

ALFRED ADLER'S CONCEPT OF GOD

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Alfred Adler's work on the philosophy of religion, while not as well known as other aspects of his Individual Psychology, not only bears significantly on his thought as a whole and recapitulates some of his principal ideas, but provides a fresh perspective for viewing the central problem of any philosophy of religion, the nature of God. Notwithstanding an apparent eclecticism which may seem borne out by this paper's referral to other thinkers, Adler in his brief treatment of religious philosophy offers a unique blend of a pragmatic outlook on a metaphysical foundation.

The primary source for Adler's religious views is his reply to the essay by Ernst Jahn, a Lutheran pastor, entitled "The Psychotherapy of Christianity." Originally both the essay and Adler's reply appeared in a work co-authored by both men (8). Adler's answer to Jahn, together with a new introduction by Jahn, has been translated into English (1).

SOCIAL CONCEPTION OF GOD

Adler's view of God is not a conventional one. He rejects both, in Pascal's (13) words, the God of the Philosophers and the God of Abraham and Isaac. The conception of God that plays the most prominent role in Adler's thought is twofold. God is viewed as a synthesis of Being and Value, and as a being that is to be imitated by man whereby man strives for an *imitatio dei*: "One concretization of the idea of perfection, the highest image of greatness and superiority, which has always been very natural for men's thinking and feeling, is the contemplation of a deity. To strive towards God, to be in Him, to follow His call, to be one with Him" (1, p. 275).

But this conception of God is not one to which man subjugates or prostrates himself as Hegel (7) describes the unhappy consciousness who finds God only at the nadir of its despair and loss of itself. Nor is God to be conceived as a *thing* with which man can be identified. God, in a sense, is a *telos*, an end, but one to which man is drawn by way of "enhancing" his activity and his feelings.

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The idea of God and its immense significance for mankind can be understood and appreciated from the viewpoint of Individual Psychology as concretization and interpretation of the human recognition of greatness and perfection, and as commitment of the individual as well as of society to a goal which rests in man's future and which in the present heightens the driving force by enhancing the feelings and emotions (1, p. 276).

Although Adler does not venture to prove or to demonstrate the existence of God, he is able to present what is, for him, a more convincing justification for God's existence than the historical proofs allow. Insofar as Adler's argument contends that the individual is "better off" by believing in God, it displays the difficulty common to this type of meliorism. Immanuel Kant (12) and William James (9), for example, deny that God's existence can be established either as a theorem or as a scientific fact. Their argument for belief in God may seem to come perilously close to the shallow, tendentious claim that the concept of God makes morality possible for man (Kant) and affords psychical health to the individual (James).

James' view of God and his relation to man can not be dismissed as mere expedience, as his forceful argument for the existential necessity of faith makes clear. Adler, in some ways, approaches James' position that, in a sense, it "works" to believe in God, but, as with James, the grounds for belief are not shallow and utilitarian in a narrow sense. Kant's postulate for the existence of God, the necessity of God to vindicate man's morality may seem purely heuristic, but it is central to his thought, and can not be eliminated as an unsightly appendage.

The purpose of Adler's conception of God is to help further his ideal of community which is "always unattainable, but always beckoning and pointing the way" (1, p. 279). This idea of community and communal action is strikingly akin to Kant's realm of ends, in which mankind or rational beings treat one another, including themselves, never merely as means, but as ends in themselves. As Kant explained: By "realm" I understand the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws . . . if we abstract from the personal difference of rational beings and thus from all content of their private ends, we can think of a whole of all ends in systematic connection, a whole of rational beings as ends in themselves as well as of particular ends . . . Thus there arises a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws. This is a realm which may be called a realm of ends (certainly only an ideal), because what these laws have in view is just the relation of these beings to each other as ends and means (12, pp. 51-52).

