

# ADLER'S INTERPRETATION OF EARLY RECOLLECTIONS: HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

HEINZ L. ANSBACHER<sup>1</sup>

*University of Vermont*

Interpretation of early recollections has become the outstanding, most characteristic, and most useful method in Adlerian psychology. Adler considered "the significance of early recollections one of the most important discoveries of Individual Psychology" (11, p. 121). Together with an analysis of the individual's family constellation, primarily elaborated by Dreikurs (20), it is today regarded by many as the basis of Adlerian personality assessment, or understanding of a person's life style. The objective of the present study is to explore the origin of this method.

For those less familiar with it, we should like to resolve at the outset the apparent paradox that Adlerian psychology is indeed present- and future-oriented, goal-oriented, rather than past-oriented, and yet goes into the individual's past, asking for his early recollections. The paradox is easily resolved if one realizes that in Adler's conception man is an active, purposeful, partly self-determining *organism*, rather than a passive, merely reactive *mechanism*. This permits the following considerations: (a) A recollection is an action of the individual, rather than being "caused" by a particular experience; he "chose" to retain this particular incident. (b) The recollection is to an unknown degree at variance from objective facts and to this extent the individual's own construction. (c) Within a given recollection, how the individual responded to the situation is more important than the situation itself. Through these considerations the recollection is used in therapy to show the individual how he typically acts and faces the future, and that he carries this picture with him as a memento or warning from his childhood, for future action.

## RECOLLECTIONS AS CONSTRUCTIONS

One of Adler's first statements on recollections was: "A person's true attitude toward life can be discerned from his earliest dreams and recollected experiences, proving that such memories are also con-

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<sup>1</sup>For reprints write to author, Department of Psychology, University of Vermont, John Dewey Hall, Burlington, Vermont 05401.

structed according to a planful procedure" (2, p. 99). He made this statement during his presentation at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1911 which marked his separation from Freud. In these early days Adler generally mentioned and used recollections together with dreams.

A recollection as a purposeful construction was quite at variance from Freud's concept of early memories as screens for traumatic sexual experiences. Adler had expressed this difference from Freud as early as 1907. In Adler's view it was not particularly the neurotic who repressed sexual traumas and disguised them by screen memories, but rather it was the "nonneurotic individuals who have kept secret their sexual traumata." And, most importantly, "One must not overrate the trauma." Instead one must understand that "the constitution *finds* the sexual trauma" (23, p. 252, ital. ours). Knowing that Adler used biological metaphors at that time, 1907, as in his *Study of Organ Inferiority* (1), we can substitute "individual" for "constitution." The above quoted sentence thus means, the individual is actively selecting from the environment rather than being merely passively exposed to stimuli from the environment.

In 1912 Adler's major work, *The Neurotic Constitution* (3) appeared.<sup>2</sup> In this book Adler considered memory to have an apperceptive function "subordinated to the guiding fiction" (p. 68). The guiding fiction was the assumption "that the child has found a unitary fixed point outside himself toward which he strives with his psychological growth energies" (p. 66). "The effective point outside the bodily sphere toward which the psyche orients itself is *the center of gravity of human thinking, feeling and willing*. And the mechanism of the apperceptive memory . . . changes from *an objectively functioning system* into *a subjectively working schema* modified by the fiction of the future personality" (p. 68, ital. in original). By such psychological mechanisms and readinesses "our entire perceptual orbit becomes limited" (p. 68). Adler refers here to Charcot, Kant, and James. There is also a footnote mentioning Bergson, to which we shall return later.

Regarding the applicability of these considerations to diagnosis and treatment Adler states: "The working method of our conscious and

<sup>2</sup>The title of the book was *Über den nervösen Charakter*, the exact translation of which would be, *On the Nervous Character*. However, the book was translated and has become known under the title given above. We are therefore using this title although we shall not be using the translation of the book itself because it is unsatisfactory.

unconscious memory . . . follows the personality ideal" (p. 74). Therefore, "each of the abstract neurotic guiding lines . . . may be accessible to consciousness in a memory image, or may be made accessible in such an image" (p. 79). In the neurotic, the memory image may often be of a seemingly "traumatic" nature. However,

None of these memory images, childhood fantasies, ever functioned pathogenically like a psychic trauma. Only at the onset of the neurosis . . . are the appropriate memory images brought out from material of the distant past. They become significant on account of their usefulness in making neurotic behavior possible and in interpreting it, that is on account of their pertinent relationship (p. 79).

