

THE MEANING OF THEORIES

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The bitter arguments which rage between different members of differing schools of psychological thought point to a forgetfulness or a lack of realization of the true nature of a theory. The didactic nature of the assertions made in the support of this or that theory indicates that its proponents may have come to regard it as a "scientific truth" rather than as a scientific theory. There is considerable difference between a discussion of the relative merits of theories and a verbal battle to prove one right and the other wrong.

It might be helpful to review briefly some points from Vaihinger's "Philosophy of As If." He calls to our attention the fact that we can't really know what is either inside or outside of our skins--the so-called World of Reality is, in the final analysis, unknowable to us! The human animal "knows" only sensations he gets via his nervous system. To remain alive or adapt to the world and people, he has to place interpretations on the sensations he gets as to whether they are leading him in the direction of survival or not. In short, it is the apperceptions he creates between his sensory and motor nerves which determine the quality and social direction of his activity, his death or his survival as an organism. He has no equipment capable of giving him any recognition of an "absolute truth" even if it exists.

But from the moment of birth, he is confronted by the necessity for making adaptations to the outside world. In the beginning he merely "feels." Certain sensations he seeks to repeat and other sensations he tends to avoid. As his memory of such experiences grows, he apperceives things and sensations; he no longer merely feels. Now he begins to act "as if" he could depend on his interpretations of sensations to lead him toward survival. Since he cannot know the absolute nature of

things, he must evolve fictions, "as ifs," theories, etc., which will make adaptation possible. From his past experience and his apperception thereof, he must be able to predict about the future with regard to a statistical probability of survival. If his "as ifs" (apperceptions) correspond to what is in the outside world, he has a higher probability of survival than if his guess is too far off.

There is hardly any doubt but that there is an outside world of reality even though we can never hope to know its absolute nature. Our trouble really starts only if we believe that our "as if" or theory we use for adaptation is a copy of reality itself! The ancients and primitives had dozens of theories of "as if" about thunder. The Greeks, for example, thought that Zeus threw something that made the noise. To them Zeus was a "fact" and not an "as if"--so it was easy for them to imagine him making a noise. But where is Zeus today for us and where is the "right" of the explanation which depended on his existence?

Then, to add to our confusion, our language is full of words referring to categories, such as hot--cold, good--bad, normal--abnormal, strong--weak. To make the situation worse, we elaborate from these categories such entities as Goodness--Badness as essences or absolute standards of comparison. Considering our industry, it is not surprising that we have built up a lot of concepts in our heads, such as categories and essences. The human tragedy begins only when we fail to realize that these categories are "as ifs" which exist only in thought and cannot be found in the outside world.

A theory, then, is in no sense a "copy of reality"; it is nothing more than a *modus dicendi*, or a "way of looking and apperceiving" so that we can make more and safer guesses in the direction of survival. Any theory or "as

if" or fiction must be a logical entity within itself. The Greek theory of thunder had to hang together as a Gestalt or picture even though it is a fiction and animistic. As long as we are conscious that it is only one of many possible ways of looking at what goes on in the outside world we can use it or lay it aside depending on how well it serves our purpose; we need never find ourselves in the position of defending it or fighting those who do not accept it as truth. If we find it increases the number of "right guesses" we can make about the coexistence and sequence of events in the future, then we had better stick to it till some other "as if" comes along that gives us a better guessing average.

With regard to what is called eclecticism, a few theories are similar enough in configuration so that certain parts may be comparable and interchangeable without violating the basic logic of the "as if." But there is no such thing as taking the "best part" from every theory and putting them together. One can, however, view any situation from one unified reference-frame (as if) or another, or from several concurrently and it may be helpful, depending on the guesser. We must never forget for a moment that we are firmly caught in a net of apperceptions, obliged to guess in which direction survival may lie for us.

Every theory, including a scientific theory such as ours, must be consciously thought of at all times as a *modus dicendi* and not as truth. At a seminar Adler warned us not to believe that anyone "has" an inferiority complex. He told us that the inferiority complex existed only in Dr. Adler's head and not in the individual. Adler said that it was his invention (as if) which he found useful in predicting how the individual would relate himself to the outside world and in confronting situations, but that he (Adler) never forgot for a moment that it was a fiction and not a reality.

There have been many ways of looking at "reality" in the past and there will probably be more in the future.

The ancients believed in magic and animism, which were the "as ifs" most agreeable to them. Modern men--especially scientists--tend to regard the outside world from two different frames of reference: that of cause--effect and that of means--end. It is useless again to argue whether things are the effects of causes or means to an end. We can look at anything "as if" it were either one or the other. That is a matter of our choice and tells us nothing about the reality of what we see, for that is unknowable to us.

Physics was once described in terms of cause--effect. More recently there has been a trend toward viewing the same phenomena as means--end relationships. Psychologists have tried both ways of accounting for human behavior. We have schools of psychology that view the faculties a person possesses as the "cause" of his "effects." Adler chose to regard faculties as developed means toward the end of survival. You pay your money and you take your choice; there are easily proved absurdities in either "as if," if you enjoy quibbling with words.

Now all this brings us to the question of why people subscribe more readily to Freud's, Watson's, and other cause--effect or possession psychologies more ardently than they cling or subscribe to Adler's psychology of use or means--end.

It is possible to invent many "as ifs" about this, too. The historian might tell us that cause--effect kind of thinking (logic) is one of the oldest. He can point out how people have thought that great disasters were the result of divine wrath. He can show us that this reference-frame or *modus dicendi* had a wide geographical distribution for so long that it would hardly occur to anyone to examine the reference-frame by which he arrived at his explanation.

