INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FIRST CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTIONS[1, 2]

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The present paper, originally published in 1913, is the first on early recollections from the Adlerian point of view. Yet it has been completely overlooked although it is of considerable interest even today. To remedy this situation we are presenting it herewith in its first English translation. Coming from a young man of 24 who had taken courses in philosophy and psychology, and who received his law degree the same year, the paper is certainly a remarkable contribution. A brief biographical account of its author, Paul Schrecker (1889-1963), will be found in the preceding article.[3]

Two groups of problems—one of general and one of individual psychology[4]—are connected with first childhood recollections. Regarding general psychology one would, a priori, expect that the earliest recollections would be extremely blurred and uncertain, and the more recent recollections increasingly more distinct. This would correspond to the theory of psychophysical parallelism as well as to any explanation which attributes memory phenomena to engrams in the central nervous system. Older engrams should be somehow less well preserved than the more recent ones.

But this a priori expectation is contradicted by the facts. While it is true that only a few recollections from childhood are brought forth, and that especially those events which are of objective importance for the child's development are forgotten, usually one or two recollections stand out from the darkness of that time with surprising clarity. The questions thus arise (*a*) from the viewpoint of general psychology: How does it happen that such clearly preserved recollections exist side by side with barely shadowlike recollections? and

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[2]Translated from "Die individualpsychologische Bedeutung der ersten Kindheitserinnerungen," *Zbl. Psychoanal. Psychother.*, 1913-1914, 4, 121-130. Translation, footnotes, and references are by the editors of the present Journal.

[3]Ansbacher, H. L. "Adler's interpretation of early recollections: historical account." *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1973, 29, 135-145.

[4]Schrecker uses the term "individual psychology" in the general as well as in the specifically Adlerian sense.

(*b*) from the viewpoint of individual psychology: What are the events? What is the content of the recollections? How may we understand why just these are reproduced in the individual case?

Regarding the first, the general question, its study has yielded definite and surprising confirmation of the memory theory I developed (14), based on the work of Henri Bergson and Alfred Adler.

An apparent plausible solution of the problem would be what Goethe has expressed as follows: "When we desire to recall what befell us in the earliest period of youth, it often happens that we confound what we have heard from others with that which we really possess from our own direct experience" (6, pp. 1-2). Where this is the case, the general psychological problem seems to be automatically solved. But the question still remains: How is such confusion possible, why do we believe to possess our own direct experience, and why do we remember it only as such and not also as having been told to us?

MEMORY, REPORT, CONSTRUCTION

But the individual psychological problem cannot be regarded as solved by the knowledge that in a specific instance the presumed original memory was the reproduction of a report heard from others. Here, the first question is: Why among so many reports are only these certain few reproduced? And the second question: Why would the individual transform these reports into memories?

A second solution would be the view, which in many cases is surely justified, that the presumed memory is neither that nor the transformation of a report, but a construction, a fiction, in the broader sense of Ernest Renan's[4a] assertion: "What one says about oneself is always poetry" (12, p. ii). But just as one can not invent a dream and no lie is ever a creation from nothing, so one may not assert that a childhood recollection, because it is a construction, is useless from the viewpoint of individual psychology. To the contrary: When, we can prove a construction or at least a retouching of a recollection or can make it plausible, our psychological task is actually facilitated. By undertaking this construction the individual shows that he attributes to its content a certain importance for his development. Since this construction is done unconsciously, we may assume that his guiding lines, his plan[5] are particularly strongly expressed in

[4a]Ernest Renan (1823-1892), popular French philosopher, idealistic positivist.

[5]Guiding lines and life plan were used by Adler before he introduced the term life style in 1926.

it. Thus we obtain the most important means, if not for knowledge of general child psychology, for understanding the present situation of this individual. The tendency we find in this way is especially significant, because by placing the construction in his childhood, the individual expresses his conviction that this tendency has dominated his life.