In summary, memory is "tendentious" (p. 178) in that it supports the tendency of the individual. Or, "The neurotic does not *suffer* from his reminiscences, he *makes* them" (p. 100, ital. ours), and uses them for his purposes (p. 155). "The significance for the psyche, especially the neurotic psyche, rests in the *particular selection* of these memory traces and their tendentious connection with the neurotic apperception" (p. 179).

#### FOCUSING ON EARLIEST RECOLLECTIONS

At the time of his writing the *Neurotic Constitution* Adler did not yet distinguish earliest recollections from what he called apperceptive and tendentious memory in general. In fact he speaks in this book only once of childhood recollections as such, which he does in the passage, the preparation for an eventual neurosis "can be discerned most clearly in the childhood recollections, frequently recurring dreams, facial and general expressions, childrens' play, and their fantasies about eventual occupations and the future" (3, p. 86).

There is, in addition, one footnote in which *earliest* childhood recollections are mentioned specifically, as follows: "Individual Psychology . . . attaches great importance to the understanding of earliest childhood recollections and has shown that they represent telltale signs from the time of the construction of the life style" (3, p. 80n).<sup>3</sup> But this footnote was not added until the 1928 edition. The lateness of this addition is attested to by the inclusion of the term "life style" which Adler did not use until 1926. In 1912, when earliest recollections were not yet conceived as something in their own right, the

<sup>3</sup>Adler spoke variously of first, oldest, and earliest recollections. We shall follow the recommendation of Mosak (22), and use only "early" or "earliest" recollections in translating the various terms of Adler and in our own writing.

entire area of memory and recollections still played a less important role than dreams and their interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Adler dealt with earliest recollections specifically first in a paper on sleep disturbances (4) published in 1913. It included two cases, one of which was concerned only with thoughts upon awakening and a dream of the patient. The second case also starts with the thoughts upon awakening during the night, but links these to a series of early recollections. The subject is a physician who remembers from his early childhood several encounters with death and who then decided to become a physician to combat death and the fear of it. His thoughts that caused the insomnia that night were still about how to save lives.

Adler considered this case so important that he included it in two collections of papers. The first, *Heilen und Bilden*, published in 1914, included also papers by his colleagues and was never translated into English; the second, *Praxis und Theorie der Individualpsychologie*, published in 1920, included only papers by him and was translated. The first gives only the case of the physician, under the title, "A Contribution to the Psychology of a Physician's Vocational Choice" (5), while the second reproduces the entire original paper (6). These two volumes, incidentally, together with the *Neurotic Constitution*, represent Adler's three fundamental works.

The physician in this paper turned out to be Adler himself. This became evident from a little known autobiographical paper by Adler (12) which includes among other recollections also those of the physician, but particularly through Phyllis Bottome's biography published after Adler's death. This biography contains three pages of earliest recollections written by him "for the guidance of his future biographer" (19, p. 30). These again widely overlap with those of the physician so that there can be no doubt that the physician is Adler. In fact, already the original 1913 paper had virtually revealed the autobiographical nature of the case, in that it contained the passage: "This little analysis was done during the writing of my book" (4, p. 931). This passage, however, was deleted when the paper was reprinted in the two collections. For us it is, additionally, a valuable confirmation that Adler's interest in earliest recollections began while he was working on the *Neurotic Constitution*.

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<sup>4</sup>This statement is based on an examination of the very extensive index found in the recent German edition of the *Neurotic Constitution*, edited by Professor Wolfgang Metzger, to which we are referring here throughout. There we counted 59 entries for dreams and derivative words, and only 25 entries for memory and memory images, including the two on childhood recollections quoted above.