The anthropologist, who is interested in the study of cultures from the viewpoint of their relative structure, might call attention to the fact that

we are children of western civilization. In our culture, the pattern of dominance--submission has been passed down to us, shaping our beliefs and disbeliefs for thousands of years. From it we have inherited an ingrained belief in superiority and inferiority of individuals, as well as a strong incentive toward competition, self-aggrandizement and boasting. Adler's psychology and philosophy are contrary to all such personal aims. For this reason it contradicts our whole cultural pattern, just as Christianity does. Two thousand years of Christianity have not made us Christians. Is it to be wondered at that Adler's command to regard others as equal members of the human family should attract few listeners? Courses of instruction that promise personal dominance and the ability to rule others gain widespread attention and adherence. Lectures on Individual Psychology draw visitors at the beginning. As it becomes clear that Individual Psychology is not a magic formula for self-aggrandizement, but demands that we live as equals, the crowd melts away. Only a few remain to carry on the work. And it may be said of many of these that they, too, are more interested in "adjusting others" than they are in altering themselves. The desire to influence other people and thus to occupy a position of fictive superiority is so much a part of our cultural inheritance that not one of us is free of its blighting influence.

The anthropologist further points out that the formal institutions and canalization of our common-life customs are built on superior--inferior relationships. This patterning of social organization does not favor equality; a feeling of closeness is discouraged between employer and employee, etc.--a distance is maintained.

As a result, the "superior group" holds the power. They act as a priestcraft and are always strongly traditional and conservative, fearful of changes lest they lose control. A new psychology, new teaching methods in schools, new socialized plans for

medicine, business, insurance, or anything else, are hindered in their growth. Most psychologies are a product of our culture and therefore favor the belief in superior--inferior relationships or regard them as unavoidable or irremediable. For this reason they gain ready acceptance in the priestcraft, since they can be "kept exclusive." The goal of Individual Psychology is that all should understand it! The priestcraft interpret this as a direct affront to themselves and fear the spread of such information. They wish to maintain their fiction of omniscience, as well as their pretense of infallibility.

The fundamental teachings of Individual Psychology are so useful that even the priestcraft cannot deny their usefulness. At the same time, they cannot admit the sterility of many of their presently held views. To get out of their bad situation they take bits at a time of Individual Psychology as their own original idea--"as if" they thought of it. Gradually they will get around to accepting its total structure,¹⁾ but under their own aegis; they never admit their lack of omniscience by a reversal of policy.

For years we have witnessed the same thing in the field of politics. The minority parties of the United States advocated for years certain reforms long overdue, only to be defeated at the polls. In time, sentiment and circumstance obliged the majority party to alter its viewpoints or lose power. The so-called crackpot ideas of the minority parties finally became the property of the priestcraft of the majority group!

In the light of these observable trends and relationships existing in our culture, Individual Psychologists should not be discouraged by the small number of adherents and by its slow growth. It will never grow swiftly unless our cultural pattern alters so that cooperation is more valued than competition. These terms are descriptions of two ways of getting things done. The race is won by

1) For example: Karen Horney's "New Discoveries in Psychoanalysis."

the swift in this civilization, and the runner does not expect to help his competitors! We still hold up the ideal of Rugged Individualism as a goal for our striving, and we encourage children to "get ahead" in the world--to prepare themselves to grab the "main chance." By direct pressure and inference, a child is influenced to train only those faculties which will help him surpass others. He sees that too much friendliness delays him in his race--that a higher degree of hostility is necessary to preserve the degree of self-interest necessary to defeat others. Defeating others is essence of competition.

As a result of improved technology, our old competitive ideals are proving inadequate. Our ideals of social organization are undergoing sharp changes that will be felt more and more as time passes. As the pinch grows stronger, people will begin to doubt the neurotic certainty they now have that competition is the best way to get things done in human affairs. Doubt is the beginning of all wisdom! They will have to realize that their affairs can be set in order only by more cooperation and less dog-eat-dog. Then they will suddenly "discover" what Individual Psychology has been teaching all these years. No one is so blind as he who will not see, and none is so deaf as he who will not hear! The world at large is still listening and looking for ways to surpass. We can only hope to influence those who are prepared in advance for more equal relationships.

Dr. Adler pointed out that it is necessary to "disturb and destroy neurotic or mistaken certainties" before one can teach Individual Psychology. For this reason, I no longer try to form Individual Psychology teaching-groups. My experience of many years

is that they die out as soon as the members realize they can't use Individual Psychology to make a fortune or to rule others. But I have been more fortunate in keeping alive some free-discussion groups in which anyone can come and talk freely of any problem on his mind. The members of the group give a variety of viewpoints--each according to his own "tendentious apperception." Then it is possible to use Individual Psychology to cast doubt into minds as to the validity of mistaken interpretations and to offer a better insight. This often succeeds in interesting them in Individual Psychology. At this stage one can give them Adler's books and personal information, for then they can have their ears and eyes opened. But I have found that the complete teachings of Individual Psychology must be held in the background until the soil is cleared of weeds about the virtues of competition and superiority. If this is not done, individuals are offended by our views and become resentful of us. One cannot teach a resentful person! By showing them that there are many "as ifs" by which one may regard a situation--none all "right" and none all "wrong," they often alter the view which creates the impasse in their own lives.

It will probably be impossible to make Individual Psychology the dominant psychology now in our time, but it is rapidly being absorbed under other names and disguises. This is all to the good. In the years to come when the partisan spirit has died and the present priestcraft have been gathered to their fathers, younger and less prejudiced minds will recognize that Adler was the source of this wisdom. His books are stamped with dates of copyrights! Then credit will be given openly where credit is due. We cannot force the time or the place.