

## ALFRED ADLER: TRAUMA THEORY

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“Since physical science has taken the ground of *causality* from under the feet of psychologists and in place of it speaks in favor of a *statistical probability* in the same issue of events, then surely the attacks of Individual Psychology for its denial of causality in psychical events need no longer be taken seriously” (Alfred Adler, 1933, p. 13).

“Individual Psychology insists absolutely on the indispensability of finalism for the understanding of all psychological phenomena. Causes, powers, instincts, impulses, and the like cannot serve as explanatory principles. The final goal alone can. Experiences, traumata, sexual development mechanisms cannot yield an explanation, but the perspective in which these are regarded, the individual way of seeing them, which subordinates all life to the final goal, can do so” (Adler, 1956, p. 92).

“In other words, the psychological life of a person is oriented towards the final act, like that of a character created by a good dramatist. The fictional, abstract ideal is the point of origin for the formation and differentiation of the given psychological resources into preparatory attitudes, readinesses, and character traits. The individual then wears the character traits demanded by his fictional goal, just as the character mask (*persona*) of the ancient actor had to fit the finale of the tragedy.

“. . . . It is the setting of a purpose in our psychological behavior and the readiness created by it which determine that actions are initiated and broken off at a certain distance; that, as Ziehen emphasizes, voluntary as well as involuntary impulses are always aimed only at the attainment of a certain effect; and that we must (p. 94) assume a generally intelligent function of the organs, as follows also from Pavlov’s presentations” (Adler, 1956, p. 95).

“No experience is a cause of success or failure. We do not suffer from the shock of our experiences -- the so-called trauma -- but we make out of them just what suits our purposes. We are self-determined by the meaning we give to our experiences, and there is probably always something of a mistake involved when we take particular experiences as the basis for our future life. Meanings are not determined by situations, but we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations” (Adler, 1956, p. 208).

“[The amount of threat a person can bear without losing courage may be called psychological tolerance.] Psychological tolerance depends on the strength of social ties. If the tolerance is exceeded, this will in turn reflect itself in the attitude toward the demands of life. ‘One cannot ask so much of me; one must take my disorder into account.’ ‘What couldn’t I accomplish if I were well.’ Everyone has something of such an attitude. The psychological tolerance is undermined by failures, some of which are certainly to be expected. Encouragement can strengthen the tolerance and prevent, ease, or defer the outbreak of a neurosis” (Adler, 1956, p. 243).

“When one has correctly established such facts, one should not forget the universal faultiness of man, through which even noble and valuable persons may fall into the error of the superiority complex. To say nothing of the fact that, as Barbusse puts it so well, ‘Even the most kind-hearted man cannot always rid himself of the feeling of contempt’” (Adler, 1956, p. 261).

“When the neurotic is brought face to face with a problem with which he is not prepared to cope, he suffers a shock and responds with a shock reaction. In such exogenous situations he develops the shock symptoms that correspond to his physical type and to his particular life style, while emphasizing especially those which seem to justify him in evading the imminent problem which carries with it the threat of defeat” (Adler, 1956, p. 287).

“The cause of a neurosis is not that a person has experienced something, but that he cannot digest an experience due to the lack of his style of life or the ability to cooperate. . . (p. 292).

“. . . . It is not the experiences as such, it is not their objective significance which then have an effect on him, but the conception, evaluation, and meaning which he gives to these experiences; he always interprets experiences according to his already existing attitude and life style” (Adler, 1956, p. 293).

“Everyone will experience shock effects if he is exposed to a concentrated barrage of fire. But he will (p. 295) become stuck with these effects, and they will become permanent, only when he is not prepared for the tasks of life, that is, when he is a person who has not been a real co-worker from his childhood on” (Adler, 1956, p. 296).

“We must remember that it is the exogenous situation which sets the match to the fire” (Adler, 1956, p. 296).

“Neurosis and psychosis are modes of expression for human beings who have lost courage. Anyone who has acquired this much insight into Individual Psychology will thenceforth refrain from undertaking with persons in this state of discouragement tedious excursions into mysterious regions of the psyche” (Adler, 1956, p. 343).

