

THE COURAGE FOR IMPERFECTION¹

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In every human being there is a striving to grow, to improve, a striving for perfection. This "is not limited to the characterization of certain individuals, nor is it brought to them from the outside; rather, it is given to every person and must be understood as innate" (2, p. 39). It is a healthy and necessary attribute as long as it manifests itself within the range of common sense and with social interest.

Unfortunately, due to physical or other handicaps, people often lose confidence in their capacities to reach the goal they have set for this striving. When this happens, people build up their own "private" goal of self-esteem, and substitute fictional for real achievement, in order to keep up the illusion of fulfillment. One of these escapes is into perfectionism.

PERFECTIONISM

At first sight it seems illogical that the striving to be perfect should be considered a withdrawal from reality, yet it is in accordance with the "private logic" of a neurotic person.

We learned from Adler's lectures and from his personal guidance even more than from his books, to keep well in mind the *difference* between *the* sound striving for perfection and the neurotic wanting to be perfect. The first is a useful realistic attitude; the second involves the neurotic tendency to withdraw from reality, in as much as perfection per se is not within human reach.

Adler viewed perfection as an ideal which can never be really reached, but can serve as a signpost for going in the right direction of improvement, by going from big mistakes to ever smaller ones, trying to perfect all one's capacities but avoiding the pitfalls of perfectionism. In perfectionism the fiction of perfection takes the place of real achievement and this façade then has to be maintained at all cost, whatever may happen.

The perfectionist will arrange everything to fit into his pattern of infallibility. What does not fit, drops out of awareness. The whole perspective is shifted, emotions are falsified, and facts become dis-

¹This was also the title (in the German, *Mut zur Unvollkommenheit*) of a paper read by the author at the Second International Congress of Individual Psychology, Berlin, 1925, and subsequently published (3). A translation was published under the title, "Dare to be less than perfect" (4). In the present paper the author returns to the same message after more than four decades of experience which confirmed over and over again the wisdom of Adler's thoughts.

torted. Not only the perfectionist but also those close to him have to pay dearly for his keeping intact such a false front. The perfectionist is very sensitive; he can not endure the idea of being wrong in anything. But life sometimes is so unkind as to demonstrate that he really has failed. Then, very cleverly he will try to prove that wrong was done to him; the others, or the world, are at fault, not he.

Clinical cases often show how this leads to confounding cause and effect, where symptoms are regarded as the cause and the real cause is changed into an insignificant symptom, and logical as well as time sequences are reversed.

But we cannot feel happy or even satisfied as long as we try to withdraw from the common laws of life into a fictitious world of our own. Whether we like it or not, such withdrawal creates some uneasy feelings. Many such persons at least recognize that something might be wrong with themselves and come to our clinics for therapy. Taking this step shows that they are not completely withdrawn and improvement may be expected.

Yet often they describe themselves as the perfect wife, mother, boss, etc., suffering because of someone else's fault. Thus they attempt to maintain their ways and still be faultless. This does not mean that they are putting on an act. Their suffering, although acquired by a neurotic tendency, is genuine. They have to be so deeply hurt and must truly pay with so much suffering since otherwise they could not have a clear conscience for putting the blame on others.

How often Adler reminded us, never to forget that "to reach a neurotic goal, no expense will seem too high." As he expressed it later in writing: "A neurotic state actually is . . . an attempt to maintain the semblance of value at any price, and paying the costs" (1, p. 266).

THE WAY TO COURAGE

The goal to be without blame very often is at the bottom of small and great human troubles. When people with such an aim seek and receive psychotherapy, they learn to face their own imperfection, instead of running after an impossible goal of perfection. They acquire the courage to be imperfect, the courage to work to become less and less imperfect. To fail less and less is the only goal human beings are able to reach—since faultlessness is out of the human realm.

In order to help people to improve in this direction we have to keep in mind Adler's teleological orientation and concept of the totality of the individual. Adler sees the individual as involved not only with

himself but with the whole world; not only as contemplative, but also as oriented towards action, thus developing what he called *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*. This implies the individual's relationship to the world at large, to the cosmos.

Pascal, whose philosophy is in many aspects similar to Adler's, is also concerned with this question, and observes that when the individual is left completely on his own he gets frightened. "The silence of the infinite threatens me," says Pascal. This is very similar to understanding the neurotic character from the premises of his frightful loneliness. Nobody understood better than Adler how many untapped resources lie within the individual chained by this anxiety. By helping such a person to experience himself as a totality that is included in a greater, more important totality than the single human being, and helping him to find his place there, one opens new and fertile vistas to him which he will want to explore.

