seventy-nine years after its first appearance in 1867. On the side, Hildebrand was also a philosopher who wrote in the informality of diary entries which he began in his 54th year. A first selection from these was published posthumously, in 1896, under the title of *Diary Pages of a Sunday Philosopher* (7). A second selection followed in 1910 (8). In 1925 a book of further selections and letters appeared (9), and as late as 1956 a small volume of edifying poems (10). This extraordinary

publication history would attest to the interest in and vitality of the thoughts of a very unusual, highly creative and unpretentious man.

The passage which Adler cited is from the 1910 book of selections, a volume of over 400 pages, edited by Georg Berlit for his "fatherly friend."¹ An examination of this work shows that Hildebrand's thinking was very much in the spirit of a broad humanistic, holistic, dynamic view of man and in protest against the determinism, mechanism and atomism of the science of his century (see also 11). He argued against a psychology which reduces the textile into its threads, "zerfasernde Psychologie" (p. 108).² The similarities to Adler are in some places astounding. When Hildebrand conceptualizes certain psychological processes it sometimes seems that only the specific names by which Adler designated them are lacking. Hildebrand, even more than Adler, was suspicious of fixed terms. "Whenever I noticed in me the rise of a catchy term, I dropped it at once to preserve a free flow for my thoughts" (p. 22). In accordance with all existentialists, and he may well be described as such, he was afraid of any systematization. "A system gives the reassuring comfort (or deception) that one can confidently carry it home—if only the soul were not something living, something indefatigably active. *Panta rhei*" (p. 36n). In the following we shall present some of the striking similarities with Adler.

Depreciation tendency. To begin with, there is the concept of the striving toward perfection, expressed in the quotation. More surprising is how Hildebrand describes what Adler called "depreciation tendency," the depreciation of others which we find quite generally when the striving toward perfection is miscarried into one of personal superiority over others. According to Hildebrand:

"Everyone wants to become more: more rich, high or great, etc. Quite right. But in the majority there is an error here which must be overcome: One wants first of all to become greater by making the others, those nearest with whom one compares oneself, smaller. Or one describes them as smaller, lets them feel their greater smallness, etc. But does one thereby become greater oneself? Only apparently, not really . . . Does one advance oneself by only preventing the others from advancing or by actually pushing them back? This usual method is simply stupidity, a miscalculation, an error" (p. 115).

¹We owe the identification and location of the quotation to our good friend Paul Rom, London, to whom we herewith express our sincere thanks.

²Where only page references are given, these are to 8.

The correct striving, according to Adler, is characterized by a well developed social interest through which the goal of perfection or superiority becomes one by which others benefit as well. This too is told by Hildebrand: "Real advance, real enhancement is attained in the opposite way: Advance the others whom you can reach first of all; thereby you advance yourself at the same time, even when apparently you remain standing with them, or even when you return to them from your own progress" (p. 115).

Depression as self-centeredness. Hildebrand's thoughts on pessimism are similar to those of Adler on melancholia and depression as related to boundless egotism. "Pessimism springs in part from a kind of egotism, by which I mean the delusion that one is alone in the world, the only self, which then is also supposed to remedy the existing evil single-handed, and is possibly even alone guilty of it. This is a delusion which . . . shows itself in depression which in turn infects us with distrust against our environment and makes us appear to ourselves as the only good persons. . . . Much of the pessimism, as it appears in science and in life, paralyzing the strength for life and the joy in it, seems to me on closer examination like pretending to be unhappy over such things as that a rosebush is not entirely rose, an apple tree not entirely apple" (pp. 140-141).

"What is moral and what is healthy are from a deeper viewpoint really one and the same, once one understands healthy not only in the physical sense as the *Zeitgeist* does" (p. 106).

Genius as supreme usefulness. While Adler defined genius as supreme social usefulness, Hildebrand had come to quite the same conclusion. "With the really great, one is always at the same time with the people, the whole, because the great seek and have their entire greatness only in the whole, because they erect their entire final goal only in the midst of the whole, put their entire meaning only in the service of the living whole, their people or mankind. This is the only certain measure of the right greatness, the genuine genius in poets, thinkers, statesmen, etc. The false genius posits or seeks himself as the whole (e.g. Napoleon), depreciates the true whole in part or small part by comparison with himself, and in doing so becomes in truth—small" (p. 128).

