PHENOMENOLOGY WITHOUT RELIGIOUS MOTIVES:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF ADLER'S INDIVIDUAL
PSYCHOLOGY

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“Since Individual Psychology is not interested in the verbal expression of feelings, but only in the intensity of the movement by which they are expressed, it will evaluate the members of various religions not by the way they represent their feelings, but by the movement of the whole individual follower, i.e. by their fruits. That these fruits must be recognised sub specie aeternitatis may be said parenthetically. Individual Psychology does not deny that the religions with their powers, their church institutions, their influence on school and education, have a strong advantage. It will be satisfied in the practical application of its science to protect and further the sacred good of ‘brotherly love where the religions have lost their influence’” (Alfred Adler). ¹

Existentialism: A philosophical current started in the past century by the Dane, Søren Kierkegaard, and developed by recent scholars (Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Abbagnano) in a variety of interpretations and connotations. For Kierkegaard (a Protestant) the tragic discovery of this real existence resolves itself in an appeal to the supernatural and, what is more, to an appeal without further ado to Christianity; but the other existentialists have eliminated this religious motive in order to stand aside in the problematicity of life and thought, and be free from the worries of definitive solutions. (Emphasis in original) ²

This essay has several aims. First, it intends to show that Adler was a product of one of the philosophical systems of the time, namely, German existentialism. Slavik (1997) discusses the existential aspect of Adler's thinking as a “contextual philosophy.” Such contextual philosophy is determined by the events constituting the individual’s life. Second, phenomenological philosophy throws light on Adler's Individual Psychology and this takes his work out of its German context as it addresses itself to individual experience. Third, the religious roots of
existentialism are a strength, not a liability, in understanding the human condition and ought not to be forgotten by Adlerian psychologists.

**Phenomenological Development**

Jellema (1963) wrote that we are witnessing “the emergence of a new ‘mind,’ radically different in approach from the ‘modern mind,’ and already viewing the ‘obvious’ notion of Reality previously held as something antiquated and alien” (p. 81). I suggest Adler and his Individual Psychology is an example of this new radically different mind that attempts to understand experience without the assistance of previously held notions. In short, I suggest that Adler is a phenomenological thinker. Further, Lowe (1982) observes: “We are so accustomed to philosophizing from an extrinsic standpoint, whether Cartesian or Platonic, that we can no longer comprehend the phenomenological standpoint within the world” (p. 165). Adler’s Individual Psychology helps us to de-familiarize ourselves with Cartesian and Platonic thought forms and introduces a phenomenological approach.

In classical thinking, theoretical questions and answers are governed by a fixed idea of nature. Moreover, truth expressed in theoretical terms has become fixed in a particular form of expression that itself is perceived to be as valid as the truth. Researchers, not aware of this aberration whereby the means have become idealized ends (goals), make interpretive mistakes. Adler’s Individual Psychology presents a philosophical solution. Adler’s phenomenological “non-fixity” in understanding helps us avoid the interpretive mistakes of idealistic philosophers. In phenomenological interpretation, existence is understood as becoming, unity is understood as relational and necessity is replaced by option. These notions are easily recognizable in Adler’s Individual Psychology.

As Western culture continues to evolve, traditional conceptualisation becomes increasingly less helpful. Skolimowski (1973), after an expose of the limitations of conventional descriptions, offers his understanding of a new knowledge. He discusses phenomenological knowledge. “What we are seeking, without perhaps being fully aware of it, is not so much improved science, or more science, but a different idiom for living, a different idiom for our interaction with nature and cosmos” (p. 36).
Phenomenological thinking, which is existential understanding about human experience, underscores Adler's thought. Contemporary thinking has developed independently and, in many cases, in opposition to classical philosophy and theology (Kroner, 1951). Development is continually taking place, and the Western hermeneutic is seeking to end its “cultural provincialism” and provide a new threshold of interpretation (Tracy, 1988, p. 56). In short, we cannot live with fossilized thresholds. Adler’s Individual Psychology assists in ending this “cultural provincialism.”

