

# ALFRED ADLER ON LEONARDO DA VINCI

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The purpose of this paper is to report a contribution by Alfred Adler to my research on Leonardo da Vinci in the form of a letter addressed to me. While the letter has been included in my recent book (5, p. 408), I thought it should, together with sufficient background material, for its interest and for the record, be presented also before a psychological audience.

My interest in Leonardo da Vinci began in 1920 when as a pre-medical student at Brown University at the age of 20, I heard some lectures on that man's art. I started reading about him, and soon came upon Freud's essay, *Leonardo da Vinci: a Study in Psychosexuality* (3). Immediately the question arose, could Leonardo have produced all he did from the basis that Freud had diagnosed for him, namely oedipal and homosexual tendencies?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I should like to take this occasion to express my gratitude to two men who have supported my work financially, one a friend of Carl Jung who wishes to remain anonymous, the other the noted apothecary, Eli Lilly.

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<sup>3</sup>A good summary of Freud's interpretation is given by himself in the minutes of the meeting in which he originally presented his thoughts on Leonardo before the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909. This summary is in form of a hypothetical statement at the beginning of his talk. "For us it is obvious," Freud said, "that these character traits are connected with his *sexuality*; we expect to find in Leonardo's sexual development the single solution for the four enigmas of his life: (a) that he was such a great investigator; (b) that he did not persevere in any one thing, but left most of his works unfinished; (c) that he dealt with his works so badly; and (d) that his peculiar kind of inactive sexuality prevailed throughout his life" (4, p. 340).

In the subsequent discussion Adler who then was still a member of the Society, offered simpler explanations. "In regard to [b] the inability of artists to complete their works, a quite frequent phenomenon, it is evident that they are not pleased with their work, that they can never do things to their own satisfaction." Regarding (c), Adler "would characterize Leonardo's neglect of his works as 'slovenliness' [*Schlamperei*], a trait that we find very frequently in neurotics, although in most cases together with its opposite, a marked exactness, which is expressed in Leonardo's fussiness over minor details." As to (d), "there would seem to be a much simpler and more correct approach to homosexuality" (4, pp. 349-350).

For two special interpretations given by Freud at this meeting and later in his essay, Adler offered his alternatives in his subsequent book (1, 2). (a) Leonardo's early recollection, "It seems to me as though a vulture had flown down to me, opened my mouth with his tail, and several times beaten it to and fro between my lips," is interpreted by Freud as a homosexual fantasy, "to take the penis into the mouth" (4, p. 340). Adler's alternative was in terms of the masculine protest: "I will experience the lot of the woman . . . therefore I must act . . . as if I were a complete man" (1, p. 179), later, "so as to escape defeat" (2, p. 91). (b) Leonardo's occupation with flying leads Freud to comment, "Dreams of flying originally have invariably the meaning: I can mate . . ." (4, p. 341). To Adler such dreams expressed "the longing of man to lift himself, . . . to do that which is impossible" (1, p. 33).—Ed. note.

Thus I embarked upon a career in the history and psychology of art, with Leonardo as my special field of endeavor. My doctorate at the University of Vienna had to do with my rediscovery of Leonardo's lost sculptures. My research culminated in the publication last year of my book, *The Sublimations of Leonardo da Vinci* (5). The book amounts to a refutation of the Freudian analysis, primarily in this new interpretation of Leonardo's works and notes with respect to his family constellation and in the perspective of the social and artistic traditions of his times. Freud's attempt shows an almost complete ignorance of these factors. His sexual interpretation is extraneous and inaccurate. Leonardo was a healthy personality, motivated primarily by spiritual values and self-preservative instincts rather than sexual drives.

In 1922 I was fortunate enough to be able to go to Europe to study the problem of Leonardo's development from original documents. In 1923, as a student at the University of Vienna, I moved into the Freudian circle at Dr. Freud's suggestion through the psychoanalyst, Paul Federn. In 1926, after having spent three years with Drs. Federn, Bibring and Mack, I came upon Leonardo's notebook, the *Codex Trivulzianus* with its puzzling word lists containing references to his ethical struggle and art principles, and new psychological evidence demonstrating the relationship of his creativity and ethical beliefs.

While investigating this relationship I was encouraged by Professor Robert Reininger, author of *Friedrich Nietzsches Kampf um den Sinn des Lebens*, and Professor Karl Bühler with whom I studied child psychology. The former suggested that I attend a course with Dr. Alfred Adler at the *Volkshochschule*, which I did.

Eventually I met and supped with Dr. Adler. At the end of an hour's chat he suggested that I did not need any more analysis, "only two *Mehlspeisen* at every meal." This was my first experience of his humor, fraught with wisdom and *double entendre*, for as a medical man, interested in such matters, he was actually telling me to ingest more sugar. At the same time he was advising me to prize my own abilities more highly.

This was the beginning of an enlightening friendship; for it seemed at once that Dr. Adler took a real interest in my work. By 1934, when I had completed the translation of the 206 word lists in the *Codex*, I sent it to Adler for review. His reply was the following letter.

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October 4, 1934

Dear Professor,

I arrived yesterday from Europe and found your letter from the 5th of September.

