

THE TWO TELEOLOGIES OF ADLER'S INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGY¹

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It is fitting that we should take the anniversary occasion of a great man's birth to find in his thought some deeper understanding of the theoretical issues which engaged him and continue to engage us. Great men do not always resolve these issues to everyone's satisfaction. Some would say they create the issues or at least the problems around which significant theoretical issues coalesce.

Alfred Adler was a man who knew full well the various nuances of theoretical usage to which his developing thought brought him. He, probably more than any other personality theorist, adapted his conceptualizations to the reality of history, to his time and professional calling. Some have seen in this adaptation a too-easy facility and even superficiality, but this is only because they fail to grasp the broader issues with which Adler wrestled. He was intent upon keeping the image of man self-directing — which meant goal-directed — but at the same time rooted in the very fabric of organic life. He flirted with arbitrariness and then backed off when he sensed the unfeeling demoralization which arbitrariness in theoretical outlook could foster.

This morning I would like to review with you the maturing thought of Alfred Adler, with particular emphasis on his use of teleological constructs. I will try to show how and why he felt it necessary to extend his teleological conception of man as individual actor to an even broader teleology of mankind as a whole, set in directed motion by organic evolution. I think that Adler's heavy reliance on Darwinian-Lamarckian theory in his mature years is not widely appreciated today, nor are the probable reasons for why he gravitated to this evolutionary emphasis properly understood.

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FICTIONAL TELEOLOGY

It is common knowledge that at the time of the split with Freud in 1910-11, Adler leaned heavily on the "as if" philosophy of Hans Vaihinger for intellectual support. Vaihinger was a neo-Kantian and admirer of Nietzsche, who took the spirit of Kant's ethical doctrine to "behave *as if* a God existed" and developed it into a concept of "fictions." The point of this philosophy was that man *creates* his world — or, at least much of it — through projecting Kantian-like categories, assumptions, or premises which frame-in his awareness and determine his existence (4, p. 78). Since they must of necessity act as presumed or accepted — hence, unquestioned — major premises coming at the very beginnings of awareness, fictions are not subject to validation in the empirical sense. This is an idealistic insight, the recognition that some things simply cannot be proven empirically because empirical proof itself hinges upon such plausibilities in order for rational evaluation to take place. It is significant to note that in 1914 Sigmund Freud referred to Adler's "new look" as theoretician by saying that he had carried the "relativity of all knowledge" too far (7, p. 348). Adler's flirtation with the fiction construct was striking home to the more authoritarian founder of psychoanalysis. But this theoretical success was to prove a mixed blessing.

Essentially, what Adler now did was to depart from the typical "natural science" mode of explaining behavior which both Freud and Jung continued to embrace, at least in part. Natural science had discarded the Aristotelian *formal* and *final* causes in favor of a restricted application of *material* and *efficient* causation (10). The latter terms fit energetic descriptions nicely, as in the case of combustible substances being burned, eventually to release "so much" pressure in heat and/or steam and thus to drive a piston "so many" times in efficient causation. Man is presumably a compendium of these same natural-science principles. Though Freud and to an even greater extent Jung had sought to modify this wooden conception of human behavior, they still clung to the seeming need for an energetic description — and thus "libido" was the energy of the sexual instincts or an *élan vital* to drive man's behavioral piston.

Adler deviated from this tradition in taking man "at face value" as constantly in the process of movement, and felt that it was psychology's task to identify the *patterns* (formal causes) which such movements took on as they oriented the human being "for the sake of" (final cause) attaining a projected goal. Teleology is concerned

with purposes or the role of goals in behavior (*telos* is derived from the Greek, meaning "end"). In unabashed fashion, Adler called for a teleological conception of man, whom he took to be a self-directed, purposeful organism.

The fiction now became one such goal, acting as a ruling strategy or "guiding fiction" to predetermine man's behavior. To offset this guiding belief Adler first posited a "counter-fiction" and thus retained an element of the dialectical style of thought so typical of Freud (9, Chapter X). In 1912 he said: "The counter-fiction forces considerations upon the guiding fiction, takes social and ethical demands of the future in account with their real weight, and, in doing so, insures reasonableness. It is a safety coefficient of the guiding line towards power. The harmony of these two fictions, their mutual compatibility, is the sign of mental health" (4, p. 144).