This social conception of God is innate in man's nature. In Adler's conception of God, man is to find a means of uplift to counter the natural feeling of the "lowliness and transitoriness of the existence here below" (1, p. 275). The "imitation of God" pursuit towards the

social idea embodied in him is a means for overcoming the tensions and inferiority feelings which burden and oppress man. Adler thinks this social conception of God is perhaps "the strongest and most significant step" in man's attempt to redeem himself from all evil (1, p. 279).

NECESSITY OF THE CONCEPT

What should be stressed is that this conception of the goal of man as lying in the ideal community or in God as a synthesis of reality and value is not a convenient fiction as, for example, Dewey held. Dewey maintained that one may, but need not, use "God" as the union or active relation between the ideal and the actual. Dewey refrains from going beyond this possible immanent conception of God to a transcendent concept (5, p. 51). But, like Kant and I think, James — at least in the "Will to Believe" (9) — Adler sees God as more than an embodiment of human value and action. The concept of God, Adler admits, is metaphysical. But it is a necessary and unavoidable concept in the individual's coming to grips with the basic problems facing him.

When speaking of the ideal goal of mankind, "the ideal community of all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of [societal] evolution" (2, p. 142), Adler faces up to the question: how do we know this conception, which, as we have seen, is synonymous with God? Adler's answer would not satisfy the positivist, but it does display the existential urgency captured so vividly in James:

It will be asked how do I know this. Certainly not from immediate experience. I must admit that those who find a piece of metaphysics in Individual Psychology are right. Some praise this, others criticise it. Unfortunately, there are many who have an erroneous view of metaphysics who would like to see everything eliminated from the life of mankind which they cannot comprehend immediately. But by doing so, we would interfere with the possibilities of development, with every new thought. Every new idea lies beyond immediate experience. Vice versa, immediate experience never yields anything new. It is only the synthesizing idea which connects the data of immediate experience. Whether you call it speculation or transcendentalism, there is no science which does not have to enter the realm of metaphysics. I see no reason to be afraid of metaphysics; it has had a very great influence on human life and development (2, p. 142; 3, p. 35).

But what is the purpose in all this? The societal conception of God focuses on man. It insists on putting man in the center of things, if he is not there already. Adler here, of course, runs into conflict with a traditional Christian view that blames man for setting himself in the center of things. But how can it be that Adler places him in what seems to be the impossible center? We should remember that

for Adler, man is striving towards his own perfection, but is beset by many complexities and contradictions, some of his own making, others not. But for Adler the conception of God is a way of removing these difficulties. So vital is the concept of God for man's striving towards perfection that man cannot, according to Adler, wait for scientific illumination. The concept of God *now* enables us to show this interconnectedness of man.

MAN'S ATTRACTION TO THE CONCEPT

What is man, according to Adler? He differs significantly from most variations of the Christian concept of man by denying that man is tainted literally or metaphorically with sin, or predisposed towards it, because of his creatureliness. Like Aristotle, Adler believes that the individual acquires morality socially in his relationship to others and to the environment. Man's self-realization, as has been pointed out, does not come from subjection to God but from the realization of his innate capacities. Like Luther and other conventional Christian interpreters of the human condition, Adler stresses pride of self as the chief difficulty, although, unlike the Christian theologians, Adler would in no way attribute this excessive pride—what Adler calls self-boundedness—to sin, but to the conditions within which the individual has been thrust and under which he forms his life style and goals, tacit or otherwise. While recognizing the role of emotion in religion, Adler rejects the value of contrition and self-abasement; indeed, he jettisons the whole notion so dear to some theologians that man's improvement depends exclusively on his suffering, and punishment.

Especially significant for his theory of the individual is Adler's grounding of his conception of God or the "concretization of a final goal of perfection" in the nature of man — and yet, in line with Adler's acceptance of metaphysics, apart from it. At one and the same time the structure of man's psychological apparatus supports the ideal of God and the innate attraction he has towards it. Taking the concept of the "goal of God," Adler claims that the tendency towards this goal is innate within the individual. It is a disposition to the social interest which awaits the proper kind of development for its fruition.

