

ADLERIAN PSYCHOLOGY AND MENTAL HYGIENE¹

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Mental Hygiene is not an exact science. It is a discipline whose objective it is to preserve and develop mental health. For this purpose it borrows from other disciplines and sometimes also refers to scientific concepts or to explanatory theories. It is a combination of knowledge, techniques and empirical procedures which aim to preserve and expand the individual personality while supporting its adaptation to the social environment.

Mental health can be defined as a dynamic equilibration of personality, that is, as a harmonic integration, a permanent becoming, of an individual history and an actual situation. Individual history must be understood not as the simple succession of events by which the subject has been confronted; it is the trajectory of being, the "dynamic line" on which Adler has insisted. This original trajectory which gives the subject the imprint of his "style of life" is the outcome of his hereditary tendencies as well as his previous experiences and it is oriented essentially toward a project whose purpose is exactly this equilibration which permits self-affirmation in the social environment.

The actual situation must be understood not as the objective inventory of the elements of the actual environment which is present to the contact and proximity of the subject. It is the significance which the elements take on in the function of his past experience and also of his project which counts.

One sees the importance in problems of mental hygiene of the Adlerian concept of the significance of the project, or the purpose, which is the major theme of this Congress.

To be sure, this prospective conception of being is not exclusively Adlerian and one finds it again developed with insistence in most existentialistic schools. For Heidegger and for Jaspers, man is a being of possibilities, a soaring flight, a being-ahead-of-himself. The human being is at each instant more than he is, although he is not yet what he will be. He is, according to Sartre, "the being which is not what he is, and who is what he is not."

All this is already included in the Adlerian concept of purpose.

¹Opening address by the honorary president, Ninth International Congress of Individual Psychology, Paris, August 30, 1963. In the absence of Dr. Sivadon this address was read by Dr. Claude Veil. Translated from the French.

But the latter, moreover, allows for the notion of the subjective unconscious evaluation of the means which permit the compensation of the inferiority of being, consequently the equilibration of the personality.

The considerable practical interest of the concept of purpose in contrast to that of a pure causal determinism, is what opens the way to preventive and curative action. Man is not yet what he is; his becoming is oriented, indeed, by his style of life and by his project. But the latter can still be modified, by individual psychotherapeutic action, or better still by equilibrating action of the group. And the style of life itself can be shaped in childhood by a good education.

In evaluating the educative action in the family and the school, in underlining the importance of adaptation to the social environment, in explaining the meaning and the purpose of behavior, Adlerian psychology contributes to all the techniques used by mental hygiene a theoretical legitimation of its efficacy and thereby the reasons for an optimism without which any effort loses the essence of its value.

The Adlerian conception of man is essentially alive and thus a perpetual becoming. It is at any instant more than it seems to be, because it contains in germinal form what it will be. It is striking to see the actual, extremely varied, developments which are permitted by the notion of the individual seeking to realize himself in and through the community, to assert himself in the function of the values of the group. The methods of active education, of group psychotherapy, the general principles of the organization of work groups, of therapeutic communities, of industrial and social institutions, they are all found already as potentialities in Adlerian psychology from its beginnings.

Mental hygiene, in as much as it is a discipline aimed at helping man to expand in his social environment, finds a particularly valuable support in an optimistic theory which invites anybody to correct at any instant the line of his destiny by orienting him towards a future of social as much as individual equilibrium.

Adlerian psychology, in its turn, verifies its validity in the fruitfulness of its applications in mental hygiene. This mutual support undoubtedly explains the distinguished honor which you have paid to a representative of the mental hygiene movement in asking him to inaugurate your work. He makes himself today the spokesman of all those who work for a better equilibrium of man, in extending to you very sincere wishes of success.