This will help him to accept himself with all his human foibles and errors, and enable him to develop positive qualities which had been kept dormant for lack of this special courage. Thus he will no longer suffer from the very hard task to *be* perfect. The infinite will not frighten him anymore because he will feel a part of it. This new perspective may change his whole life.

If a person has learned never to regard his affairs as purely personal matters . . . but to consider all problems as part of a communal life, . . . he will not try to conceal defeat. . . . He will not feel himself shaken by failure, nor toppled from a position of superiority, but in his humanity he will renew his courage and make a fresh start, either in a different field of activity or in a different manner of approach within his old field. And that is what we call daring to be less than perfect (4, p. 82).

Adler possessed the great gift of presenting wisdom in so light a way that everybody could understand him. I once heard him tell one of his "perfectionists" he should not try so hard to become an angel, because if he would become one, his wings would prevent him from pulling his nightshirt over his head.

And as Pascal said: "Man is neither angel nor brute, and he who tries to act the angel is likely to act the brute."

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POWER¹

ALFRED ADLER

The following is the first English translation of a paper originally published in 1928 (4) in a handbook on pacifism (8).² We learned of this paper through a book by Josef Rattner (9) which uses a passage from it as a preamble, marked by footnote 5 below. Subsequently, the paper was mentioned to us by Henri F. Ellenberger. It had not been included in the extensive Adler bibliography published in 1964 (6).

Although the paper was published in 1928, one may assume with great certainty that it was written immediately after the first World War, in 1918 or 1919, with the exception of a few but crucial paragraphs that were probably added later. In style and tone it is very much like two other papers written in this period, one of which appeared in a general political periodical (1), the other in the form of a separate political pamphlet (2). Excerpts from these papers have been published in translation (5, pp. 448, 455-457, and pp. 457-459, respectively). The first paper deplored the use of power by the Bolsheviks, the second protested against the concept of collective war guilt which the Allied powers applied against the defeated countries. Actually several passages from the first paper are included in the present paper; they are marked by footnote 4. At this earlier time also the term Gemeinschaftsgefühl (social feeling) was new with Adler, and he still used it together with the plural version, as well as Gemeinsinn (social sense or common sense) both of which he no longer used in 1928 when the paper was actually published.

In the opinion of Dr. Kurt A. Adler, "The victorious struggle of the proletariat against the coercion of capitalism . . ." is an obvious reference to the takeover by the Bolsheviks in Russia, and by the Social Democrats in Austria and Germany at that time." For this reason Dr. Adler also believes that this paper was written in 1918-1919, or 1920 at the latest, that his father for some reason did not use it then and took it out of a drawer when the request for a contribution to the handbook came.³

The handbook was edited by Dr. Franz Kobler, a Viennese lawyer, for the War Resisters International whose honorary secretary was H. Runham Brown. The full title of the volume is Violence and Non-Violence: Handbook of Active Pacifism. Most of the 43 contributors were from Germany, Austria, England, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia and Holland (in that order), with single contributors from America, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, India and Palestine. Perhaps the best known con-

¹Translated from the German (4) by permission of Rotapfel-Verlag, Zurich. The order of some of the paragraphs has been changed, and all comments, footnotes and references have been provided by the editors.

²We are greatly indebted to Dr. Josef Rattner, Zurich, for having provided us with a copy of this book.

³Personal communication, March 10, 1966.

tributors were Mohandas Gandhi, Romain Rolland, Norman Thomas, and Stefan Zweig.

Despite his contribution to this volume Adler was not an unconditional pacifist. As his son states, "My father was not a non-violent pacifist under all circumstances; I cannot tell for sure how he would have felt about World War II as far as Allied action was concerned. But I feel he would have supported defense."³ In Adler's own words we find the following corroboration of this, although it was written in a different connection: "Only in the rare cases of self-defense where damage must be prevented and cannot be prevented otherwise, must we, with deep regret, grant the right to use the means of power" (3, p. vi).

This paper, and its inclusion in a pacifist handbook, present still a further correction of the misunderstanding that was quite frequent and has still not completely disappeared, namely, that Adler's psychology is a system in which power striving had taken the central position which Freud had assigned to sex. Actually this was only Adler's description of what he was fighting as a psychotherapist. The present paper shows that he considered the striving for personal power not a "primary process" of human nature but as derived from a false guiding ideal, a personal value, which he believed could and must be replaced by a better ideal, that of social interest.