“Every phenomenon in human life is the result of training. Nothing can have come into existence suddenly; everything must have been prepared. Every phenomenon of a person is connected with his earliest history. . . . In some persons the training becomes so evident that it is openly visible, through their posture, or handwriting. What we call arrangement of a symptom is a matter of training. . . . The training occurs not only in the presence of others; the patient trains also when he is alone and avails himself of his fantasy. This is seen most clearly in dreams. . . . We will have a different attitude when we know we are dealing with a person who is training than if we think the behavior is due to a childhood influence or a trauma” (Adler, 1978, p. 391).

“As the central motive in this field of forces the feeling of incompleteness, of insecurity, of inferiority, is always to be found. The minus situation is at the basis of any psychological form of expression. Guided by the individual goal of completion, it gives the impetus to progression, just as it arises from the helplessness and imperfection of (p. 53) childhood, and as it has forced all mankind to seek from out of its needs a security-giving culture (Adler, 1973, p. 54).

“His [Pierre Janet’s] emphasis of the neurotic’s ‘sentiment d’incompletude’ [‘feeling of incompleteness’] . . . is so wholly in harmony with the results offered by me that I am justified in seeing in my work an extension of this most important fundamental fact of the mental life of the neurotic” (Adler, 1973, 53n).

“To be a human being means to have inferiority feelings. One recognizes one’s own powerlessness in the face of nature. One sees death as the irrefutable consequence of existence. But in the mentally healthy person this inferiority feeling acts as a motive for productivity, as a motive for attempting to overcome obstacles, to maintain oneself in life. Only the oversized inferiority feeling, which is to be regarded as the outcome of a failure in upbringing, burdens the character with oversensitivity, leads to egotistical self-considerations and self-reflections, lays the (p. 54n) foundation for neurosis with all its known symptoms which let life become a torture” (Adler, 1973, p. 55n).

“Disregarding such ideal forms as fantasy attributes to a god or a saint, we may derive the following guiding viewpoint, confirmed by experience: The greater the trained social interest acquired in childhood, i.e., the degree of readiness for cooperation, for joining in love, and for fellowship, the higher and more valuable the accomplishments to be expected from the mood of the inferiority feeling. Thoughts, feelings, and actions will always be found on the level accorded to the general welfare. Whether or not the man of genius or the everyday fellow man knows this, or even contradicts this view, his accomplishments give him temporarily or permanently a high feeling of value which is identical to the experience of happiness.

“In the end all great accomplishments stem from the blessed struggle with the needs of childhood -- be they organ inferiorities, pampering, or oppressing circumstances -- as long as the child, at the time of his oppression, has already learned the active adaptation to cooperation. Then, and also later on, in the face of all difficulties and torments, only the paths to cooperation will be open in accordance with his inviolable law of movement (p. 54).

“It is understandable that with most persons social interest does not have this ideal capacity. Probably there is for everyone a test situation which is so heavy and unbearable that his degree of ability to cooperate is no longer sufficient. Also, vulnerability in the face of the various problems of life differs with each person; some answer incorrectly, contrary to social interest, more easily when it is a matter of the interest of others in social life, some when it is a matter of occupation or love. But it is always a failure in a certain situation which gives us the opportunity for appraising the lower degree of the existing social interest. As long as there is not test, we are not in a position to make a definite statement about this; but after the test, the person who has failed it appears totally left to his inferiority feeling” (Adler, 1973, p. 55).

“The honest psychologist cannot shut his eyes against the fact that conditions exist which prevent the entering of the child into the community, prevent his feeling at home, and let him grow up as if in enemy country. The honest psychologist must therefore talk and work also against poorly understood nationalism if it harms the community of all men; against wars of conquest, revenge, and prestige; against the drowning of the people in hopelessness due to widespread unemployment; and against all other disturbances of the spreading of social interest in the family, the school, and the social life” (Adler, 1973, p. 65).

“In the face of exogenous factors, when he does not have the necessary ability to cooperate, every patient will get into psychological tension. Here his entire body begins to vibrate. In the inferior parts this becomes more clearly visible. They are not necessarily organically inferior. A symptom may also show up otherwise, proof that the symptom must be suitable to hide the inability. . . The normal person aims to arrive through his actions at a solution of the problem despite his deficiency. These are the cases where the lack of the ability to cooperate is not too great” (Adler, 1973, p. 200).

“You must not forget that the organism is a unit, and that through a shock in one place the entire organism is set to vibrate. We know too little to lay down any rules, but it is fairly certain that through such a shock an organ may be damaged.