Adler's interpretation of his early recollections was actually quite limited, referring only to the occupational choice and the fact that upon awakening that night his thoughts were again concerned with the same general theme. From this he made an inference to the general outlook on life. A comment by Adler elsewhere makes this explicit: "The early childhood recollections, like the fantasies of vocational choice, contain always the effective outlook on life (*gestaltende Weltanschauung*), regardless of whether it is a matter of genuine, fantasied, or reconstructed (Birstein)<sup>5</sup> recollections" (2, p. 107n).

In concluding this section it seems worth noting that Adler began one of his most important contributions, the interpretation of early recollections, by interpreting his own recollections—just as Freud began dream interpretation by interpreting his own dreams.

#### PAUL SCHRECKER

In the paper in which Adler gave his own earliest recollections, he added to the sentence, "Then I arrived at the occupational choice of medicine, to overcome death and the fear of death" (6, p. 179), a footnote. The footnote reads: "On the significance of death for philosophizing see P. Schrecker, *Bergson's Philosophy of Personality*. Munich: Reinhardt, 1912."<sup>6</sup> Adler mentions Schrecker on two further occasions, on both of which he shares with Schrecker credit for the understanding of early recollections. On the first occasion, also a footnote, in 1914, Adler says, "The tendentious construction or retention of earliest childhood recollections has been pointed out by me (*Neurotic Constitution*) and Schrecker (Congress of Psychotherapy, Vienna, 1913)" (8, p. 175n). The other mention is in the text of a monograph first published in 1917, and reads, "I and Schrecker have pointed out the falsifying tendency of childhood recollections in favor of the life plan" (10, p. 12).

While nothing is known directly about the relationship between Adler and Schrecker, we can only make inferences. There are, however, the two contributions by Schrecker which Adler cited, both of which were published.

<sup>5</sup>J. Birstein whom Adler credits for the above important conception participated in Adler's meetings at that time, 1913, and published several papers in the *Zentralblatt für Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie*, then edited by Stekel, before Adler had founded his own journal. Birstein's location was given as Odessa.

<sup>6</sup>In the translation Bergson's name is omitted from the title.

### *Publications*

*On early recollections.* Schrecker's paper read at the Congress was published immediately after, under the title, "Individual Psychological Significance of First Childhood Recollections" (25). It is the first paper on this topic. But it is also still very worth reading—beyond its historical interest. Yet it has to date been completely overlooked in the Adlerian literature. Reference to the published paper was never substituted for the Congress reference, despite numerous subsequent printings of the German book in which Adler's paper with this reference was included. Worse yet, in the English edition Schrecker's name was omitted and Adler given credit for the Congress paper (9, p. 242n). Nor is the paper listed among the 337 items of Wexberg's "Bibliography of Individual Psychology" (27, pp. 180-190). To remedy this situation and make the paper available in English we have now provided a translation, which follows the present paper.

*On Bergson.* It was most likely through Schrecker that Adler became acquainted with the philosophy of Henri Bergson. During 1910-11 Schrecker took a course on personality with Bergson at the Collège de France, after which he returned to Vienna. When Adler's *Neurotic Constitution* appeared early in 1912 it contained a footnote following a paragraph on "apperceptive memory" which reads: "Here I must refer also to the fundamental theories of Bergson, without being able adequately to include his significant viewpoints" (3, p. 68, the second part of the sentence being included only in the first edition, p. 32). Interestingly, Schrecker is not mentioned here, but in 1912 also, Adler published Schrecker's monograph on Bergson (24) in the series he founded right after separating from Freud and before he had started his own journal. Adler referred to this monograph in his first mention of Schrecker, above, and again several years later when he mentioned Bergson together with Vaihinger (7, p. 229n).

Schrecker's monograph is concerned with Bergson's concept of man. Opposed to elementaristic analysis, Bergson sees man as an active being, striving toward a goal (24, p. 8) whose functions are all in the service of life, similar to the views of James, Vaihinger and others (p. 9). Schrecker considers "a tendency of psychological self-preservation" to be a tacit presupposition in any psychological theory but finds it explicit in Adler, and in this light examines, toward the end of the book, Adler's theory of neurosis in reference to Bergson (p. 52).