Theoretical scientific understanding originated with the philosophers who lived prior to Plato and Aristotle. They prepared the way for phenomenological interpretation. Murray (1940) writes: The early philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. were more like men of science with a strong taste for generalization. Their problems were concerned with the physical world: they made researches in geometry, geography, medicine, astronomy, natural history and were apt to sum up their conclusions in sweeping apothegms….. Socrates, the father of the Attic school of philosophy, turning away from natural science with its crude generalizations, concentrated his attention on man, and particularly on the analysis of ordinary speech and current ideas (p. 36).

Adler also “concentrated his attention on man” in his Individual Psychology which is articulated by way of a phenomenological approach to life. Adler's Individual Psychology constructs eidetic objects. Eidetic objects have no extra-mental existence, ideal or otherwise (Ryba, 1991). These fictions, or eidetic notions, evoke a movement in an individual that is capable of study according to Adler's Individual Psychology.

Traditional Western analytical interpretation maintains that there must be some cause existing independently behind all effects. Discussing modern developments in the cognitive sciences, Searle (1984) points out an assumption within rationalist thinking which many find no longer tests as true. This assumption “goes as far back as Leibnitz and probably as far as Plato. It is the assumption that a mental achievement must have theoretical causes” (p. 45). However, this is not so with Adler's Individual Psychology. Adler does not rely on classical understanding. Rather,
Adler's phenomenological interpretation suggests a direction in which human development may occur.

Since Adler's thinking is not determined by pre-existing theoretical causes it presents as a new threshold of understanding. Individual Psychology, as a phenomenological methodology, possesses no past or future that concretely exists; there is only the perpetual present moment of existence that is susceptible to interpretation. However, the present moment (movement) is not divorced from the past but, rather, has evolved from it (Sokolowski, 1974). Bloom (1987) cites such evolutionary development in Descartes' thought: "Descartes had a whole wonderful world of old beliefs, of prescientific experience and articulations of the order of things, beliefs firmly and evenly fanatically held, before he even began his systematic and radical doubt" (p. 42).

As well, Bloom (1987) notes that Heidegger turned to pre-Socratic thought forms in developing his ideas.

A new beginning was imperative, and he turned with open mind to the ancients. But he did not focus on Plato or Aristotle.... Heidegger was drawn instead to the pre-Socratic philosophers, from whom he hoped to discover another understanding of being to help him replace the exhausted one inherited from Plato and Aristotle, which he and Nietzsche thought to be at the root of both Christianity and modern science (p. 310).

According to Ferguson (1992), Stephen Hawking thinks similarly. He "doesn't hesitate to admit that an earlier conclusion was incorrect or incomplete. That's the way his science—and perhaps all good science—advances, and one of the reasons why physics seems so full of paradoxes" (p. 122).

Finally, Dewart (1989) notes a similar evolutionary development occurring in phenomenological thinking. He writes: “The phenomenological method...is not the diametric opposite of the ontological; it is a more comprehensive one than the latter, whose merits it preserves and whose inadequacies it tries to remedy” (p. 31). Adler's Individual psychology is a phenomenological undertaking which returns to the individual’s
experience in much the same manner as Heidegger returned to the pre-Socratic philosophers.

Phenomenological Thresholds in Adler's Individual Psychology

Specifically, in his Individual Psychology, Adler moved towards phenomenology in two important ways: first, in Individual Psychology, the idea of a fixed, objective interpretation of events moves to that of continual interpretation; second, a classical epistemology of knowing moves to a phenomenology of being.

Fixed interpretation moves to continual interpretation

To engage in phenomenological interpretation is a challenging task. Don Ihde (1977) offers advice that applies to Adler's Individual Psychology.

When one first learns a discipline, one must also learn a 'tribal language.' In philosophy, those who read Kant for the first time, or Leibnitz, or even Nietzsche, may find words being used in a different and often technical way.... But if a discipline is to be mastered, the technical language simply must be learned. That is as true of sciences, logic, alternate styles of philosophy as it is of phenomenology (p. 19).

The present movement from fixed to continual interpretation within Western theological thinking arises partly from the attempts at reconciling contemporary interpretation and traditional understanding. Adler's Individual Psychology is an example of this shift occurring in psychology.

Tamas (1991), referring to postmodern development, suggests that an additional evolutionary phase of understanding is “bringing a new form of civilization and a new world view with principles and ideals fundamentally different from those that have impelled the modern world through its dramatic trajectory” (p. 410). Adler's Individual Psychology is all about inclusion in this new dramatic trajectory.

