

SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND SOCIAL FEELING

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I discover that I am everybody, and that I discover myself in discovering my fellow man, and vice versa.

—ERICH FROMM (6, p. 186)

For the psychologist the rule is never to worry about his own success; if he does so, he forfeits it. The psychotherapist must lose all thought of himself.

—ALFRED ADLER (2, p. 341)

Adler's concept of social feeling offers the psychologist a means by which he is better able to comprehend the process of self-understanding, and most important, articulate his comprehension of the process to others. This statement implies that at present many psychologists are unclear as to the nature of self-understanding and consequently refrain from discussing it, specially as an issue in itself. It is the author's contention that the nature of self-understanding as process is a problem for therapeutic psychology. It is simple enough to say that mental health is to know thyself, but precisely how one goes about knowing thyself remains an enigma.

The purpose of this paper is to examine self-understanding as a problem, study this problem in terms of the Adlerian notion of social feeling, formulate a definition of self-understanding, illuminate this definition with examples, and present its therapeutic implication through a case study.

SELF-UNDERSTANDING AS A PROBLEM

"Know thyself." This utterance has been handed down through the ages as the criterion of wisdom and peace of mind until our present day where it is transformed through psychological sophistication from a religious-philosophical notion into a slogan of mental health or the central theme of an academic course in mental hygiene. Today it is assumed that one gets to know himself by learning about man in the abstract, i.e., man as a social, psychological, biological, economic, and religious being. Consequently, the "knowledgeable person" ends up knowing about a fictive man constructed from a web of ideas, not the man who lives and breathes, nor the one to whom the personal pronouns "I" and "me" apply.

Then how does one "know thyself"? This slogan or academic

theme implies that one does not ordinarily come to know himself; that is why it is conceived as a goal to be attained or a lesson to be learned. Then knowledge of one's self is not the exclusive goal of amnesiacs; rather, insight into self is understanding why we behave as we do. For instance a person may still not understand the reason why he yells at his wife in certain situations, although he knows his socio-economic status, genealogical decent, IQ score, level of academic achievement, physiological make-up, and religious heritage. Clearly, such information is not wisdom, nor does it bring about peace of mind, nor does mental hygiene commence and mental health prevail because of it. Instead, self-understanding appears to be particularized knowledge involving one's unique individuality which is constantly situated with and implicating others. How then does one come to understand himself as a unique individual always situated and involved with others?

DEFINITION OF SOCIAL FEELING

Adler's concept of social feeling offers us a powerful conceptual tool which we may bring to bear upon the thorny question of self-understanding.

What does social feeling mean? Basically, it is a notion which refers to a person's ability to empathize with another: to see, hear, and feel with him (2, p. 135). Buchheimer's analysis of the original German term *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* is helpful here: *Gemeinschaft* means specifically community with general aspects implicating also the universe; *Gefühl* signifies a person's attitude and action tendency (5, p. 242). The English translation of *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* as social feeling or interest loses merely the implication of one's relation to the universe. What is interesting and rather paradoxical is that Adler combined the idea of social, an objective referent of commonality, with feeling or interest, a subjective referent of personality. The former implicates common meaning; the latter indicates private experience and desire. The synthesis of the objective "social" with the subjective "feeling" or "interest" seems to indicate a triumph over the dichotomous relationship of common meaning and private meaning, a bridge between "you" and "me." Now let us be more specific.

Ansbacher states that Adler considered social feeling to be "an innate cognitive aptitude" (3, p. 50), an aptitude, the author believes, which allows one to transcend his private meanings and feelings by

focusing his interest on the other's words and behaviors in terms of what they mean to the other, a feeling with the other. This point can be seen in the way Adler sums up the notion of social interest: "The capacity for identification, which alone makes us capable of friendship, love of mankind, sympathy, occupation, and love, is the basis of social interest and can be practiced and exercised only in conjunction with others" (2, p. 136).

Such identification is a self-transcendence, a going beyond the limited horizons of one's private motives and thoughts to an understanding or sharing of another's aims and desires. In the context of this paper, the nature of social feeling is seen as an aptitude to understand one's self through the understanding of others. At this point it is possible to make more definitive statements concerning the nature of self-understanding conceived as social feeling.

