

# Social Interest, Spirituality and Ethics

It is the individual who is not interested in his fellow men who has the greatest difficulties in life and provides the greatest injury to others.

It is from among such individuals that all human failures spring.

- Alfred Adler

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# Metaphysics in IP

- I must admit that those who find a piece of metaphysics in Individual Psychology are right. Some praise it, others criticize it. Unfortunately, there are many who have an erroneous view of metaphysics who would like to see everything eliminated from the life of mankind which they cannot comprehend immediately. (Adler, 1938, p 35)

# Spirituality - Psychology - History

Spirituality and health have long been intertwined in philosophic and healing traditions that form the ancestry of the discipline of psychology. Interest in and research on spirituality and religion have never been wholly absent from psychology but, for much of the 20th century, were isolated from mainstream scientific discourse and journals of the field.

Miller & Thoresen, Jan, 2004, American Psychologist

# Spirituality?

- Spirituality (Thoreson & Plante, 2005):
  - One's relationship with God or a higher power
  - Seeking more meaning, purpose and direction in life
  - Transcending one's selfishness, egocentric desires and needs
  - Fostering classic virtues and character strengths such as love, compassion and forgiveness

Spirituality is ...one's search for meaning and belonging and the core values that influence one's behavior" (Sperry, 2001, p. 4)

# There's no escape from spirituality

- *Spirituality is a latent construct - like health, culture, cognition, development, personality, etc. (Miller & Thoresen, 1999)*
- “Spirituality is a lot like health. We all have health; we may have good health or poor health, but it is something we can't avoid having. The question is not whether we “have spirituality” but whether the spirituality we have is a negative one that leads to isolation and self-destruction or one that is more positive and life giving.” (Dollard, as quoted by Prugh, 1985 in Kurst & Ketcham 1994)

# Adler's Concept of God

- Robert Hall, 1971, JIP 27 (1)
- Not a conventional idea of God
- Rejects both the God of the Philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
- God is viewed as a synthesis of Being and Value, and as a being that is to be imitated by humans

# Adler on God (1933/79)

“The idea of God ... can be understood and appreciated from the viewpoint of IP as a concretization and interpretation of the human recognition of greatness and perfection, and as a commitment of the individual as well as of society to a goal which rests in man’s future and which in the present heightens the driving force by enhancing the feelings and emotions.” p. 276

1. Recognition of greatness & perfection
2. Commitment to that goal attainment, which is in our future but in the present gives us hope and energy

# The Purpose of God

- Hall says, “The purpose of Adler’s conception of God is to help further his ideal of a community which is ‘always unattainable, but always beckoning and pointing the way’ (Adler, 1933, p. 279).”
- So Hall sees Adler as using God to further the establishment of an idealized community or society which is always out there beckoning us to grow toward perfection and Gemeinschaftsgefühl.
- God is, in effect, the goal.

# Self-Boundedness

- “Self-boundedness (Ichgebundenheit) is the central point of attack of Individual Psychology. The self-bound individual always forgets that his/her self would be safeguarded better and automatically the more s/he prepares for the welfare of mankind, and that in this respect no limits are set for him/her”
- “Only a child who desires to contribute to the whole, whose interest is not centered in him/herself, can train successfully to compensate for defects”

(Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, p. 112).

# The Highest Image & The Goal

- “One concretization of the idea of perfection, the highest image of greatness and superiority, which has always been very natural for man’s thinking is the contemplation of a deity.”
- “To strive towards God, to be in Him, to follow His all, to be one with Him - from this goal of striving (not of a drive), there follow attitude, thinking and feeling.”

AA, 1933, p. 275

# From Minus to Plus

- “The whole of human life proceeds along this great line of action -- from below to above, from minus to plus, from defeat to victory. The only individuals who can really meet and master the problems of life, however, are those who show in their striving a tendency to enrich everyone else, those who forge ahead in such a way that others benefit too.”

Alfred Adler (1870-1937), *What Life Could Mean to You*,  
1931/1992, p. 67-68.