There are several further, minor publications by Schrecker pertaining to Adler's theories.

*Biographical Account<sup>1</sup>*

Who was Paul Schrecker who at the age of 24 contributed in a short period so importantly to Individual Psychology? Born in Vienna in 1889, he began his studies at the University there in 1908, registered at first in courses in philosophy and psychology, spent a period in 1910-11 in France as mentioned, and subsequently concentrated on law, in which he received his degree in 1913.

After having received his law degree, Schrecker became manager in a large furniture manufacturing firm while continuing his interests in philosophy and writing. Around 1925 he moved to Berlin attending the University there and receiving his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1928. From then until 1933 he had an academic research appointment there. With the accession of Hitler, Schrecker went to Paris. There he edited a book of letters and unpublished manuscripts by Leibnitz (1646-1716), the German organismic and teleologically oriented philosopher, and collaborated on an edition of the complete works of Malebranche (1638-1715), the French idealist.

In 1941 Schrecker came to the United States where he was on the faculties of the New School for Social Research until 1945, Columbia University until 1947, Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr and Haverford until 1950, and the University of Pennsylvania until 1961, when he became emeritus professor of philosophy. In 1948 he published *Work and History* (26) which was republished in paperback, in 1967 and 1971. In addition to articles in learned journals he also wrote for *Harper's Magazine* and the *Saturday Review of Literature*. He was listed in the *International Who's Who*, 1953, and the *Directory of American Scholars*, 1957. He died in Philadelphia, December 24, 1963.

If Schrecker disappeared from the Adlerian scene after his early contributions this was probably because he was always more interested in philosophy than in psychology. In his Bergson monograph he explained that he discussed Adler rather than Freud in relation to Bergson because he was more attracted to Adler's theory "from the philosophical viewpoint—the only one which the author considers himself competent to take." From this viewpoint Adler's theory "has the advantage of unity and of agreement with philosophical theories" (24, p. 42n). Phyllis Bottome reported that there had been an estrangement between Schrecker and Adler (19, p. 121). But Schreck-

<sup>1</sup>We wish to express our sincere appreciation to Mrs. Leah C. Furtmüller, widow of Carl Furtmüller, for her very generous help in tracing the sources and gathering most of the data on which this biographical account of Paul Schrecker is based.

er's widow in Toronto, although she did not know him in these early days, writes: "I do not recall hearing him speak either of Adler or of his work, except with respect and admiration."<sup>8</sup>

#### HENRI BERGSON

What did Adler mean by the "fundamental theories of Bergson" which he considered significant? Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was the French philosopher who at the turn of the century offered an organismic alternative to the dominant mechanistic, causalistic orientation in the sciences from which Adler had freed himself, and who could thus contribute to a solid theoretical foundation for Individual Psychology. Although he has some romanticist and mystic aspects, Bergson is regarded as essentially a pragmatist (27, p. 579), which was also Adler's orientation. Walter Kaufmann counts Bergson among the great variety of pragmatic philosophers which includes Peirce, James, Dewey, F. S. C. Schiller, Vaihinger—and Nietzsche (21, p. 88). Adler himself spoke of Bergson's "important teachings" in connection with James (3, p. 68) and Vaihinger (7, p. 229).<sup>9</sup>

One of Bergson's basic assumptions was "the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned towards action" (17, p. xvii). "We start from action . . . our faculty of effecting changes in things, a faculty . . . towards which all the powers of the organized body are seen to converge" (p. 67). This involves an orientation toward the future. "It is to the future that I am tending, and could I fix this indivisible present . . . it is the direction of the future that it would indicate" (p. 177).

Regarding science, Bergson shared the general pragmatic position that it is a tool in the service of man and not an absolute. "The essential object of science is to enlarge our influence over things . . . Even when it launches into theory, it is bound to adapt its behavior to the general form of practice. However high it may rise, it must be ready to fall back into the field of action, and at once get on its feet" (18, p. 330). Bergson sees mental disorder as "a breaking of the tie which binds this psychic life to its motor accompaniment, a weakening . . . of our attention to outward life" (17, p. xv).