DEFINITION OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Self-understanding is, paradoxically, self-transcendence, i.e., focusing one's interest and feeling upon the other in order to discover what his words, gestures, and postures mean to him. It is becoming less involved with one's own hopes, fears, shame, and doubt in order to become more concerned about how the other sees and experiences the world and others. Self-understanding conceived as social feeling means to see one's self (insight) by participating with another, sharing mutual concern, or more succinctly, being an "I" for a "thou" as Buber (4) would say. It is precisely in such an "I-thou" relation that one is able to establish the necessary distance between himself as figure and his self-seeking pragmatic involvement as ground, for self-understanding to come about. Schutz, the late social philosopher of common sense life, comes to a similar conclusion through a phenomenology of face-to-face relations: "I experience myself through you, and you experience yourself through me" (7, p. 30).

THE PRACTICE OF SOCIAL FEELING: SELF-UNDERSTANDING

How can one practice social feeling and thereby understand himself? This question is not easily answered, for we lack adequate descriptive-explanatory concepts with which to exemplify social feeling in action. Here I ask you to imagine along with me. Suppose, for the purpose of exemplification, that you finish eating supper and sit down in the easy-chair and begin to read the newspaper. Your

wife enters and begins to nag you about never doing anything around the house and calls you "lazy."

You can respond in different ways. You can mimic her actions as she scolds you, thereby causing her to break into tears. Or, you can not listen to her words, and slip into your own thoughts of self-pity, or think of some ideal love who is always affectionate to you. Or, you can try to understand her point of view, i.e., what her words mean in terms of herself. You actively direct your interest toward how she must feel in making such remarks. All of your knowledge, past experience, and emotional sensitivity is summoned in order to understand why she behaves in such a manner. At this point you are not self-conscious (ashamed, embarrassed, enraged, threatened, etc.), but totally directed toward understanding her point of view. This self-transcending movement achieves distance from self and affords you the possibility of understanding her and hence yourself. For instance, you may realize that she acts as though she is inadequate to the task of being a home-maker, leading you to see that she needs some encouragement and help in doing household chores. It then impresses you that the reason for not helping her in the past springs from an inflated idea of manliness which you unknowingly harbored. On the other hand, you may suddenly see that she is afraid to be affectionate and feels that only harsh words bring results. This understanding also brings with it insight, for you realize that you have been treating her abruptly due to your own mistrust of affection. Let us now pursue what psychotherapeutic implication the reciprocal aspect of self-understanding has in terms of a case study.

THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATION OF A CASE STUDY

In the analysis of an apparently paranoid woman with a persecution complex, Adler (1, pp. 183-185) revealed how lack of social feeling can make wrong spring from right. It so happened that Adler's patient was actually being disparaged by her supposed friend who in truth depreciated others behind their backs. At first not even the patient's husband and friends believed the patient's accusation: that the apparently kind lady was prone to assassinate a person's good name, and had already done so in the patient's case. In the end the hostile side of the accused woman was revealed for all to see. However, in the interim, the patient suffered alienation from her husband and friends, became hostile and anxiety-ridden

even though she was right. The point Adler makes is that his patient failed to understand her two-faced friend; instead, she became so hurt and insulted that she risked her own sanity to prove herself right and the other wrong.

Adler's patient responded to the other's depreciating remarks in terms of her injured self-esteem; she depreciated her deceptive friend in the name of truth instead of understanding what the depreciatory tendency meant to this two-faced woman. If the patient had practiced social feeling she would have become aware of this same tendency within herself and everyone else and thereby been able to see that everybody has faults. Despite the fact that this patient was right in what she said, her behavior was not adaptive; she failed to understand the other and to understand herself. Reciprocal understanding of self and others transcends the argumentative mode of being with others, i.e., being interested in being right and proving the other wrong.

SUMMARY

Self-understanding is only attained through understanding others. Understanding others is a function of social feeling. Social feeling implies self-transcendence. The self-transcending movement of social feeling overcomes self-centeredness and leads to greater reciprocity between self and others. Fostering social feeling in psychotherapy allows the patient to transcend the struggle between right and wrong through a reciprocal understanding of self and others.

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