

## FORTUNE-TELLING AND PROPHECY

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*Relatively early in his career Adler explained the interest in telepathy and spiritism as being derived from a "tormenting inferiority feeling" so that the individual "expects of others the greater ability to see, to such a degree as if they could see something hidden, could explore the innermost" (1, p. 49). Two decades later Adler added the counterpart, so-to-speak, stating that those who credit themselves with telepathic or prophetic powers justifiably "arouse suspicion of a superiority complex" (2, p. 261).*

*The present paper goes into more detail regarding the phenomenon of prophecy, discussing the personality of those seeking to have their fortune told, the method used by the fortune-teller, and the reaction of the questioner who uses the prophecy as an impulse either to act in accordance with the prophecy, thus making it come true—or to counteract it. In the former case we have an instance of what Merton, in a sociological context, has since called the "self-fulfilling prophecy," a phenomenon "peculiar to man," in which "prophecies or predictions become an integral part of the situation and thus affect subsequent developments" (3, p. 423).*

*Without using the word itself, Adler below actually describes a special case of suggestion, supplementing earlier statements on the subject in which he defined suggestion as "a matter of modifying or strengthening an already effective attitude which manifests itself clearly in its bearer" (2, p. 216). "Suggestibility appears only where it fits in with the style of life" (2, p. 217).*

*The paper, published here for the first time, is from a manuscript handwritten by Adler. Being written in English, it must be from his later years, and required some editing which was kept at a minimum. The manuscript was recently found by his daughter, Dr. Alexandra Adler.*

Everybody would like to know a little bit in regard to his future and the future of some others; of course also in regard to the future of his country, of peace, of mankind; sometimes only of the stock market.

Whatever arouses a person's present interest in later events can be judged as his main interest, and signifies his personality, his style of life. If he wants to find out something about money matters or about his perfection in a piece of work, about personal pleasure or about happiness of himself and others, about diversions and entertainments or contributions, about the future attitudes of other persons towards him or his own towards others, about love and inclination of others and how they will change, or about his own firmness towards others—all these questions and many others can give some hints of the standpoint and make-up of the questioning person.

Of course there are thousands of varieties to be considered. For the fortune-teller to find out to which degree the questioner is selfish or socially adjusted, courageous or timid; or what he will do once he is told his future, whether he will accept the prophecy as a call to make it true so far as possible, or will hinder its coming to pass—this is always a matter of much experience and of a good eye for the coherence of the unity of a personality.

Some tradesmen and salesmen have this eye for guessing what the customers need and what they will buy. But besides they must also have the right diplomacy to close the deal.

#### THE METHOD OF THE FORTUNE-TELLER

Some fortune-tellers know perfectly the types of persons who are visiting them. And if they look carefully with experienced eyes, starting with nearly empty phrases, giving the further lead to the questioner—as a blind horse can find the right way with a knowing driver, so the questioner takes the lead and the fortune-teller has only to pick up what the other offers him.

In a certain way each of us behaves like a fortune-teller, for himself and for others. We are not blessed with the absolute truth. We do mostly not know and cannot foresee the strict consequences of our doing. There is a certain probability that we will infer from our experiences how we can find the relationship between causes and effects. But many years may lie between, so that the connection will never be clear. Or many interferences may change the development of the effect. Or different personalities, different in body or mind, may assimilate and digest and conclude differently. Or circumstances and situations, favorable ones or disastrous, may be at work and change the effects.

Perhaps the best look into the future, of course limited and in their particular sphere of activity, can be found among poets, physicians, and astronomers. It is no surprise that the superstitious ways of prophecies mostly resemble these honest and scientific ways.

The poet when creating a heroic figure must know what may and will happen to this person in a certain calamity. And more, he must foresee the calamity and how it will work out. In his foreseeing ability he knows in advance that his hero will be hit. Just as the master—to use an improper example—says to his apprentice: I know I will give you a slap today, and after an hour it is done. He is working out a destiny in his imagination where he has his hands in the play.

This is because in so speaking and influencing oneself and others, feelings and emotions will be aroused. Some vague impressions are used to become reality. Experience, common sense, and the ability to guess are of help, and especially the sense of reality must not be lacking, so that at last the fortune-teller—has not revealed the future but has given an impulse.

#### PROPHECY AS IMPULSE

The entire business of all the fortune-tellers is based upon this fact of the impulse. All persons who desire to know more of the future than they could expect from their own activity, are longing for an impulse. They are broken down, feel as though before an abyss, are doubtful and timid. This is the state of mind which desires more security, a great feeling of inferiority where persons do not trust themselves more than they trust other powers. They want to lean on somebody as they have been inclined to do more or less throughout their whole lives. And now they are no longer responsible: the stars have spoken through the prophetic mouth of the fortune-teller.

Each poet has his scheme, his style of life, his meaning of life. All his characters are filled in accordance with his own personality. Whatever is moving him moves his figures. He identifies himself with his hero. The same process occurs in fortune-telling.

And now: the questioner who before had had no direction, no goal, and was shuddering before any decision, has a guiding point, an impulse, a directed activity. He carries out the prophecy like a piece of advice—and admires the wisdom of fortune-telling. Or, he may be afraid and avoids going the way of his “destiny”—and has won because of the prophecy.

Each fortune-teller prefers his own scheme. He uses a writing pad; or uses playing cards and makes them serve as voices and votes adapted to the real situation; or he takes dreams and interprets them in terms of fixed symbols. Too often he also gives warnings of suicide, of insanity, of accidents—and attains a probability of 100%. Either these disasters occur or not. The fortune-teller is always right, having prophesied them, or prevented them by his warning.

#### REFERENCES

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2. ADLER, A. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. New York: Basic Books, 1956.
3. MERTON, R. K. *Social theory and social structure*. Rev. ed. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957.