"FAILURE" AS ERROR

This concept of social interest underlies both the "failure" and the success of the individual. The notion of the style of life which

the individual creates for himself, is basic. It is this conception of the soul which is the fulcrum of Adler's concept of "sin and salvation." Of course, Adler has no conception of sin, original or otherwise, in man. Man is, according to Adler, intrinsically good, in the sense that he has the tendency to social interest if it can be developed. Individual error in the sense of defiance or overwhelming ambition should not be understood in terms of the individual's defects or inadequacies of ego, but rather in terms of the wrong kind of life style, fundamentally to be found in the emphasis of self-boundedness over social interest.

Unlike the proponents of most forms of Christianity, Adler believes the individual should not dwell on his past "sins" or errors, but simply recognize and understand his error and its roots — in the kind of life style which he had formed. Most of the basic problems facing the individual are social, according to Adler. Consequently, the individual with the wrong sort of life style has not been able to meet such problems with the adequate amount of social interest. But as we have seen, Adler would dispense completely with the idea that the individual with the wrong life style has done anything for which he should feel ashamed or blamed for. The erring individual should be led sympathetically to realize the erroneous life style which he has thus far followed since his early childhood. It is axiomatic for Adler that one's life style is formed for better or worse at an early age.

Here the analogue with Christianity is striking. Both call for a transformation in the individual, the creation of the new being, as Tillich (15) puts it. In Christianity such transformation is achieved because man realizes his condition as a sinner and needs the *kerygma* or message of the New Testament to believe. For the Christian the new life is still fraught with the danger of falling back. But for Adler the transformation of the life style results in a triumphant progress or evolution towards the goal probably unconsciously selected by the individual. What is required of the individual, thus transformed, is that he realize his error, accept it in relation to his earlier mistaken goal, and rectify it in the light of the ultimate societal goal or God. "The erring human being stands before the common sense and what is recognized as the right ideal of an ultimate society" (1, p. 284).

SELF-REALIZATION IN COOPERATION

The common sense, like Kant's concept of the practical or moral reason, is present in all, but can be overshadowed by the wrong sort of striving. Common sense is in contrast with "private intelligence"

or cleverness which, as in Aristotle, is the ability to achieve one's immediate goals, wrong as they may be. Common sense, as Aristotle's *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, is "integration with the social demands of our life and the resulting insight in their social relatedness." (I, p. 290). The transformation of the individual life style allows the individual to develop his striving towards self-realization as an aspect of the "self-consistent" personality now directed towards creating fulfillment of his personal goal through success in cooperation with the overall community. He thereby achieves both harmony of body and equilibrium in life.

Adler denies that man is striving for sheer power. Rather, the individual seeks to overcome his inadequacies, both personal and social. Adler differs from some religious thinkers in feeling that what must be done is not overcoming man's pride or his place in the center of concern, but leading the individual to that center of significance and importance from which he may have been displaced. "Individual Psychology would consider unessential the question of whether man is the center of the world. Its intention would be to make him the center" (I, p. 277). Being at the center does not mean the egoism of the individual, but the feeling of the significance of man which is shared with others. If the feeling of inferiority present in man is complemented by the development of his tendency towards God or the societal community, the individual will attain the appropriate self-realization.

In a way that follows the position Spinoza developed in his *Ethics* (I4), Adler maintains that self-preservation of the individual in the genuine sense entails a community of men, each one of whom is realizing himself in harmony and cooperation with his fellows (I, p. 304). Compare this to Spinoza who says:

To man there is nothing more useful than man—nothing . . . more excellent for preserving their being can be wished for by men, than all should so in all points agree, that the minds and bodies of all should form, as it were, one single mind and one single body, and that all should, with one consent, as far as they are able, endeavour to preserve their being, and all with one consent seek what is useful to them . . . in accordance with reason, desire for themselves nothing, which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind (I4, pp. 201-202).