“Not much is known as to how a psychic impression reaches the organs, but without doubt its effect is a general one. The organism has a strong tendency to preserve its equilibrium. There is plenty of evidence that disturbances can be caused by affects” (Adler, 1973, p. 225).

“. . . it is the exogenic situation which releases the trigger, which affects the whole disposition” (Adler, 1973, p. 226).

“It is obvious that the psychic force must pass through the sphere of consciousness; there must be a transformation of the absorbed influences, followed by irritation of the vegetative system. Through the latter the irritation is transmitted further in very diverse ways, in accordance with the uniqueness of the individual and the uniqueness of the organs. His organs begin to respond.

“The irritation always excites the whole organism; however we are able to observe the excitation only in those parts of the organism which manifest it more clearly” (Adler, 1973, p. 229).

“In the severe illnesses and melancholia and insanity, probably the emotions which rule the whole picture also rule the endocrine glands, and probably certain blood changes will be found.

“In the literature we find the contention that such secretions are the cause of insanity; we maintain that they are the consequences of it. The glands are affected by the irritation of the vegetative system, and we shall probably also find such disturbances of secretions in some neuroses as well. We may find differences in the blood of someone suffering from agoraphobia, but not the reasons for it” (Adler, 1973, p. 234).

“The shock which evokes physical and mental irritations, i.e., the symptoms, is always occasioned by an ‘exogenous fact,’ a task which is to be solved socially” (Adler, 1973, p. 242).

“The neurosis, or rather the neurotic symptom, appears always in the face of a social problem, never in a favorable situation, as our experience has shown. In the face of the exogenous factor the inferiority complex shows itself as in an examination of one who is poorly prepared. . . . The problem at hand is not solved, but leads to an enormous psychological tension on account of the threatening defeat because the erring individual does not muster what the life problems require: social interest and cooperation. The shock he experiences as soon as he feels socially unprepared transforms body and soul into disastrous vibrations. But the confusion which ensues, the reflex (according to Pavlov), the disturbed equilibrium, are not yet a neurosis. They are human reactions, differing only according to constitution, bodily and psychological structure.

“Now the question arises: What will follow? What position does the unity of the individual take toward this often deep-reaching change, in order nevertheless to rescue the self-esteem, to carry out the striving for superiority? In our view, socially poorly-prepared persons will not in this situation strive for a solution of the problem at hand, for which more social interest is required than they possess. Rather they find relief by coming to terms with the disturbance which has arisen, remain with it and use it as justification for declining a solution because they fear defeat more than they expect success. Thus they (p. 297) secure distance from the solution of a feared problem by consolidating the disturbance which has arisen in a shock-like manner. They make a detour towards the side which appears easier to them. In doing this, it is not that they ‘make’ the symptoms, as it appears to most psychiatrists and psychologists, but rather that they do not feel a real inclination to give up a solution which they feel is easier” (Adler, 1973, p. 298).

“Everyone feels a shock when he is under fire, but the effects of the shock will only become chronic if the person who has suffered them is not prepared for the tasks of life. In that case, he will come to a standstill” (Adler, 1996, p. 322).

“Every individual is capable of showing some particular emotion if she is put into an appropriate situation, we might call this capability the faculty for emotion. The emotions are such an essential part of human life that we are all capable of experiencing them” (Adler, 1992a/1927, p. 213).

“There are always limits, beyond which the individual feels incapable of proceeding” (Adler, 1992b/1931, p. 175).

“Not all suffering stems from the patient’s life-style. Many patients with adequate life-styles develop problems or symptoms in the face of intolerable or extreme situations from which they cannot extricate themselves” (Mosak, 1979, p. 66).

“External events are extremely meaningful” (Adler, 1963/1930, p. 131).

“. . . life itself sets the test, and this shows the strength of the bond between the individual and the problems of life” (Adler, 1998a/1933, p. 37).

“We see the life style under certain conditions, and it is our task to analyze its exact relation to existing circumstances, inasmuch as the mind changes with any alteration in the environment. As long as people are in a favorable situation, we cannot see their life styles clearly. In new situations, however, where they are confronted with difficulties, the life styles appear clearly and distinctly” (Adler, 1998b/1927, p. 49).

“We have the Great War making brutes out of some, shell-shocked neurotics out of others, ardent and active workers for world-peace of still others. . .” (Wolfe, 1982/1930, p. 46).

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