Kant's creative thinking introduced a new philosophical understanding about intelligible categories. They exist but are not perceptible. This notion is reflected within Adler's Individual Psychology. A phenomenological
threshold does disclose something new; it does not simply present variations of previous interpretation. What is new is the interpretation of existing, non-perceptible relationships. New methods of interpretation are conceived and new questions requiring further innovative resolutions arise in Adler’s Individual Psychology.

Specific cultures provide a threshold of interpretation in which phenomenological understanding is continually constructed and reconstructed. History shows that those thresholds that die out have not exhausted their meaning. Rather, other thresholds, which are more suitably adapted to a specific cultural understanding, have become accepted. Young (1988) shows how culturally suitable ones have replaced unsuitable psychotherapeutic methodologies in Western culture. Adler’s Individual Psychology can be classed among the culturally suitable ones.

A classical epistemology of knowing moves to a phenomenology of being

As the scholastic thinker requires a secure grasp of idealistic thought and presumptions, so the phenomenological thinker requires a secure grasp of phenomenological understanding and presumptions. Two phenomenological philosophical presumptions contributing to this essay are that:

- knowing is actualised in existential consciousness. It is not an act of intellectual apprehension of theoretical structures.
- unity is actualised in a conscious awareness of dialectical relationships rather than through an intellectual conformation to ideal categories.

Both presumptions are evident within Adler’s Individual Psychology.

Classical knowledge is structured upon theoretical concepts which themselves are structured upon previous concepts (Hodges, 1979; Watts & Williams, 1988). Classical knowledge consists of theoretical interpretations, which are theoretical interpretations of theoretical interpretations ad infinitum. Phenomenological knowledge differs from classical knowledge in that conscious (intended) understanding is
constituted out of the present moment of being (existence). Noetic concepts are not revisions or refinements of ideal concepts but are actualisations of the present moment of being. The old schema of theoretical knowledge is not perpetuated nor preserved in a phenomenological epistemology. Within this line of thought, Von Bertalanffy’s discussion of the re-orientation to systems thought, a movement from idealistic thinking to noetic thinking, continues Adler’s approach within Individual Psychology. Von Bertalanffy (1968) writes:

Such a new ‘image of man,’ replacing the robot concept by that of system, emphasizing immanent activity instead of outer-directed activity ... should lead to a basic reevaluation of problems of education, training, psychotherapy and human attitudes in general (p. 194).

Adler’s Individual Psychology, which constructs (actualises) noetic concepts, reveals a phenomenological philosophy that structures new thresholds of interpretation. Streng (1991) states: “The act of giving value is perceived as an ontological act because it determines the manner in which one recognizes and thereby ‘actualizes’ one’s existence” (p. 8). This is the basis of Adler’s Individual Psychology.

The phenomenological view does not necessarily conform to with any given system of knowledge. In a phenomenology of being, the boundaries of a relational state are not fixed. In a phenomenology of being one must think in terms of subjectivity and objectivity rather than in terms of subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism and objectivism denote a specific doctrine or system of knowledge, whereas subjectivity and objectivity are notions connoting a phenomenological and personal view of the life-world. To exclude subjective understanding and rely only on objective (ideal) understanding would be a phenomenological philosophical error according to Searle (1984). Because of this subjective approach, Darroch and Silvers (1982) suggest that an author’s biography be incorporated into any interpretation of experience. Adler’s life experience, articulated at the threshold of existentialism, provided the context out of which his Individual Psychology developed.

This essay began by situating Adler’s thinking in the philosophical context of German existentialism. To close, I quote the opening paragraph of The
Quest of the Historical Jesus and invite the reader to ponder its content with respect to the philosophical context of Adler's Individual Psychology. Schweitzer (1910) writes:

When, at some future day, our period of civilization shall lie, closed and completed, before the eyes of later generations, German theology will stand out as a great, a unique phenomenon in the mental and spiritual life of our time. For nowhere save in the German temperament can there be found in the same perfection the living complex of conditions and factors—of philosophic thought, critical acumen, historical insight, and religious feeling—without which no deep theology is possible (p. 1).

NOTES


REFERENCES