It was when he dropped the dialectical opposition of a guiding fiction and its counter-fiction that Adler truly became his "own man" as theorist. Rejecting the Freudian dialectical maneuver, Adler now cast everything in terms of the individual's life plan, with its implicit goal. It is the goal selected which freezes man into a fixed course of behavior, and only by changing his plan can we change a man's style of life (1, p. 52). Man is not simply an efficiently caused mechanism, propelled by the material energies in his make-up. He is moved "for the sake of" a prototypical plan of action, and there is no such thing as internal conflict. To speak of unconscious motives at odds with the goals of consciousness is to reflect a gross misunderstanding of the human condition. Man is not quite the "bundle of contradictions" that Freud had painted him to be. He is at all times a uniformly teleological being, moving inexorably toward *one* goal.

But if we no longer oppose a counter-fiction as balancing counter-measure to the more selfish guiding fiction, what is there to prevent mankind from sinking into the morass of social indifference and self-indulgence? It is precisely at this point that we find Adler feeling about for his second teleology.

FACTUAL TELEOLOGY

The crux of the theoretical problem facing Adler lay in this term "fiction," which he found increasingly unacceptable. After all, if the neurotic individual really believes that his behavioral anomalies are the result of interacting "fictions," he has plenty of justification for simply dismissing any change in his life style, since this would leave

him in no more certain circumstances than before. Or, he might simply muddle along in indecision for an interminable — and excusable — length of time. Add to this the fact that an analysis of behavior in terms of such arbitrary beliefs or convictions was almost too academic and removed from the world's necessities to satisfy Adler. It seems that the observed horror during his service in World War I was the precipitating factor to a dramatic change in Adler's theoretical outlook. Friends have documented Adler's more quiet and serious, yet somehow stronger and self-assured, demeanor following World War I (6). He returned to his favorite cafe in Vienna, the *Whiff of Tobacco*, and announced to his astonished followers that what the world wanted was social interest (*Gemeinschaftsgefühl*).

In the pre-war version of Adlerian thought social interest would of course have been a counter-fiction. Vaihinger held that a belief in teleological behavior was itself a type of fiction (4, p. 80). But now Adler was searching for universal, hence *factual* principles against which to judge man's more personalized fictional life plans. And from this time forward we see in his writings a growing emphasis on the factual rather than the fictional. Here is a 1927 sample, in which he refers to man's teleological goal striving in these terms:

Our experience . . . has shown us that the assumption of a striving for a goal is more than simply a *convenient fiction*. It has shown itself to be largely coincident with the actual facts in its fundamentals, whether these facts are to be found in the conscious or unconscious life. The striving for a goal, the purposiveness of the psychic life is not a philosophic assumption, but actually a fundamental fact (1, p. 68 italics added.).

Post-war Adler now finds himself in opposition to the highly arbitrary views of pre-war Adler. Not only was man's goal-striving a fact, but Adler emphasized that social interest and the social feelings it engendered were also an "absolute truth" (3, p. 277). On what grounds could we argue that man has it within his bosom to feel socially toward a fellow human being? It is at this point that Adler falls back on the theories of organic evolution. He had always accepted the Darwinian-Lamarckian line of thought, and had properly recognized that — no matter how one tried to explain it — the edifice of evolutionary theory rested on an assumption of progression, advance, and improvement (5, p. 39). This *natural teleology* is not to be denied, said Adler, for it is *fact* that "we are . . . embedded in the stream of evolution and must follow it" (5, p. 34).

Hence, the tie binding all men to one another is a feeling of community, a social feeling, which is itself nurtured and furthered by

social interest. In the descent of man, says Adler, "social feeling . . . was meant to bind human beings more closely to one another. It must be regarded as the heritage of evolution, as the result of the upward struggle in the evolutionary urge" (4, p. 462). And so it is that Adler has now effectively introduced a *second teleology* into his theory. Not only is individual man teleologically arrayed to work for goals — even erroneous ones — but mankind as a whole is arrayed to work for the goal of mutual acceptance and interpersonal concern. This is not a simple or automatic evolutionary process. It takes work, hard work, to cultivate the slowly developing sense of concern we have seen attend the evolution of man from the lower forms. As Adler put it: "Social feeling itself is derived only from the arduous creative effort of each individual" (2, p. xiv.).