Thus we arrive at the first conclusion: For the understanding of the individual—and this is the ultimate goal of any individual psychology and the necessary presupposition of any educational and psychological influence—it is on principle quite immaterial whether what is told as an earliest childhood recollection is an original recollection, a reproduction of reports that have been heard, or a total or partial construction. In any case it constitutes material for the understanding of that person.

But we may immediately continue: When someone reflects on which was his earliest childhood recollection, if we take a teleological position, we will have to admit that he can recollect only what is somehow related to his present situation. Let us assume further, he does not find anything, finds only memories of reports, or has to construct something, the report or construction must undoubtedly disclose the same structure, tendency, or attitude as would an original recollection which became conscious at the same time. . . . The teleological structure must be the same in any case.

We may therefore consider any such reproduction as if it were a fiction, because thereby psychological insight is facilitated and the error is minimal [compared to the error we might incur by taking the recollection as the report of a factual objective event]. As a fiction it would have individual-psychologically the same structure as the methodological fictions which Vaihinger (15, p. 283) has analyzed.[6]

Where we could trace the development of an early childhood recollection we found that it is fixed in consciousness usually in the following combination of all three sources of origin. Approximately between the ages of 10 and 15 years, when the child strives for a firmer position in his world and no longer wants to be considered a child but an adult, he also gives himself an account of his past. At this age children characteristically often start to keep a diary and thereby reveal that they attribute significance to their experiences as the

[6]A methodological or heuristic fiction, according to Vaihinger, is a construction which, although not proven and perhaps unprovable, is useful in serving and facilitating the correct solution of a problem (15, pp. 39-40).

adults do. Thereby, naturally, those childhood experiences are particularly recollected and emphasized in which the child sees support and confirmation of his present attitude towards his environment [memory]. These recollections are tendentiously reinforced in the indicated sense, and retouched [construction]. The child also gathers confirmation from his surroundings [report]. He thus fixates more and more sharply the recollection of a specific, vividly perceived experience in which poetry and truth merge. From now on this recollection is always brought forth when first impressions are called for. It is also told in autobiographies. According to its whole history of origin, it is bound to furnish the individual psychologist with a valuable means for understanding the guiding lines of that person. . . .

EXAMPLES

The material on which we studied first childhood recollections comes from two sources: autobiographies and reports of individuals well known to us personally. A few comments may justify the choice of this method. Other investigators have usually used oral or written questionnaires, or, like Dr. Kammel (10), requested a number of unselected persons to write down their first childhood recollections. But these methods cannot yield answers to problems of individual psychology. Their results refer only to external characteristics of the recollections such as duration, clarity, affect, age, etc. As to their content, this is merely tabulated in terms of categories of events.

We have chosen sources in which the first recollection does not stand isolated, but rather fits into the whole of a personality picture from which it receives its meaning. We believe thus with the aid of a dynamic teleological method to be able to accomplish more than the experimental psychologists with their static-mechanistic fragmentations of the continuity.

Autobiographies have often been called unreliable as a psychological source. But this objection is not valid here, since even a complete construction, even more than mere cosmetic retouching, furnishes valid data for the solution of our problems. We will be able to show clearly one basic tendency of most early recollections—to safeguard and reinforce the life plan.

Attaining Achievement and Admiration

Richard Wagner, at about 30 years of age, writes in his "Autobiographical Sketch" which was requested of him on the occasion of his first success:

My stepfather also died early. I was only seven years old. Shortly before his death I had learned to play on the piano "*Ueb' immer Treu und Redlichkeit*," and the "*Jungfernkranz*" which was quite new then. One day before his death I was asked to play both in the room next door. I heard him then say in a weak voice to my mother: "Should he perhaps have a talent for music?" Early in the morning, when he had died, Mother came into the nursery, said something to each of the children, and to me she said: "He wanted to make something out of you." I remember that for a long time I imagined something would become of me (16, p. 1).