Social interest. With these insights, it is not surprising that Hildebrand describes social interest and its function quite completely. Only the use of the actual term is missing. "The individual self gains

itself only through devotion to the all-self. And this, I think, is actually the old doctrine of all good and wise men, which is also practiced daily in life in all the good that comes about" (p. 119). "The natural, healthy person spends of his well-being, to the good and the bad . . . He does this without great deeds or conscious action, already through his glance, his tone of voice, his judgment, his whole attitude . . . The good which has visited him takes root as general love, where the miracle takes place that one possesses only in order to spend, and that the spending does not diminish the treasure but increases it" (p. 123). Hildebrand considers it a law of life that "we can advance, that is, reach a higher rung on the ladder of life, only together with the others" (p. 125). "Only through, in, and with other selves does one gain one's own self" (p. 270).

Conscience is seen as the agent of connection with the larger whole. "It is the point where all that is 'subjective,' the source of all error, stops being subjective and becomes 'objective'" (p. 372). The similarity to Adler's concept of private intelligence versus common sense is apparent.

The social responsibility of the scientist. Comparing Freud with Dewey, Feuer (5) recently made the distinction between the spectator theory of knowledge which was Freud's and the reformer's theory of knowledge which was Dewey's. We have shown elsewhere that the latter is apparently a concomitant of the holistic approach as exemplified by Smuts (4) as well as by Dewey and Adler. Hildebrand as a true holist also embraces the reformer's theory, expressing himself on this point quite explicitly. "The concept of science as existing only for the sake of 'research,' i.e., for being a spectator, and not for intervention, which could be taken care of at some later time by others, must be corrected" (p. 299).

From the reformer's point of view Hildebrand decries analytical approaches according to which "the truth reveals only where and how the world is bad . . . For many, to understand human nature means to know how bad men are. And this 'truth' deprives me of the unity of the soul" (p. 299). "I see criticism, pessimism, nihilism, solipsism, those evil demons of our day, as hypochondriasis in philosophy's clothing. . . . All this under the semblance and claim of 'strict science'" (pp. 298-299). The proper place of science would be to show up the relationships and proportions of things (p. 158).

In the same vein causalistic determinism and the principle of self-preservation come under attack. "Do not men become automata

at the hands of the determinists, the causalists, and such" (p. 202)? "Oh, you determinists! You paralyze the God-given forces, while they should be freed from self-created shackles" (p. 182). Self-preservation as a basic principle is considered inadequate because it cannot account for "progress and growth" (p. 266).

It appears then here again, as so frequently, that there is an entire constellation of concepts which logically follow from a holistic, in contrast to an analytic reductionistic point of view, and which emerge again and again in those who adopt the holistic view. And this constellation seems to be related to a more urgent and salient sense of social responsibility than can be noted among those holding the opposing view. Thus the initial quotation from Hildebrand continues with the words: "But this *becoming* harbors at the same time within itself a great *thou shalt*" (p. 102).

Conclusion. The few samplings from Hildebrand presented here will be enough to demonstrate the quality and range of his thinking. Yet one aspect that has been omitted should be brought out at this point. Hildebrand was a great German patriot, which would appear only consistent with a life devoted primarily to the study of the German language. Whereas for Adler the concept of community went from the family so-to-speak directly to mankind, for Hildebrand it went via the social structure to the "people," the nation. This is aptly reflected in the title of one of his posthumous books, *People and Mankind* (9). Aside from this difference, the concurrence of Hildebrand's thoughts with those of Adler is so striking that one may well assume that Adler, knowingly or unknowingly, was influenced by Hildebrand to a greater extent than one quotation would indicate.

We may conclude by noting, as Adler did himself on several occasions, that he was not the first to formulate many of the concepts he embraced, just as many others have re-formulated them since, often without being aware of Adler. But it remains the unique contribution of Adler to have been the first to work out the assumptions and observations springing from a holistic viewpoint into a comprehensive modern theory of personality, psychopathology, and psychotherapy.

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