# Social Interest

- Social interest- Adler's translation of Gemeinschaftsgefühl ... means *feeling with the whole, sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity. It is a feeling of oneness with all humanity and empathy for each member of the human community.
- “It means striving for a form of community which must be thought of as everlasting, as it could be thought of as if mankind had reached the goal of perfection.” (Adler, SI, 1938, p. 34)
- One might say, “as if we had become like God”

# Social Interest is A Fictional Goal

- It is never a present-day community or society, nor a political or religious form. Rather the goal which is best suited for perfection would have to be a goal which signifies the ideal community of all mankind, the ultimate fulfillment of evolution.” ” (Adler, SI, 1938, pp. 34-35)

# Social Interest as Goal

- “The community, which IP invokes, is a goal, an ideal, always unattainable, but always beckoning and pointing the way. ... Mankind ... can bring its task closer to a solution only if the bodily and psychological welfare of all is taken as an unalterable factor in the accounting of life. Even here abuse occurs readily, be it by opponents or adherents of Individual Psychology.” p. 279-280

# Psychology of Use

- IP is a psychology of use
  - Not whether one has something in some quality or quantity but how that something is used
  - “...in IP guidance, it is the deeply felt conviction that the only right way of solving human problems is that which would benefit an ideal community.” p. 284
  - “We find similarly, that the goal of perfection can be thought of only in community with the welfare of all humankind. ... he who loves God must love man” p. 302
  - So there is a relationship between spirituality, social interest and ethics

# Impact on Ethics

- Normal behavior means acceptance of certain, more or less specific, ethical values which influence, direct and motivate behavior. An adult person confronted by a situation which requires choice and decision has to be guided by an evaluation of the consequences of his decision. Insofar as these consequences involve other persons, ethical values become indispensable if harm to others or to oneself is to be avoided.

(Papanek, H., 1957, p. 160)

# Conflicting Social Values

Societal	Adler's
Competition	Cooperation
Rugged Individualism	Altruism and ideals of unselfish love
Strength as Self-Assertion or prestige, outsmarting others (to not be a sucker or sissy)	Equality, honesty and mutual helpfulness; the desire to be useful
Movement on the vertical plane	Movement on the horizontal plane - equality
Masculine ideal	Humaneness - better human beings
Hostility	Social Interest
Distrust, Suspicion	Confidence in others
Fear	Courage

# Ethical Values in Therapy

- Helene Papanek (1958, p 162): “Therapeutic neutrality should be replaced by the therapist’s firm stand on his right to his own values and respect for the patient’s right to be different. ... But s/he must be able, by objective, rational thinking, to accept and respect the patient’s integrity and values, if these are genuinely held and directed toward social feeling.”
- The group therapist guides the group to develop its own group culture, one in which these values thrive

# Essential for Psychotherapeutic Process

- The therapist's conviction that social interest is both worthwhile and natural
- Open discussion of ethical problems; Explanation of the therapist's viewpoints
- Tolerance and acceptance of different set of values as long as these remain within the general rules of society
- **RESULT:** patient internalizes ethical rules and becomes healthier & better integrated into society

H. Papanek (1958)

# Minimal Ethical Principles from Adler

- **1. *Relate to others in a generally useful way***  
“A person is called good when s/he relates to other humans in a generally useful way, bad when s/he acts contrary to social interest” (A&A, p. 139)
- **2. *Mutual Helpfulness must replace self-boundedness***  
The iron logic of communal life leads to the ethical value of reciprocity or mutuality as expressed in the golden rule.

# Minimal Ethical Principles from Adler - cont'd

- *3. Free development of human potential*
  - Freedom of self-expression (honesty, frankness and genuineness vs. tactfulness, evasiveness, political correctness) limited only by mutual helpfulness - above
- *Equal Rights*
  - To accept others and to be accepted as an equal, with one's recognized and admitted deficiencies, strengthens self-esteem and changes the self-image so that the patient becomes able to accept him or herself

# Ethics Beyond Therapy

- See Richard Wilkinson's and Kate Pickett's 2009 book, The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better. London: Penguin - or visit The Equality Trust - [www.equalitytrust.org](http://www.equalitytrust.org) for updated info
- Economists studying effects of differences between the wealthiest 20% and poorest 20% of a society - world differences as well as differences in US states

# Ethics Beyond Therapy

- Greater the differences, greater the problems of the society:
  - Violence
  - School failure,
  - Poor health,
  - Infant mortality,
  - Teenage pregnancy rates,
  - Literacy and math scores,
  - Obesity,
  - Rates of imprisonment

# Beyond Therapy - cont'd

- Consistent with Adler's ideas about equality and concern for ALL of society, not just one segment
- Differences seem to do with chronic stress from hostility, anxiety and major difficulties related to social status
- E.g., In the most unequal of the 50 US States, 35 or 40 percent of the population feel they cannot trust other people compared to 10 percent in the more equal states
- E.g. Indian study - caste children and problem solving

# The Task

- Recognize that Adler's original concepts related to spirituality seem to be supported today: Usefulness, mutual helpfulness, equality, and the free development of human expression
- See how they integrate with your personal beliefs
- Apply them in your practice of Adlerian psychology in whatever venue you work
- Apply them in the political-economic world in which you live