COMMITMENT TO HUMAN EVOLUTION

In the final years of his life Adler's commitment to evolutionary theory is truly remarkable. In 1933 he put the edifice of Individual Psychology squarely on this foundation, as follows: "The talking about social interest as belonging to the evolution of man, as part of human life, and the awakening of the corresponding understanding is today being attended to by Individual Psychology. *This is its fundamental significance, its claim to existence, and this is what represents its strength*" (5, p. 38; italics added). Concepts of morality, concepts of God, and the viability of civilizations are all now said to be derived from this *organically-based* capability — our human capacity to sense the feeling of the "other" in interpersonal relations, and to act accordingly. Carl Furtmüller, Adler's closest friend and biographer, has summed up the developing change in Adler's mature outlook most clearly, as follows:

By and by the concept of social interest itself changed in character. When Adler first introduced the idea into his theory it was a biological fact, the preparedness of the individual from the first moments of his life to establish contacts, co-operating contacts, with other individuals. Now social interest became the mentally healthy direction for the innate striving toward perfection—for the individual as well as for mankind as a whole (5, p. 388).

Adler was not unaware of the fact that many social Darwinists (8) used evolutionary theory to justify man's hostile tendencies, drawing on the so-called principles of "survival of the fittest" or "self-preservation." Adler rejected such interpretations, noting that there are too many instances in the march of history in which such principles have been violated (4, pp. 120-121). It is precisely this "dog

eat dog" aspect of behavior that mankind is evolving *out of*, and into a higher level of interpersonal relating. All evolutionary signs point to it, and if the progress is delayed by those whose will-to-power or striving-for-superiority has taken a negative, selfish turn, then the exception to the rule merely highlights the error of the behavior in question. As Adler phrased it:

The goal of mastering the environment in a superior way, which one can call the striving for perfection, consequently characterizes the development of man. It is expressed most clearly in the concept of God. In the individual case, however, the striving for superiority takes on very different concrete forms. Typical is, *e.g.*, the striving to *master one's fellow man*. Exactly this form was shown by Individual Psychology to be erroneous, contradicting the concept of evolution (5, p. 39).

The cultivation of social interest and social feeling is everyone's responsibility. Children should be trained in this concern for their fellow humans (5, p. 54). If nationalistic considerations dictate that one country becomes predator of another, or, within countries, one class feeds on the disadvantages of another, then the Individual Psychologist must point out how this atavism in ethical outlook can only harm mankind as a whole (5, p. 65). It is only with effort that man can hope to fulfill the promise of a future goal, one which evolutionary advance has begun to approximate. Other evolutionary goals have been achieved, and so can this one. Hence, says Adler: "We must expect the development of social interest so strongly in the ultimate goal of perfection that mankind of the future will possess and activate it like breathing" (5, p. 38).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

Now, though we might not accept his grounds for theoretical belief in what I have called the "two teleologies," what heritage has Adler left us? What are some of the implications of his thought for today? Drawing "morals" from a man's thought is surely a most dangerous pastime — and they must invariably be tinged with one's personal reactions. Hence, we might rephrase this to say what do *I* feel Adler has to say for today?

Well, for one thing, I think that Adler properly understood the role of emotion or "feeling" in behavior. Today we hear much about what the world needs is "love and not war." This is surely an echo of Adler's proclamation in the *Whiff of Tobacco* decades past. Yet Adler was astute enough to know that strong feelings in and of themselves are no guarantee that the behavioral implications therein are worthy of aspiration. Those in error *also* feel strongly. The great

wave of convinced social critics today, who *strongly* feel a *genuine* emotion of almost self-righteous certainty as regards the ills of society might take pause. Adler teaches that feelings are paramount, but we must ask ourselves "what kind of feelings are these?" Social feelings demand that we take the perspective of the "other," and consider his welfare. Simply having a *genuine* feeling is no guarantee that one is feeling *socially!*