Picture Wagner's situation at the time of writing: Nobody had had real confidence in his musical talent. He had fought with poverty and misery, and probably often had doubts about himself. A tutor had once told him—and he also mentions this—nothing would become of him because he could not play the piano. No wonder he looked everywhere for a confirmation of his mission, and in doing so, soon fixated in his memory that situation in which he had enjoyed enhanced self-esteem. He holds this memory up as proof of his genius against all who had doubted him, and proves to himself on the occasion of his first success that he and his father had prevailed against the tutor. The significance of this memory for Wagner is evidenced by the fact that he recalls it in such detail in a biographical account of only 15 printed pages We wish to point out two characteristics of this recollection: It shows the author in a situation of enhanced self-esteem, and he thereby safeguards his life plan.

The famous sculptor Ernst Rietschel[7] writes in his *Memories of My Youth:*

The first event which from earliest childhood on has remained in the consciousness of my memories was the liking of little pictures and woodcuts. . . . I tried myself to draw on the slate-board what interested me, as for example in my third year a bear leader with his bear. . . . Because both man and bear were perhaps somewhat recognizable as such, I was, as I remember, very much praised by visiting neighbors who were greatly surprised about this (13).

Obviously this recollection is similar in its essential characteristics to the one previously cited. Again, the enhanced self-esteem—it should be noted that the author by adding, "as I remember," emphasizes once more, apparently unnecessarily, that he remembers the praise of the neighbors—and again the reinforcement of the life plan so that this appears like the effect of a predestination.

[7]Ernst Rietschel (1804-1861), German sculptor.

A large number of recollections which I had occasion to observe fit more or less into this general category. For example, a young man of 25 years remembers: "It is my birthday. I am standing with my arm propped on the table. I hear the doorbell ringing, and say, 'Now the guests are coming.' " Here we find the expectation of something which in the two previous cases was fulfilled: the joy of being celebrated, the pride in being somebody. In this case, this is even expressed in the posture which the child assumes in the recollection. He stands there in the pose of a man to whom homage is being paid. From my knowledge of this person I can testify that in the many fluctuations of his life he has indeed tried with all means at his disposal to play a role which would have secured him the admiration of his fellow men.

Desire for Power

Much more frequently the recollection symbolizes besides a desire for admiration, a desire for domination or power. We find a deep insight into the dynamics of the child's psyche in St. Augustine's *Confessions* where he writes:

> I fidgeted and cried and gave through the few clumsy signs at my disposal only unclear expression to my wishes. When my will was not fulfilled because one could not understand me, I became angry at the adults who did not want to be subservient to me, and at the free people who did not want to be subordinated to me. By crying I sought to revenge myself on them. This is the way of children (4).

One can easily see here in the child already the same attitude as later in the young man who, as he himself tells us, through ambition became a rake, and through pleasure in power, a thief. The later saint, seen psychologically, still shows the tendency to achieve power, although it is power over souls and in extreme spiritualization and highest sublimation. The same mechanisms were traced by Lomer in Ignatius of Loyola, and by Furtmüller in Pascal.

Getting Even

The cases cited so far had in common a striving for esteem, for dominance, a violent expansion tendency, without the cause for this having been expressed in the recollection itself. In other cases we see this clearly, as in the case of Friedrich Hebbel.[8] In all his childhood recollections feelings of inferiority, helplessness, oppression etc.,

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[8]Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863), German poet and dramatist, brought up in severe poverty. His work stands for the rights of the individual and a humane system of morality.

are clearly expressed. He speaks of "the time when I considered everybody to be more than myself (still in Hamburg, with what eyes and what respect I regarded those who went to the Gymnasium)" (8). And again: "The first feeling as a child of being a proletarian: Madame Schomer said to me and my brother as we approached the garden corner: 'Go away, or I shall have you chased with the dogs' whip' " (8). We understand this inferiority feeling very well when we learn from the autobiographical essay, "My Childhood" (7), that when bread and work were lacking there often were anxious scenes at home; that Hebbel's father was extremely strict and almost brutal, so that the young child in this narrow surrounding must always have had a feeling of oppression. His first clear recollection of an event represents an act of revenge against father and mother:

> At times my father had to provide his own food against a compensation in his day's wages. Then our noonday meal was postponed, and to alleviate hunger we ate at noontime only a simple piece of buttered bread. . . . Once on such a day my mother made pancakes. . . . We ate them with the greatest appetite and promised not to tell father in the evening. When he came home we were already in bed and deep asleep. . . . He woke me up, caressed me, took me in his arms and asked me what I had eaten. "Pancakes," I replied, half asleep. Upon this, he reproached my mother who had no retort . . . but threw a glance at me which pronounced disaster. . . . At other times again she indoctrinated me with the strictest love of the truth (7).

This last sentence shows clearly the motive for this sudden love of the truth—perhaps also the motive for all the surprises which the enfant terrible creates. Such a child always considers himself suppressed by the adults. By following their demands exactly when this must be awfully embarrassing for the adults, the child takes revenge on them through obedience (see 2). The same attitude of rebellion against the parents is also revealed in a short note from Hebbel's posthumous works. It says briefly: "You swindler of people (to my father)." The reverse is again expressed in the recollections of his school days where he always suffered injustice. It is the same attitude which Hebbel's diaries reveal to the attentive reader—the self-torturing, nagging, depreciating trait of his character which seeks its justification in the childhood recollections with which he is continuously and extensively occupied. The feeling, "I have suffered injustice," always provides an incentive for taking revenge and if necessary to blame the failure of one's personal power on those who were the originators of this injustice.

The tendency to embarrass the adults by speaking the truth, to make them by this means dependent on one's own, otherwise powerless, will and judgment, shows itself even more clearly in a childhood recollection of Karl Philipp Moritz.[9] He tells in his autobiographical novel, *Anton Reiser:* "Anton was once asked to say that [his master] this Englishman was not at home when a stranger wanted to visit him. But he could not be moved to do it, because he did not want to tell a lie" (11). If one considers that an Englishman was then in a German village quite a fabulous, esteemed being, one will understand what satisfaction, what feeling of power it must have provided a young person, to play the morally superior toward such a demigod.

We also learn the reason for this attitude. He tells about himself that from the cradle on he was oppressed, was organically inferior due to years of a foot condition, that his father, a fanatical pietist, treated him without any love, and that he was continuously ashamed of his wretched clothes. This permanent inferiority feeling demanded as compensation, exaggerated ideas of grandeur: He wanted to become a saint, poet, actor, minister, scholar—all occupations which would have brought him esteem and power. This situation lasted until a relatively old age. In his autobiography the description of his childhood misery takes up the greatest space. The memory of this oppression is a means in the struggle for power because he—like Hebbel—finds in it the justification for his life plan, an incentive for further efforts and the means to place the blame on others for failure in certain periods of his life. . . .

A young girl in opposition to her family, who feels particularly misunderstood by her older sisters, reports about her first two recollections, of which one is probably constructed or modified according to reports by others: "I was 2½ to 3 years old when my older sister took me, tied into the baby carriage, out for a walk in the garden. My sister walked away for a few minutes and the carriage fell over." The second recollection: "I played with my older sister in the garden when she hurt me with a spade. Actually it was the fault of my parents, because they left us unattended." From these recollections one clearly sees the thought: My sister hurts me, and my parents are also to blame—it was this way already in my childhood.

The Reverend A. tells that on one occasion he went with his father, a strict liberal, to church. The sight of the minister who stood

[9]Karl Philipp Moritz (1757-1793), poet, writer, art historian, close friend of Goethe.

high on the pulpit above all the people impressed him enormously and he decided to become a minister. We see in this case how the child creates for himself a guiding image, a personality ideal of greatness, one by which he enters into opposition to his father.