After searching your very interesting paper on Leonardo's manuscript I came to the following conclusion.

It is very difficult to find out the connection of his writings with the personal experience of the days when L[eonardo] wrote down the single words. And I want to say that this would need a thorough knowledge of the impressions of these days which I at least am lacking.

But I believe I can say a modest word regarding the style of a man who indulges in that kind of an endeavour. It is the style of a man whose attitude towards life is a very subtle and distinct one, who wants to go to the depth of human mind and psyche. And at the same time he finds it necessary to order in a pedantic way all his thoughts, purposes and experiences, feelings and wants alike, in sharpest views expressed in words and intellectual considerations. It seems to me that he worships words and thoughts as the only strong basis for understanding human nature. He seems to belong to this group of geniuses who struggle despairingly against the limits of human knowledge, especially against our ignorance of what moves in our mind and psyche. So he can be placed between the personalities of philosophers or psychologists and unhappy people suffering from compulsion ideas. A master mind who wanted to force all the more or less dark impressions, feelings and wants to open their secrets. I believe he came to feel that each single word is a question of wherefrom and whereto. Probably in his mind had been the goal of finding a satisfying philosophy of life.

I do not doubt that in writing down these words L[eonardo] knew what he wanted to talk about. Many of them are obvious, others have occupied many later generations, especially philosophers and psychologists. Perhaps if he had finished what he wanted to say he would have been the same forerunner in psychology as in other things.

Some evidence seems to be the descriptions of artistic propositions included in this manuscript when he wanted to fix in thoughts or drawings (both propositions to stop the flight of impressions) what occupied his mind.

Finally, it seems to me that he was led in accomplishing his philosophy,—if I am right,—by a high goal of sincerity and social interest. His interpretation of life,—if I am right to suppose such a task,—would have been a challenge for human welfare. You can find so many words which indicate how L[eonardo] had been considering virtues and vices.

This is what “a poor man like Hamlet” can offer you.

Thanks for your belief in my ability to say a word to a rare mystery.

Sincerely yours,  
Professor Alfred Adler.

Regarding Adler’s specific comment on the word lists, “I believe Leonardo came to feel that each single word is a question of where-from and whereto,” the following may serve as examples from the lists as such, even if not for single words. A relatively short list of about 45 words begins with “spiritual, particular, affection,” where “power, unique, will” are in the center, and “extermination, deceitful, defeat” at the end (5, p. 282)—a note of pessimism. On the next page Leonardo begins a much longer list with “fear, violence, falsity,” ending with “felicity, sempiternal, cordial, to generate” (p. 283)—an optimistic mood. Again, another list begins with “abyss or ruin,” and ends with “servitude, service, obedience,” preceded by “benign, pacific, meek” (p. 288). Although antithetical, none of the lists would seem a straight progression, without reversals, from one pole to the other.

Characteristic of most of these lists is that the words refer to human action, feelings and conditions. It is probably on this account that Adler could consider these lists as an incipient psychology, especially since they all embrace opposites, in the dialectic tradition. This is why Adler could summarize: “I do not doubt that in writing down these words Leonardo knew what he wanted to talk about . . . Perhaps if he had finished what he wanted to say, he would have been the same forerunner in psychology as [he was] in other things.”

In 1934 when the lists were sent to Adler, Adolf Meyer, Oscar Diethelm and James Sagebiel, none of us saw the significance of the drawings and doodles showing, e.g., Leonardo’s father (folios 30r, 38r) or the symbol of the fruitful libido (folio 32v). In the research of the ensuing 34 years my identification of the family constellation sheet (5, Fig. 3) and related drawings of persons influencing Leo-

nardo's inner conflicts and triumphs, led me to believe that the entire *Codex* was a kind of psychosynthesis in which the word lists were rounded out or realized with the sublimatory graphic symbols. This the followers of Freud, with the exception of Pastor Pfister, completely overlooked and still overlook. Therefore they are generally unable to use "sublimation," as had Leonardo, for achieving a healthy, productive, life style.

A year or so after his letter, Adler asked me to lecture to his students at Long Island Medical College. After the subsequent discussion Adler remarked that he found Leonardo to have been a "man definitely interested in ethical goals." In his letter he had stated: "Probably in his mind had been the goal of finding a satisfying philosophy of life." Adler concluded his comments stating that Leonardo had been led "by a high goal of sincerity and social interest. His interpretation of life . . . would have been a challenge for human welfare. You can find so many words which indicate how Leonardo had been considering virtues and vices."

Considerations of such conscious purposiveness might seem to contradict my hypothesis of "free association" and self-analysis for these lists, a view toward which I and others are inclined. Dr. Sagebiel, a psychiatrist with Freudian training, also wrote against this hypothesis. Although a possibility, "one must be guarded in drawing this conclusion" (5, p. 411). Sagebiel saw in these lists of Leonardo's "his ideals, his desire for social esteem . . . his fear of mediocrity," a purely self-centered orientation. In contrast Adler's hypothesis was that of a budding psychology with "a high goal of sincerity and social interest . . . a challenge for human welfare." This hypothesis of self-transcendence would be more in accord with the contributive creative genius that Leonardo was in so many ways.

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