Bergson's singular contribution among the pragmatists is his work on memory (17), where his main thesis is, "If there be memory

<sup>8</sup>Mrs. Anne M. Schrecker, personal communication, December 21, 1972.

<sup>9</sup>Adler's relationship to the Anglo-American pragmatists has been shown in a paper by Winetroun (29); that to Nietzsche, in a paper by the present author (15); and that to Vaihinger in a volume edited by the present author and his wife (14, pp. 77-87).

. . . it is with a view of utility" (p. 70). "The function of the body is not to store up recollections, but simply to choose . . . the useful memory, that which may complete and illuminate the present situation with a view to ultimate action" (pp. 233-234). Memory is then not "disinterested"; its primary function is "to evoke all those past perceptions which are analogous to the present perception . . . and so to suggest to us that decision which is the most useful" (pp. 302-303). On the other hand, "Consciousness . . . sets aside all those memory images which cannot be coordinated with the present perception and are unable to form with it a useful combination" (pp. 96-97).

Particularly pertinent to the Adlerian technique of understanding early recollections is the statement: "A few superfluous recollections may succeed in smuggling themselves through the half-open door. These memories, messengers from the unconscious, remind us of what we are dragging behind us unawares" (18, p. 5). Adler recognized that such "superfluous" recollections also have their "usefulness," namely, in helping the individual meet his problems in accordance with his life style of which he is also unaware.

In summary, Bergson fully supports Adler's subsequent understanding that recollections are tendentious and biased and in the service of the purposes and goals of the individual, and that one may therefore infer from a person's recollections his ideas and goals.

F. C. Bartlett (16), experimental psychologist, after Bergson and Adler came to similar conclusions. He found, "The description of memories as 'fixed and lifeless' is merely an unpleasant fiction" (p. 311). "Recall is inevitably determined by temperament and character" (p. 308), and, "The past is being continually re-made, reconstructed in the interests of the present" (p. 309). Memory is "one achievement in the line of the ceaseless struggle to master and enjoy a world full of variety and rapid change" (p. 314). Yet there is in Bartlett's book no mention of Bergson, nor of Adler—a commentary on scientific separatism.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In examining the background of the emphasis in Adlerian psychology on early recollections, we found that as early as 1907 Adler held that the person has an active part in what he remembers. The first time Adler dealt with the meaning of early recollections in a particular case was in examining his own early recollections, during 1911-12, while working on his book, the *Neurotic Constitution*.

During this period a young student, Paul Schrecker, participated in the further development of Individual Psychology regarding early recollections. He published the first paper on this topic from the Adlerian viewpoint, and he apparently brought the significant work of Henri Bergson to Adler's attention. A brief biographical account of Schrecker is given, and the important observations of Bergson regarding memory are presented.

The following passages by Adler (13) from his later years, 1933, would seem to be a fitting conclusion for the present paper.

It is understandable that at an early stage of my endeavours to throw light on the impregnable unity of the psychic life I had to come upon the function and the structure of memory. I was able to confirm the statements of earlier authors that memory is by no means to be regarded as the gathering-place of impressions and sensations; that impressions do not persist as "mneme," [but that memory is] a partial expression of the power of the homogenous psychical life—of the self. The self, like perception, has the task of fitting impressions into the completed style of life and using them in accordance with it (p. 203). We must accordingly reckon on finding as many forms of memory as there are forms of style of life (p. 205). I am, above all, interested in those recollections that we regard as the earliest. The reason is that they throw light on events, real or imagined, correctly reported or altered, that lie nearer to the creative construction of the style of life in the first years of childhood, and that also to a large extent disclose the elaboration of these events by the style of life (pp. 208-209).

Adler had by then arrived at the conclusion: "I would never investigate a personality without asking for the earliest memory" (14, p. 351).

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<sup>10</sup>A translation cited from an English source may have been modified in the present paper after the German original text.

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