This community of men, which is close to, if not identical with, Adler's conception of God, is described, as stated earlier, as a "goal, and ideal, always unattainable, but always beckoning and pointing the way" (I, p. 279).

What is significant here is Adler's rejection of the Christian view

that this world is a "vale of soul making." Adler's idea of community, the societal conception which is more or less equivalent with his conception of God, is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is descriptive in that it portrays the human condition; man, as a matter of fact naturally tends to preserve and advance himself. To do this by "tooth and claw" or through the "survival of the fittest" is, for Adler, illusory and destructive of man. The idea of community is prescriptive in that it tells man what he ought to do, to act so as to bring about the interconnectedness of man.

Adler believes that the disposition to community in his sense is innate, and can best be developed scientifically. Such development would be at its optimum when the individual rationally or intellectually realizes the value of community for all (1, p. 279). But for the present, at least, Adler realizes the impossibility of the predominance of reason in the formation of human action and feeling, at least with regard to individuals as a whole. For the time being, religious faith appears as the most effective agent in achieving the societal goal.

Adler, thus, presents us with a philosophy of religion which, like the James of the "Will to Believe" and the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (10) stresses "health-mindedness" and the acquisition of a psychic and physical equilibrium. With Kant and Spinoza, Adler uses the idea of community as a prescriptive goal for the individual. His view of the community as a goal is, of course, roughly congruent with his conception of God and, has a metaphysical basis transcending, as it does, immediate experience.

DISTINCTIVENESS

Adler's philosophy of religion, as I have already noted, displays a uniqueness which is all the more apparent when contrasted with the points of view of Freud and Jung, his great contemporaries.

Idolizing reason and the scientific method, Freud, as is well known, rejects utterly the value of religion in today's world

The scientific spirit brings about a particular attitude towards worldly matters; before religious matters it pauses for a little, hesitates, and finally there too crosses the threshold. In this process there is no stopping; the greater the number of men to whom the treasures of knowledge become accessible, the more widespread is the falling-away from religious belief (6, p. 63).

Freud holds that any benefit which religion might have conferred on man has either been supplanted by science or has been negated

by the obvious, widespread dissatisfaction with religion. Yet, Adler while acknowledging the future supremacy of reason in bringing about the individual's self-understanding and understanding of others, does not mean "logical" or scientific reason exclusively, but the reason of the "whole man," the practical wisdom (*phronesis*) of Aristotle, not mere science (*techne*). In stressing this concept of reason, Adler brings out very well the relation of the individual's thought to his feeling and action, which is, of course reflected in Aristotle's conception of the relation of practical reason to the emotions and desires. Unlike Freud, Adler is well aware that until scientific illumination of the type he envisaged is possible, religion is the most appropriate way to bring about the goal of community.

This idea of community or God which plays so vital a role in Adler's thought distinguishes him from Jung, who shares with Adler a genuine sympathy for religion. Jung focusses on God as bringing about the psychic equilibrium of the *individual*. He does not pass on the existence of God apart from immanence of that concept in the individual's unconscious. In contrast, Adler's concern for the individual's religious belief tending towards the ideal community suggests a transcendence beyond the apparent immanence of Jung's God archetype. The fact that Jung believed that experimental evidence established the archetypes of the *collective* unconscious, should not mislead us into thinking that religion for him was, as with Adler, primarily inter-personal. Throughout *Psychology and Religion* (11), Jung makes clear his orientation to the psychic wholeness of the individual — apart from his relation to others.

In a very real way, Adler has focussed on the idea of God, the central concept in any philosophy of religion, as joining within itself the psychic well-being and goal-realization of the individual with the metaphysical or transcendent basis of the ideal community. Despite then, similarities with philosophies of theistic religious humanism, especially with James' religion of healthy-mindedness, Adler has presented us with a distinctive, if not unique, interpretation of God in the philosophy of religion.

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