To be big! To be powerful! This is and has always been the longing of those who are little or feel they are little. Every child longs for higher goals; everyone who is weak, for superiority; everyone of faint hope, for pinnacles of perfection. This goes for the individual as well as for groups, peoples, states, nations. Whatever men are striving for originates from their urgent attempts to overcome the impression of deficiency, insecurity, weakness.

But in order to go anywhere, men need a guiding image in the future. The fictitious guiding ideal of perfection is not tangible enough to fulfill its purpose. The groping spirit shapes the guiding image concretely in order to walk securely. Whether one sees his perfection in being a coachman, a physician, a Don Juan, a fellow-man or a tyrant, he always sees in it the highest fulfillment and confirmation of his nature. Whether his guiding ideal will bring him this fulfillment under given circumstances, depends on his preparation, his training, his choice of method, his optimistic activity on the one hand, and its congruence with the external possibilities, on the other hand. The former factors we can advance through education, the latter we must recognize and see for what they are. All these factors penetrate each other and interact.

We can contribute much toward the attainment of an approximately correct way of life when we have at our disposal an accurate

exploration of the external circumstances. Many of the evils which distress man could be more easily borne and fought against if we did not only deplore them, but regarded them as the expression of a movement toward development and progress. We all suffer from the fact that we stand at a crossroad of development which must be overcome through the creative power of mankind.

THE FALSE IDEAL OF PERSONAL POWER

The Individual Psychologist can maintain with certainty that general and personal suffering are always connected with the fact that today we have constructed our guiding ideal still too little in accordance with social interest and too much in accordance with personal power. The large army of problem children, neurotics, insane, alcoholics, drug addicts, criminals, and suicides in the last analysis all present the same picture: struggle for personal power, or despair of being able to attain it on the generally useful side. Today superiority over others is still being aspired to as the perfect form. Our guiding ideal is concretized as power over others, and this problem is too much in the foreground for everybody, overshadows all other problems, and directs all movements of our psychological life into its path.

The poison of the craving for power creeps into parental love and seeks in the name of authority and filial duty to cling to the semblance of superiority and infallibility. Then it becomes the task of the children to grow beyond their parental educators, to cope with them. It is the same with the teacher. Even love is full of these tricks, and demands of the partner too much devotion. The husband's desire for power, appealing to "natural destiny," demands the submission of the wife. The result is, unhappily, the destruction of all spontaneous relationships and the paralyzing of valuable forces.⁴ The dominance of man over woman deprived him of the highest sexual pleasures and must in a more highly developed civilization lead women to rebellion against their feminine role. This would at the same time bring the existence of the human race in question because uncivilized peoples would gain an advantage.

The waves of the power striving of society break into the confines of the nursery. The parents' desires to dominate, servant arrangements in the house, privileges accorded the infant, irresistibly direct

⁴This paragraph or passage is also found in a paper dated 1918 (1).

the mind of the child toward the achievement of power and predominance, and allow only this position to appear tempting. Not until somewhat later do social feelings enter his soul, usually to fall under the domination of the already developed desire for power. The pleasant games of children disclose to the judge of human nature a self-consistent system of satisfying the craving for power. One finds then during more careful analysis that all character traits are elaborated through the striving for one's own superiority.

When the child enters school or life, he brings with him, from his family, this mechanism which is so harmful to the social sense (*Gemeinsinn*). The ideal of one's own superiority counts upon the social sense of the others.

The result of individual and social psychological inquiry is therefore: The striving for personal power is a disastrous delusion and poisons man's living together. Whoever desires the human community must renounce the striving for power over others.⁵

To prevail through violence appears to many as an obvious thought. And we admit: the simplest way to attain everything that is good and promises happiness, or even only what is in the line of a continuous evolution seems to be by means of power. But where in the life of men or in the history of mankind has such an attempt ever succeeded? As far as we can see, even the use of mild violence awakens opposition everywhere, even where the welfare of the subjugated is obviously intended. The patriarchal system and enlightened absolutism are such deterring traces. No people could tolerate even their God without contradiction. Lead an individual or a people into the power sphere of another, and immediately a resistance will arise, openly and secretly, and it will not disappear until all shackles have fallen.^{4, 5}

The victorious struggle of the proletariat against the coercion of capitalism shows clearly this course of development. But the growing power of the organization of labor may, if used carelessly, release a lesser or greater resistance in insecure persons. Wherever it is a question of power, no matter how excellent its intentions and goals, it will come up against the will to power of the individual and arouse opposition.⁴

It would be a gross deception to admit power intoxication only for the individual psyche. The mass also is guided by this goal and the

⁵Used as preamble of a book by Rattner (9).

effect of this is the more devastating as in the mass psyche the feeling of personal responsibility is essentially reduced.