Sexual Recollections

Such examples could be increased to any number. But I want to touch only on one more question—that of sexual or erotic recollections.

The lack of judgment which exists in the interpretation of such recollections is evidenced in a paper by Hug-Hellmuth (9). The author [following Freud] claims that the reason for lack of memories from early childhood is that the sexual recollections of that time are repressed under the influence of the censorship of the ethical and aestetic imperatives which arise only later. But this would explain only the absence of sexual recollections since the author would probably not go so far as to assert that all childhood experiences are sexual in nature. But not even all sexual memories are repressed, as the author immediately cites a manifest sexual childhood recollection of Ludwig Ganghofer.[10] With this method one will naturally find sexual recollections in any event: If they are not there, they have been repressed; and if they are there, they are presented triumphantly as new confirmation of the pansexual world philosophy.

Far be it from me to deny that there are sexual childhood recollections, although they are rare. But where they do occur they, too, are the expression of a specific attitude toward the surrounding world. Evidently, someone accustomed to measure his inferiority or his successes in sexual terms, will have sexually toned childhood recollections, just as, from what we have seen, the painter reproduces success in painting, the musician, success in music.

Still another circumstance contributes to the finding that in some cases sexual recollections are preserved. The general insecurity of children shows itself also in their insecurity regarding the signs and the relationship of the sexes. The child knows that something is being kept from him by the adults, and seeks avidly to get behind this secret. The child is also unsure regarding his own sexual role. Therefore every experience which brings him certainty in this respect will have a strong effect.

As Alfred Adler (1) has shown, uncertainty regarding one's sexual

[10]Ludwig Ganghofer (1855-1920), popular Bavarian writer.

role—in boys the doubt of one's own masculinity, equated with power—continues to exist in the nervous adult. Therefore it is natural that recollections are preserved which confirm masculinity. Thus it is to be understood that, as Kammel (10) states, a large number of boys mention in their earliest recollection the first time they wore pants.

A further factor which favors the retention of sexual memories is the fear of the sexual partner (the negative side of the will to power, compensating for the inferiority feeling) which was also revealed by Adler (3). For this attitude, too, the respective nervous individual will seek support in childhood experiences which put the sexual partner in a threatening and dangerous light, as for example Ganghofer's recollection cited by Hug-Hellmuth.

We want to cite another example illustrating this point. The painter, Anslem Feuerbach,[11] writes in his *Legacy:* "Then I remember an overgrown garden on which I looked down at dusk from the window of our dark room. On its paths our older cousin, swinging a bean pole as a lance, chased about with her hair loosely falling. I liked this extraordinarily well" (5). One only needs to compare this picturesquely conceived impression with Feuerbach's paintings—those presentations of manlike demonic women, those Medeas, Iphigenias, Nannas, the Battle of the Amazons—and one will immediately understand the meaning of this first recollection. He himself wrote in a letter to his mother, November 2, 1855: "How come that my pictures stand there in truly majestic, aloof, calmness, while he who created them is a swaying reed!" The tendency to redeem himself from the fear of women through artistic creation could be shown in a psychological study of Feuerbach through many of his experiences.

The range of examples could be considerably extended, but in no case did we find a sexual experience which did not prove to be merely a form of expression of a pervasive tendency.

CONCLUSION

Thus we arrive at the conclusion: What is reported as a first childhood recollection serves the function of supporting the life plan, be it directly or by detours. In this support of the personality-tendency

[11]Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880), important German painter representing late classicism, whose work has a "lyrical and elegiac" quality, corresponding to his quest for true greatness, his loneliness, and his tendency to be depressed and discouraged. His lifelong closest relationship was to his stepmother, two volumes of letters to whom have been published, and who edited the volume (6) containing his autobiography and various notes.

the utility is revealed which Bergson has shown to be the condition for a recollection becoming presently conscious. The tendencies which are found correspond to those which Alfred Adler showed to be present without exception in normal and nervous characters.

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