Another thing that impresses me about Adler is that, though he has gained a reputation as a social psychologist because of all this emphasis on social interest and social feeling, I cannot really see him as a *truly social theorist*. His ethic is not based on the group level! He could never have come to the claim of a "sick society," for example, as Harry Stack Sullivan did (11, p. 155). Adler's ethic is based on *natural* and not *social* factors. It springs from the organic substrate we carry as individuals, not from our particular group or class identities. Indeed, Adler was to turn away from socialist and communist thinkers he had known as friends and students precisely because they did try to apply his thought to a social revolutionary or revisionist scheme (6). Adler's concept of society was as an ideal, a universal state of brotherhood toward which we all work in our own unique behavioral patterns each day (4, p. 451). Societies are not "sick," for they are or should be elevated goals toward which we work. People are "sick," or more properly, in error. Adler was no advocate of what I like to call the *ad medium* argument — that is, excusing or explaining away personal behavior on account of one's "early social environment."

Finally, I would like to observe that Adler had the good sense to distinguish between "behavior as observed" and the "goal toward which behavior is aimed," and to escape the fallacy of dismissing the latter because of the former. Too many social critics today look out and see in a so-called *realistic* vein that people are *not* perfect, that they fail to live up to the ideals they profess. We are in an age of ultra-sophistication and so-called "honesty" which seems obsessed with the disparity between a projected goal of what things "might be" and the reality of what they are. Adler was not so quick to call down the imperfections of a man who professed aspirations which were quite beyond him. I do not refer here to those neurotic and criminal types who use professed goals of a concern for their fellow men as desirable but unattainable ideals (fictions), and thereby justify their seeming inability to work toward social interest (4, pp.

303 & 413). Doubtless insincerity and excuse-making can be seen in those who express exalted goals, and then claim they are too sick or otherwise corrupt to work toward them. This is why Adler stressed actions over mere words. But not *everyone* who is trying to improve as a human being — however imperfectly and occasionally that effort is being put into behavioral effect — should be viewed in this light. Furthermore, what is far more important is that we *not* allow the imperfections of our aspiring fellows to denigrate the goals for which they do sincerely, actively work.

You can invoke your own stereotype here. Whether you think of the gospel singing, Sunday Christian who harbors racial prejudice throughout the week, or the sign-carrying, bewhiskered radical who works for a better world by setting fire bombs off in public buildings, the point is: Must an ideal be judged by the disparity between it and the actions of those who profess it? Or, can we honor the goal and accept the shortcomings of those who aspire to it? If goals must be manifested before they can be projected, then goals are really not “something to be attained” after all.

Put another way: Adler believed in the power of *example*! Even the sinner can work for a sainted goal, and thereby inspire others through his resolve. Woe to civilization if it gives up on its goals simply because they are not *really achieved* in the present. Those who see Individual Psychology as a moralizing theory of behavior are responding to the same general issue. It is impossible for man to improve if he does not strive, and one cannot strive without first asking what ought to be achieved. Life is not a happening! It is a working-toward! Evolution is not an unfolding! It is a working-toward! In this, the 100th anniversary year of Alfred Adler's birth, I at least would like to take his unselfish life as example and goal for what might someday be as routine to us all as breathing.

SUMMARY

An interpretation of Adler's maturing thought is presented, dating from roughly his split with Freud. Although some of his early theory was rooted in physical concepts, it is well-known that Adler came to stress man's psychological goal-orientation. This image of man emphasizing a *human teleology* is what he saw as distinguishing Individual Psychology from the Freudian concepts of a mechanistic-energetic nature (libido theory). In his pre-World War I conceptions Adler relied heavily on the neo-Kantian theories of Vaihinger, who had

proposed the idealistic conception of the "fiction." Yet, it can be shown that Adler was never entirely satisfied with the ubiquitous application of the fiction concept, due to its nihilistic overtones. Following the horrors of World War I, Adler found it personally necessary to base Individual Psychology on a less relative premise. He achieved this by now proposing a teleological evolutionary theory, in which a common "telos" was rooted in nature for all men to sense within their being: i.e., *social interest!* Social interest was not a fiction or counter-fiction, but a Darwinian-Lamarckian *fact*. This second teleology removes the area of grey in his ethic, for both men and mankind are now said to be goal-directed "by nature." The presentation closes with some observations on the implications of Adlerian thought for today.

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