How did this harm come into the world? *The striving for personal power is one of the concretizations of the striving for perfection!* And it is one of the most tempting, especially in a civilization which is pressed from all sides. It is an understandable error, borrowed from unbridled events of nature where the perfection of the individual is gained by brutal victory over the weaker.

THE IDEAL OF SOCIAL INTEREST

Modern psychology has shown us that the traits of craving for power, ambition, and striving for power over others, with their numerous ugly concomitants, are not innate and unalterable. Rather they are inoculated into the child at an early age; the child receives them involuntarily from an atmosphere saturated by the titillation of power. In our blood is still the desire for the intoxication with power, and our souls are playthings of the craving for power.⁴

One thing can save us: the mistrust of any form of predominance. Our strength lies in conviction, in organizing strength, in a world view, not in the violence of armament and not in emergency laws. With such means other strong forces before us have fought in vain for their existence.⁴

For us the way and tactics emerge from our highest goal: the nursing and strengthening of social feelings.⁴

Even among the animals there are enough tendencies which ameliorate this wild struggle—social instincts, gregarious drives—obviously for the protection of the species, to prevent its extermination. For man, the coercion toward development points much more strongly to the path of social interest, because in the face of nature and the facts of life he, much more than all other living creatures, is forced toward mutual obligation. Without the most highly developed division of labor he is doomed to go under or to lose the fruits of evolution.

We may fight against the working of social feelings in us, but we cannot smother it.⁶ Thus the human soul may madly dismiss logic that has been pronounced holy; in suicide vital force defiantly annuls the vital instinct. But logic and vital instinct are realities like the

⁶Here Adler refers to social interest no longer as an ideal but as the minimum of social identification and integration, of cooperation, that has developed in every one out of the natural "coercion toward . . . social interest" and cooperation.

community. Thus such failures are sins against nature, against the holy spirit of the community.⁷ It is not at all easy to suppress one's social sense. The criminal needs the intoxication of the senses, before or after the deed, to quiet his social interest. Wayward youths form gangs so that they may share the feeling of responsibility with others and thus mitigate it. Raskolnikov must first lie in bed a month and meditate whether he is a Napoleon or a louse. And then when he ascends the stairs to murder an old worthless usurer he feels his heart palpitating. Through this excitement of his blood, social interest speaks. War is not the continuation of politics with other means, but the greatest mass crime against man's belonging together.⁸ What sum of lies and artificial arousal of low passions, what thousandfold violence was necessary to suppress the indignant outcry of the voice of humanity!

The typical ideal of our time is still the isolated hero for whom fellow men are objects. It is this psychological structure which has made the World War palatable to people, lets them shudder in admiration before the unstable greatness of a victorious military leader.

Social feelings require a different ideal, namely that of the saint, purified, to be sure, from fantastic clinkers originating from superstition. Neither school nor life are later capable of removing the firmly rooted, exaggerated striving for one's own significance at the expense of others.

We need the conscious preparation and advancement of a mighty social interest and the complete demolition of greed and power in the individual and in peoples. What we all lack and for which we struggle relentlessly are new methods to raise the social sense, the new word. In the meantime this progress appears to make its way predominantly through the extermination of the socially unfit. We [humans] are much milder than the facts of life in nature, than this cosmos which

⁷Phyllis Bottome in her biography of Adler quotes him as having exclaimed at one time, "Anxiety? But is that not high treason against the Holy Ghost?" (7, p. 219). Those of us who have been puzzled by this statement find that Adler in the above did indeed use the phrase, *der heilige Geist*. But this would be translated as the "Holy Ghost" only if the adjective, *heilige*, were capitalized. However, this is not the case and thus the phrase must be read as the "holy spirit"; furthermore, "of the community" is added. In this way the usage of this phrase by Adler becomes understandable.

⁸According to Dr. Kurt Adler (personal communication, March 10, 1966) this sentence should probably be modified by the material in brackets, to read: "War is not [merely] the continuation of politics with other means, [politics also being usually used as a means to power,] but the greatest mass crime against man's belonging together."

calls to him who has a longing for power and violence in the greatest variations: I don't like him, he must be removed! He who like the psychologist witnesses this hard logic of human living together, longs to make this infinitely dark voice audible to all, to warn them of the abyss into which individuals, whole families, and peoples fall, to disappear forever. But—we need the new method, the new word, to make this dreadful voice audible.

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